

**Hanns Lessing | Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda (Eds.)**

**in collaboration with**

**Anna Case-Winters, Margit Ernst-Habib, Gemma King,  
Henry Kuo, Andreas Müller, Dirk J. Smit**

# **Receiving Nicaea Today**

**Global Voices from  
Reformed Perspectives**



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# Preface

1700 years on, the Nicene Creed continues to touch churches all over the world. The Reformed family of churches celebrates this milestone and joins the rest of the ecumenical movement in marking how the Council of Nicaea and its product the Nicene Creed has shaped the life of the church.

Part of the Reformed heritage is to take God's gifts to the church through the ages and engage in a critical appraisal of what these gifts mean to us in the present tense. This character in the DNA of the Reformed Communion mirrors the character of the Berean Christians described in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of Apostles who «[...] welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so». (Acts 17.11). Therefore, we offer this volume in this spirit of renewing our welcome of this 1700-year-old creed with critical review.

In the twenty-first century, we are confronted with divisive issues in the church. We are also confronted with ways in which the church is challenged in its mission. The church has not always lived up to its calling to understand mission as God's means of transforming the world, and therefore has often found itself complicit in the death-dealing forces of injustice and evil in society. For example, what does it mean to say, «We believe in one God [...] maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible?» What implications do we draw from it when the forces of the world act as if only some things are under God's domain, and the church is often found supporting the powerful in destroying God's creation or not being good stewards of God's creation?

In this volume *Receiving Nicaea Today: Global Voices from Reformed Perspectives*, Reformed theologians, together with theologians from the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican tradition, have engaged in critical reflections on the Nicene Creed as it communicates to us in the present tense. As a Global Communion that has journeyed through mission, colonization, resistance,

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and renewal, we receive the Nicene Creed as a living confession that sustains the struggle for justice of all whose suffering and hope bears witness to the living God. It is in these contexts that Nicaea must speak anew if it is to be truly confessed today. Therefore, this volume has approached Nicaea with a post-colonial liberative lens and a rereading from the margins. It also brings insights which connect Nicaea to the current urgent ecological, political crises to make it a living confession for the world. As we give thanks to God for these 1700 years, we hope these reflections will lead us to new levels of commitment in our faith, so that what we believe in will have a profound impact on our actions in the world today.

The Reformed Confessions developed in the last century are consistent with the Nicene Creed. Each of them has a «We believe [...], and therefore we [...]» movement. Reflections on the 1700-year-old Nicene Creed in the present tense also strengthens this move. What we believe impacts how we analyze current day issues and what we sense as God's call and how we respond to it through our actions.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is very grateful to each of the contributors to this volume. We give thanks to God for your time and insights that you have shared in this book. We are very grateful to our colleague Hanns Lessing who is providing good leadership in our Communion and Theology programmes and whose vision and hard work has brought this volume to birth.

This year as we celebrate the 1700<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Council of Nicaea which yielded the Nicene Creed, the WCRC is also celebrating 150 years of its life and witness as Reformed World Communion. We have challenged ourselves to persevere in our witness no matter how challenging the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is in this spirit that we offer this volume in the hope that 1700 years of the Nicene Creed will inspire us to persevere in our faith and witness to be even more relevant to the times in which we live.

*Setri Nyomi*

Interim General Secretary – WCRC

# Appreciation

This book project would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of many people. The idea for the book was born at a meeting of the Strategic Programme Planning Group of the WCRC. All the editors have accompanied the theological work of the WCRC for many years.

We thank the group of editors, comprising Anna Case-Winters, Margit Ernst-Habib, Gemma King, Henry Kuo, Rathnakara Sadananda, and Dirk J. Smit, for developing the idea of a living reception of the Nicene faith and offering their global networks for the search for potential authors and accompanying authors in the different sections of the book.

We especially express appreciation to Rathnakara Sadananda for his tireless efforts to give shape to the emerging voice that the book presents.

We appreciate the enthusiastic support that the project received from the authors. Almost everyone whom we approached committed immediately. The different perspectives that the authors provided improved the project considerably. We are grateful that half of the authors are from the Global South and express our appreciation for the commitment of all the contributors to decolonialize theology. It is because of this commitment that the book can present a global reception of the Nicene tradition.

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The World Communion of Reformed Churches is blessed by this theological network and proud of the results of this work.

Hanns Lessing  
Executive Secretary for Communion and Theology  
World Communion of Reformed Churches





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# List of Abbreviations

AACC	All-African Conference of Churches
ACK	Anglican Church of Kenya
AIM	African Inland Mission
AIPRAL	Alianza de Iglesias Presbiterianas y Reformadas en América Latina
ANC	A New Creed
ATR	African Traditional Religions
CCCS	Congregational Christian Church Samoa
CCT	Church of Christ in Thailand
CEC	Conference of European Churches
CHRISCO	Christ Coworkers Church
CICC	Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CoS	Church of Scotland
CSI	Church of South India
CWM	Council for World Mission
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
DRMC	Dutch Reformed Mission Church
EARM	East African Revival Movement
EASM	East African Scottish Mission
EFT	Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand
EPC	Evangelical Presbyterian Church
FAST	Faatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi
GAC	General Administrative Committee
GKI	Gereja Kristen Indonesia
GMS	Gospel Missionary Society
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
ICC	Indonesian Christian Church



## 16 List of Abbreviations

IECLB	Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil
IRD	Interreligious Dialogues
JC	Justinian Code
JPRC	Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Committee
KMT	Kuomintang
KYODAN	The United Church of Christ in Japan/ Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, or Agender, (sometimes also includes Allies)
LMS	London Missionary Society
MCK	Methodist Church in Kenya
MTC	Malua Theological College
NC	Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed
NCCK	National Council of Churches of Kenya
NEAR	Nurturing, Educating, Advocating, and Resourcing
NIFEA	New International Financial and Economic Architecture
NPCC	Newer Pentecostal Churches
OPC	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
PCA	Presbyterian Church of America
PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
PROK	Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea
RCA	Reformed Church in America
REET	Ecumenical Network for Theological Education Foundation
RGC	Redeemed Gospel Church
ThC	Theodosian Code
UCC	United Church of Canada
UCC	United Church of Christ
URC	United Reformed Church
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa
USPG	United Society Partners in the Gospel
WARC	World Alliance of Reformed Churches
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCRC	World Communion of Reformed Churches

# Receiving Nicaea Today: Global Voices from Reformed Perspectives

## Celebrating Nicaea 1700

The 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is more than a commemorative milestone – it is a *kairos* moment, a Spirit-stirred invitation to re-encounter the triune God and to re-examine the covenantal faithfulness of the Church in a wounded and waiting world. For the Reformed tradition, this is not a ritual of nostalgia but a liturgical provocation – a call to interrogate, discern, and renew the very grammar of our believing.

Yes, Reformed churches celebrate the Nicene faith – but not uncritically. Celebration is not separation from reality. Reformed hermeneutics receives such anniversaries not as closures of doctrinal certainty, but as openings – opening spaces where theology must be re-tested in the fire of Scripture, re-voiced amid the cries of history, and re-shaped in the pulse of mission.

Our tradition offers a simple yet searching two-fold discernment:

1. Does the Nicene faith – along with the tradition that has grown from it – still bear faithful witness to the self-revealing God of Scripture, as known in Christ, and made alive by the Spirit? That is, can the theological formulations of Nicaea still be held as truthful echoes of God's liberating Word, as confessed in the testimonies of prophets, apostles, and the crucified One who lives?
2. And does the language of the Creed remain capable of expressing the living, dynamic self-disclosure of God as encountered in the ruptures of history and the urgency of now? Can the old formulations still sing in the

tongues of oppressed peoples, still breathe in the dust of exile, still stir in the dreams of the displaced, and still be heard in the cries of the earth?

These are not merely academic questions, but ecclesial, spiritual, missional priorities. They are the heartbeat of a tradition that insists: *God is still speaking, the church is still listening, and the creed must still be reformed for the sake of the world God so loves.*

John Calvin, ever the careful reformer and passionate theologian of discernment, offered a wise and enduring principle for engaging the decisions of councils – not with blind allegiance, but with faithful vigilance. His method was both rigorous and reverent, marked by spiritual humility and theological clarity. Calvin wrote:

Whenever the decree of a council is produced, the first thing I would wish to be done is to examine at what time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it; next I would bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture. And this I would do in such a way that the decision of the council should have its weight and be regarded in the light of a prior judgment, yet not to prevent the application of the test which I have mentioned. (*Institutes IV, 9, 8*)

This posture – neither dismissive nor deferential – is the heartbeat of Reformed theological engagement. It is a method that honours tradition without enshrining it, and it is precisely this approach that guides Reformed churches as they mark the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Nicaea 1700 cannot be a celebration of orthodoxy frozen in time, but of faithfulness forged in history – of a creed continually brought to the testing ground of Scripture, community, and context.

We revisit Nicaea with gratitude, but also with courage – critically examining the content of the Creed, the imperial conditions under which it was forged, the process of its formulation, and the living faith it has nurtured and challenged through the centuries. We ask again, with Calvin, not only *what* was said, but *why*, *how*, and *to whom* – bringing every word to the measure of the Gospel.

For Reformed churches, this is not doctrinal submission – it is confessional responsibility. It is our conviction that the Spirit – not the emperor – is the interpreter of truth, and that the Word of God must not be entombed in ecclesial chambers, but become flesh again in occupied territories, trembling congregations, exiled and excluded peoples, melting glaciers, and the exploited earth.

All Reformed churches, in diverse ways, affirm the Nicene Creed as a truthful and faithful witness to the triune God. Some affirm it with judicial weight; others,

shaped by noncreedal traditions, hold it with spiritual reverence while resisting its institutional codification. For some, the classical creedal form feels too abstract – too far from the language of the poor, the disinherited, the everyday believer. Yet all are bound together in the living tradition of the Reformed faith, which celebrates the triune God, not as a distant dogma, but as a communion of love revealed in history.

This tradition draws from the deep wells of the early councils – Nicaea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381), Ephesus (AD 431), Chalcedon (AD 451) – and is shaped by the rich chorus of the Reformed confessions and the living voices of contemporary faith declarations like Barmen (1934), Belhar (1986) and Accra (2004). It is not a single note repeated through time, but a dynamic symphony of discernment – where theology breathes, reforms, and rises again in each generation, always leaning toward the liberation of God’s people and the healing of God’s world.

With the bold confession of «*We believe*» at the heart of the Nicene Creed, the Reformed tradition affirms that faith is never a solitary possession, but a communal belonging – a covenantal act of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. This ‘we’ stretches beyond individual experience into the vast communion of saints – across centuries and continents, across memory and hope, across the visible and the unseen. In this creed, the gathered, worshipping body of Christ proclaims its shared trust in the triune God – a trust that binds the Church in faith and mission, in unity with believers past, present, and yet to come.

For Reformed communities, the Nicene confession is not merely recited; it is lived. It becomes a teaching tool in catechesis, a liturgical rhythm in worship, a theological compass in ecclesial life. Especially in its Christological and Trinitarian affirmations, the Creed grounds the Church’s faith and challenges its imagination – calling the Reformed faithful to reflect, express, and embody their discipleship with clarity, courage, and care.

Yet to confess «*We believe*» today is to do more than affirm unity. It is to interrogate the history behind the voice. Who said «we», and who was never invited to speak? Who was excluded from the councils? Who was silenced in the formulation of faith? To echo the Creed uncritically is to risk amplifying centuries of erasure – of indigenous cosmologies pushed aside, of women’s wisdom dismissed, of queer bodies criminalized, of Christ domesticated into imperial decorum.

Thus, in the Reformed tradition, to reconnect with Nicaea is not to cling to static orthodoxy, but to enter a dynamic process of reformation – where doctrine is

not discarded but discerned anew. The 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary is not a celebration of doctrinal perfection, but a *kairos* of theological courage. Nicaea 1700 is not a pedestal; it is a protest, not a relic; but a reawakening, not a closure; but a threshold into deeper communion and more faithful witness, a protest, and a prayer.

We revisit Nicaea to unearth – not entomb – its liberating core. Christology and Trinitarian theology must be reclaimed as confessions of divine communion, not instruments of domination. *Homoousios* must resonate not with imperial metaphysics, but with the Galilean who stood with the oppressed, was executed by the State, and rose again as the firstborn of a border-crossing people.

Ecumenically, Nicaea has long served as a bridge, but too often, guarded by gatekeepers of doctrine, gender, race, and power. Let this moment of commemoration be transfigured into a moment of radical hospitality, where «We believe» becomes a polyphony, not a unison – a chorus of the beloved community rather than the dominant voice.

While this anthology articulates a Reformed emphasis, its approach is ecumenical and wants to stimulate a fresh conversation about the relevance of the Nicene Creed for the church today. Thirty-seven scholars from around the globe not only from the reformed family but also from the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox traditions collaborate together to engage with Nicaea, in a prophetic re-entry – a *kairos* moment to let the creed breathe again from the wounds of the world and the witness of the crucified.

Vast majority of Christian communions see themselves in the Nicene tradition. The living commemoration of the Council of Nicaea cannot be confined to a confessional project but emerge as an ecumenical inspiration to re-engage with the Nicene faith together. Therefore, the contribution from authors who engage with the Nicene Creed from Roman-Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican Communion traditions is greatly appreciated.

This book unfolds as a global polyphonic theological journey, receiving Nicaea not as a relic of imperial orthodoxy, but as a living confession re-voiced from the margins. Six dynamic sections guide this re-engagement – each shaped by the Reformed commitment to *semper reformanda*, justice, and the liberating Word.

### Reformed Hermeneutics and the Authority of Creeds

This section explores how Reformed hermeneutics receives creeds as open invitations to living confession. It asks: how has the Nicene tradition formed us – and

how must it now be reinterpreted to shape a liberative, faithful future? Here, Scripture, context, and the cries of the oppressed come together in discerning, confessing, and reforming the church's witness.

## **Nicaea and the Empire**

Here, we enter the imperial corridors of the fourth century – Constantine, Athanasius, Arius, and the in-between. The essays interrogate the political-theological roots of the Creed and its imperial entanglements, asking: what was – and is – at stake when theology and power collide?

## **Scriptural and Theological Hermeneutics of the Nicene Faith**

This section offers a critical analysis and evaluation of the theology of the Nicene Creed, with particular attention to its relationship to the testimony of Scripture and its adaptation within both historical contexts and contemporary pluralism. It explores what was theologically at stake at Nicaea and reflects on the lessons learned, in order to discern the continuing relevance of the Nicene faith for the Church's self-understanding and mission today.

## **Nicene Influence on Reformed Synodality and Church Governance**

Exploring how the Nicene legacy informs Reformed polity, this section asks how ecclesial authority must be collaborative, non-hierarchical, and critically self-aware. It challenges simple binaries with Spirit-led collective discernment.

## **Confessions and Contemporary Witness**

Focusing on Reformed confessions from the Reformation to Accra and beyond, this section probes how contextual confessions shape theology that liberates and transforms, guided by history, community, and mission.

## **From Creed to Confessing: Worship, Teaching, and Mission**

Finally, this section explores how the Nicene faith animates liturgy, discipleship, and mission –challenging empire, nationalism, and ecological injustice, and embodying a just, joyful witness to the triune God in a broken world.

## Receiving Nicaea Today: The Meaning of Receiving

The anthology is titled “Receiving Nicaea Today”. Receiving is not merely a passive acceptance of the Nicene faith, but radical engagement – where faith is re-voiced, re-membered, and re-situated through communities that have long been silenced. Reception involves rising into a sacred struggle from the margins of the empire to experience liberation and resurrection.

Scripturally, reception is a process that begins not with human initiative but divine disruption. Receiving is, therefore, radical openness to God’s gracious initiative. To receive, then, is to embody God’s liberating presence in context – in struggle, in exile, in movement of the people and the planet.

Receiving is also an act of reclaiming agency. It is what the poor, the colonized, the queer, and the displaced continue to do: claim the right to interpret, embody, and proclaim the Gospel on their own terms. Reception is also memory at work. The empire fractures memory and teaches the oppressed to forget their dignity. But to receive is to *re-member* what the empire has dismembered – to recover indigenous wisdom, ancestral theology, and suppressed stories of resistance. Reception thus, is to contest theologies of control to re-situate ‘truth’ and reinterpret ‘continuity’. Finally, to receive is to hope. It is to risk rupture, misunderstanding, and marginalization, believing that even broken traditions carry seeds of life. Reception, then, is not just assent but incarnation, not an echo but an uprising, not the end but a beginning, a rising together to life.

## Receiving Nicaea Today: The Meaning of Nicaea

The heart of the Nicene faith is the Triune God – one in substance, coequal, coeternal. But from the margins, this is not metaphysical math; it is divine mutuality. The Trinity is not hierarchy, but a communion of love. It resists domination and invites solidarity. Nicaea is a confession of divine relationality and shared power – rooted in the Triune communion of justice and love. Therefore, to affirm faith in Trinity is to confess a God whose life is shared, whose love is just, and whose image calls forth communities of radical inclusion.

Nicaea is also a wounded site of theological violence which was forged not only in theological conviction, but imperial compromise. Convened under Constantine, it became a tool to consolidate empire, exclude dissent, and sanctify colonial expan-

sion. Therefore, the confession of the Nicene faith is a reminder of the Church's painful complicity, and thus a call to lamentation, repentance, and reparation in a movement towards liberation.

Confessing Nicaea is re-voicing. Reformed theology insists that tradition is not frozen but is fermenting. Nicaea must be received as a living inheritance arising from encounter with the liberating God who walks with the enslaved, the exiled, and the crucified. Therefore, to confess Nicaea is to let the wounded speak to experience an unfolding journey of liberation to receive, to discern, to struggle, to reclaim, to reinterpret the living faith in context. It is the joy of the oppressed reclaiming God's promise. It is the song of new beginnings, sung in minor key, rising from the soil of wounded lands. It is the birth of new life. It is theology's true starting point – where the Word is not just heard, but received, and rises to life.

## Receiving Nicaea Today: The Meaning of Today

'Today' is not an ordinary moment, but a *kairos* – a sacred disruption where history and heaven collide. It is the day of reckoning, the hour of hope, the now of justice. Today, the world groans, capitalism extracts, and the empire persists. Theologies bless bombs. The Church, too often, is tempted to nostalgia or neutrality. But the Spirit will not wait. Today is the moment to live out what is required, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

'Today' is also critique and a mirror. Therefore, today is a call to remember rightly, not for sentiment, but for resistance. Memory is sacred when it tells the truth, when it remembers Jesus not as celestial prince, but crucified peasant; when it names stolen lands, lynched bodies, persecuted prophets, and colonized scriptures. Thus, 'Today' is Reformation in motion, *Semper Reformanda*.

'Today' is also Eucharist; a broken loaf in a broken world; a foretaste of joy amid injustice: Today, not tomorrow, not after orthodoxy is perfected, in the agony of the empire, in the company of Christ; today is the fullest expression of incarnational solidarity envisioning a new world. 'Today' is therefore not a pause, it is a pulse of the future breaking in. 'Today' is not just time – it is testimony of Spirit breathing through brokenness; and the crucified Christ saying, even now, «Behold, I am making all things new».



## The Global Voices from Reformed Perspectives: The Meaning of Reformed

To be Reformed is to live a theological rhythm – grounded in Scripture, stirred by the Spirit’s unsettling presence, shaped by communal confession, and continually reformed by the cries of the earth and the voices of the wounded. To be ‘reformed’ is to inherit a tradition not as a fortress but as a fire handed down – not for preservation but for transformation. It is a movement of critique and communion.

Born in the turbulence of the sixteenth century Reformation – through Calvin’s clarity, Zwingli’s courage, and the people’s longing – the Reformed movement insists that God’s sovereignty is not domination but freedom in embracing vulnerability, that Christ is not the possession of the empire but the crucified and risen companion of the poor, and that the Church must be a community of Word and sacrament, justice and love. But this movement did not stay European, it travelled – through mission and migration, resistance and resilience – and became a global, polyphonic witness.

To be Reformed is therefore, to be ecumenical to the core – walking with Christ, seeking communion with all who follow Christ, and with all that is created in and through Christ, yearning for justice, reimagining creeds, and speaking faith from the fractures of history. It is to declare *status confessionis*, not when institutional systems are threatened, but when the Gospel is betrayed, when racism kills, voices are silenced, the planet burns, and the empire baptizes violence and conquest.

This book is not merely an anthology. It is a communion of voice – global, diverse, fierce, and faithful – rising not to echo sameness, but to embody covenantal diversity, to affirm unity in difference, and to seek communion free from coercion and control. They do not speak about Nicaea from a distance, but speak through it – from scars, from songs, from silence. They compose a polyphony of postcolonial critique, prophetic courage, ecological imagination, and liberative hope. They reclaim Nicaea not as relic but as rhythm of life, alive with struggle and Spirit. They sing not in unison, but in harmony – carrying diverse textures, timbres, and tongues – all longing for a faith that can rise from the margins and breathe anew into a fractured world.

Together, these voices ask: Can the Nicene faith still be good news for the wounded and the waiting? Can it be reimagined as a wellspring of life, for the whole world God so loves? This book is their bold and beautiful polyphonic harmony rising from the margins daring to believe that the Nicene faith can still become good news for all creation.

# Reformed Hermeneutics and the Authority of Creeds

## Introduction

The Nicene Creed, uttered in the voice of «We believe», has long been regarded as a cornerstone of Christian orthodoxy. But in the Reformed tradition – shaped by the fires of protest, the urgency of contextual truth-telling, and the unrelenting call to be *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* – this creed is not a monument to be polished but a living threshold to be crossed with discernment, struggle, and prophetic imagination. The essays gathered in this first section take us into the deep waters of that engagement, exploring how Reformed hermeneutics, rooted in both Scripture and suffering, reads the creeds as invitations – not impositions – to rediscover, reformulate, and re-voice the liberating heart of the gospel.

At stake is not merely doctrinal continuity but the living tradition of the Church itself. How has the Nicene tradition shaped the Reformed faith? How might it still? How should it? What does it mean to confess the triune God not from the thrones of power, but from the margins of empire, from the exile of injustice, from the burning edges of today's crises? These are not academic questions. They are ecclesial, existential, and eschatological. They are the kind of questions that call forth a hermeneutic of confession, not of preservation.

In his illuminating essay, *The Hermeneutic of Confessing in the Reformed Tradition*, **Hanns Lessing** opens the section with a compelling exploration of a confessional logic that resists ossification and insists on remaining dynamic, responsive, and alive. Drawing from Rowan Williams' reading of the Nicene era and Karl Barth's theology of confessions, Lessing presents a vision of Reformed confession as historically responsive, contextually anchored, and spiritually courageous. Nicaea, he reminds us, was never a moment of settled certainty – it was a site of theo-

logical wrestling under imperial shadow. So too were Barmen, Belhar, and Accra. These confessions did not echo the past; they erupted from the present – naming heresies of racism, nationalism, and economic injustice not merely as errors of doctrine, but as violations of the gospel.

Confession, then, is not a backward glance. It is a prophetic gesture. It is the community's act of speaking truth at a kairotic time, always provisional, always discerning, and always oriented to the God who calls, disrupts, and liberates. For Lessing, a Reformed hermeneutic of creeds means reading Nicaea through the cries of our age, grounding all doctrinal affirmation in Scripture and lived experience, and holding it open to reform under the Spirit's movement. Creeds are not timeless verdicts but timely verdicts – offered in history, accountable to Scripture, and accountable to the communities that suffer.

**Heleen Zorgdrager's** profound contribution, *Reformed Wrestling with the Spirit: Navigating Nicaea 325 and Beyond*, invites us into one of the most underexplored tensions in Reformed theology: the marginalization of the Spirit. Drawing on Sarah Coakley's work, Zorgdrager shows how Nicaea's placement of the Spirit as 'third' led to a historical and theological sidelining of pneumatology – especially in the West. Within Reformed theology, this has manifested as a paradox: an expansive vision of the Spirit's presence in creation and community, alongside a restricted confinement of the Spirit to word and sacrament.

Zorgdrager pushes us toward a recovery of Spirit-led hermeneutics, rooted in the groaning and praying of the Spirit in Romans 8. Here, the Spirit does not simply 'apply' salvation as a final step in a patriarchal hierarchy but breathes as a coequal presence in the divine dance. Reclaiming such pneumatology means resisting not only ecclesial rigidities but also the social hierarchies they mirror and uphold. In this vision, creeds must be read not merely with intellectual assent, but with Spirit-breathed openness – discerned in prayer, lament, embodiment, and community. The Spirit does not freeze orthodoxy; She sings it anew in every context, especially from the underside of history.

**Philip Vinod Peacock**, in his stirring essay *Viewing the Nicene Creed from the Lens of Justice*, continues this work of reimagining. He refuses to read the creed as an imperial script locked in time. Instead, he unfixes it – prying it open through feminist, queer, and liberation theologies to reveal its subversive and justice-bearing potential. He shows how the Nicene formula «begotten, not made» was once used to justify royal legitimacy and hierarchical order – but also how it can be revoiced to dismantle those very hierarchies. For Peacock, the creed must become not

a fortress but a field – where gender binaries, theological exclusions, and doctrinal controls are unravelled in favour of relationality, plurality, and shared becoming.

He urges us to see the divine image not in abstract metaphysics or doctrinal precision, but in the full diversity of the human community. The Trinity, re-read through the lens of justice, is not a hierarchy of divine persons but a model of mutual empowerment, radical equality, and non-dominative communion. Theology, in this frame, is not about control – it is about co-creation, love, and struggle.

Together, these three essays reveal the power – and the responsibility – of Reformed hermeneutics in engaging the creeds. They remind us that to confess is not merely to repeat, but to wrestle. That creeds are not boundary-markers of the faithful, but invitations to reimagine what faithfulness looks like in a world groaning for justice. That Reformed theology, when truest to its roots, does not protect tradition from change, but insists on its transformation in the light of God's liberating Word and the cries of the world. These essays help us discern how the Nicene faith can still shape our doing of theology – how it might guide our confessing, our witnessing, our re-forming – so that the Church does not merely repeat what it once believed, but becomes what it is called to be: a community of truth, justice, and Spirit-breathed love.



# The Hermeneutic of Confessing in the Reformed Tradition

*Hanns Lessing*

In Byzantium at the end of the fifth century, theological debates were not just for professional theologians. More than sixty years after the Council of Nicaea, Gregory of Nyssa – who, along with Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, became famous for his contributions to the development of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity – reported wild discussions all over the city:

The narrow streets, the marketplaces, the squares, the alleyways: the whole city is full of that kind of people. You can find them among those who deal in clothes, money changers, the men who sell us food. If you would ask someone about money, he would philosophize about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of a loaf, you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater (cf. John 14:28) and the Son subject to Him; if you ask, «Is my bath ready?» the other person quotes you a definition about the Son having been created out of nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Gregory did not like the turmoil, but his observations clearly indicate that the debate over which theological concepts could guarantee salvation in Christ was deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of the lay people. This debate began long before the Council of Nicaea and has yet to be fully resolved. Significant streams of Christianity in the East and West have affirmed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, but significant portions of world Christianity have always either rejected the Nicene language or have not related to the tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, [Oration on the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit], *Patrologia Graecae* 46: 557.trans. Meredith L.D. Riedel, in “Photios’s Hermeneutic for Wisdom Literature in Amphilochia 9 (2021),” in *Receptions of the Bible in Byzantium Texts, Manuscripts, and their Readers*, ed. Reinhart Ceulemans Barbara Crostini (Uppsala Universitet, 2021), 101 n.40.

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Reformed theologians have played an active role in the debate. The vast majority of voices unequivocally affirmed the Nicene faith. However, the Reformed tradition has always had reservations about the imperial framing of the creed, in which the emperor guaranteed the validity of Christian symbols. This tension led to a particular hermeneutic of confessing that engaged the confessional tradition in the present tense, seeking to affirm its truth claims in response to contemporary challenges. This chapter will explore the Reformed hermeneutic of confession in three steps:

1. The article starts with an overview of the confessional hermeneutics presented by British theologian Rowan Williams, who served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012, in his book *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*.<sup>2</sup> Reformed people often pride themselves on the conviction that to be Reformed is to be ecumenical. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin an exploration of the Reformed hermeneutics of confessing with an outside position that applies Reformed hermeneutics to encourage an ecumenical debate.
2. The second section discusses Williams's interpretation of the Nicene faith in relation to Karl Barth's description of the characteristics of Reformed confessions.<sup>3</sup> The analysis will focus on Barth's use of Calvin's concept of the «divine compact» in particular.
3. In the Postscript (Theological) to his book on Arius, Williams relates the Nicene debate to the controversies that led to the Barmen Declaration and provides a structural analysis of the parallels between these two processes. The third section of this chapter will use this analysis as a lens to reconstruct the hermeneutics of confessing in the contemporary confessions of Barmen (1934), Belhar (1986), and Accra (2004).

## Theology for a Church in Crisis

In his book on Arius, Williams delves into the deeper layers of the Nicene debate that captivated people in the fourth century. This analysis reveals a dynamic that

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions: 1923*, trans. and annot. Darrel L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

will guide the church as it attempts to come to terms with today's theological crises. He makes three critical observations:

1. Williams's Postscript unambiguously calls for a critical interpretation of the relationship between the church and the Roman Empire. The controversies that emerged before, during, and after the Council of Nicaea made it clear that the church was far from as unified, self-consistent, or established as Eusebius of Caesarea's account of Emperor Constantine's role at the council suggested. The prevailing notion of the Constantine church as the baptized *oikoumene* under the emperor, who was himself under the logos, did not align with the actual circumstances on the ground. Following its official recognition, the church came to the realization that its relationship with the empire had not resolved the questions surrounding the church's distinctive identity and mission. The extensive debate surrounding the appropriate nomenclature to characterize Jesus Christ's relationship with God revealed that the employment of a *deus ex machina* on the throne was incapable of resolving its inherent internal contradictions.<sup>4</sup>
2. In light of this situation, Williams emphasizes the distinct theological character of the debate. The dispute about the Nicene language was not a controversy between conservatives and progressives. The primary voices in Nicaea were unmistakably conservative. They firmly agreed that the theology of the church began in the language of worship. This language rightly conserves metaphors and titles that are both ancient and ambiguous. But their conservatism did not stop there.<sup>5</sup> In a situation where the empire embraced the church, the church had to be careful not to be completely absorbed. This required the development of an independent theological language that allowed the articulation of theological truth claims without reference to imperial power. The church had to move from the loyal and uncritical repetition of traditional formulas to something more exploratory and constructive to achieve this goal.<sup>6</sup> The citizens of Byzantium clearly wanted to understand their beliefs and experiences in the church. They used a «doctrinal hermeneutics» that demanded the re-imagining and re-creation of the old symbols and rituals in times of crisis.<sup>7</sup> In their attempt to come to terms with the new dispensation, the question was not whether new

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 236f.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 237.



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conceptual language should be used. Instead, the question was «What kind of innovation would best serve the integrity of the faith?»<sup>8</sup>

3. For Williams, this discovery of the significance of theology was a significant contribution of the Nicene debate to the church. It was in the controversies before, during, and after Nicaea that the church developed an understanding of the significance of theological discourse for its self-understanding and faith:

Although the radical words of Nicaea became, in turn, a new set of formulae to be defended (intelligently or unintelligently), the actual history of the Church in the succeeding centuries shows that some kind of doctrinal hermeneutics had come to stay; continuity was something that had to be re-imagined and re-created at each point of crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Following this history, Williams discovers that the theological constellation of the debate in and around Nicaea reappeared in other crises in which the church had to re-examine its faith and mission.

Williams demonstrates the continued relevance of the Nicene call for theological renewal. He compares the Nicene debate with the theological controversies in German Protestantism when Adolf Hitler took power in 1933 and detects clear similarities in the theological constellations of the main actors. These parallels raise important historical and conceptual questions. Williams cautions his readers that the analogies might be far-fetched and emotionally loaded in an unfair way.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he proceeds with the comparison to demonstrate the significance of the theological wrestling with the Nicene crisis for the church today.<sup>11</sup>

Williams' exploration of the theological constellations in Nicaea and Barmen identifies four parties. Two parties represent classical approaches. The other two propose the introduction of a new theological language. On the classical side, he sees an opposition between conservatives who propagated a ritualized adherence to established truths and those groups that campaigned for a church that would be synonymous with the national culture.

In Williams' analysis, these classical approaches proved to be insufficient to guide the church in times of crisis because they did not satisfy the need for clarity that was demanded in the debates that led to the Nicene Creed and the Barmen Declaration. Williams concludes:

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 237.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 237.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 237.

The debates represent a recognition by the church at large that theology is not only legitimate but necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate as a means of securing continuity at anything more than a formal level; Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another. They need to be made more difficult before we can accurately grasp their simplicities.<sup>12</sup>

Two new theological streams gained prominence in the theological debates around Nicaea and Barmen in response to the increased demand for theological clarity.

In both debates, one of the new parties sought to confirm the traditional faith of the church by recourse to philosophical thinking. In the Nicæan controversy, Arius took a firm stance against any concept of God that claimed that God was created. This was a widespread belief in the multireligious world of late antiquity. In the context of the persecution of Christians under Diocletian (AD 303–311), his motive can also be read as a critique of emperor worship, which deified the emperor. In response to these challenges, Arius proposed Neo-Platonist language that described God as a pure singularity who, as a matter of principle, was beyond human comprehension.<sup>13</sup>

From this epistemological point of departure, creation and redemption are understood as arbitrary acts of God that are disconnected from God's own being. For the sake of strict monotheism, Father and Logos-Son could not be of the same essence. Arius explained the creation and salvation in Jesus Christ like this: the uncreated Father created an independent being, the Logos-Son. The Son created the world, and he was the mediator between the eternal God and the transient world. In Arius' radical monotheism, the Son is the first creature of the Father. That is why Arius insisted that there was a time when the Son was not:

We acknowledge One God,  
 alone unbegotten, alone eternal,  
 alone without beginning, alone true,  
 alone having immortality,  
 alone wise, alone good,  
 alone sovereign, judge of all, governor, and provider,  
 unalterable and unchangeable,  
 just and good,  
 God of the Law and the Prophets and the New Testament;

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 236.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 242.

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he begot an only begotten Son before time and the ages,  
through whom he made both the ages and all that was made [...].

But the Son, begotten apart from time by the Father,  
and created and founded before the ages,  
was not in existence before his generation,  
but was begotten apart from time before all things,  
and he alone came into existence from the Father. [...]

Therefore, he thus has his being from God;  
and glories, and life, and all things have been given over to him;  
in this way God is his beginning.  
For he is over him, as his God and being before him.<sup>14</sup>

This theological framing had enormous consequences for the believers' faith. Arius' attempt to secure God from any analogy with earthly authorities led to an apotheosis of God's absolute power in which salvation was by mere fiat and could be withdrawn at any time.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike many others, however, Williams does not reduce Arius' contribution to the Nicæan debate to his role as a heretic. He sympathizes with Arius' approach and defends him against the unfair polemics of Athanasius and others. At the same time, he firmly opposes the arbitrariness of Arius' understanding of creation and redemption, and probably also his concept of power.

In Williams' interpretation, Arius' demand for conceptual innovation set the Nicene debate in motion. Athanasius and others accepted this challenge and responded with theologies that adhered more faithfully to Scripture.<sup>16</sup> But without Arius' provocation, there probably wouldn't have been a Council of Nicaea, and we would not have an established tradition of theological innovation to come to terms with crisis moments of the church.

William's approach is straightforward: the church must cherish theological provocations. To reinforce his point, he doesn't shy away from provocations and compares Arius to Emanuel Hirsch, who, at the time of the Barmen Declaration, was one of the most controversial theologians in Germany.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Letter of Arius and His Followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria (318–320)," in *Athanasius. Epistle de Synodis* 16, tran. G. Thompson, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-6>.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 240.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 237.

Like Arius, Hirsch wanted to save the church's theology from becoming irrelevant by accepting a modern philosophical understanding of truth that rejected any form of knowledge of the transcendent. From this viewpoint, any attempt to get into a relationship with God, other human beings, or even with oneself appeared to be completely incomprehensible. For Hirsch, this observation was a challenge and an opportunity alike because this deficit in the scientific understanding of truth created an opening for a renewed theological language.<sup>18</sup>

Hirsch tried to fill this void in the scientific understanding of truth by exploring the mystery of the encounter between man and God and man and man. This application of the concept of mystery allowed him to go beyond scientific understanding without having to abandon its significance for modern life.<sup>19</sup>

However, during the National Socialist take-over of power, Hirsch used this concept of mystery to advocate complete allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Hirsch became a theological advisor to Imperial Bishop Ludwig Müller. In this position, he fervently opposed the Confessing Church. Critics, therefore, draw a line between Hirsch's theology, his ardent support of National Socialism, and the ideology of the German Christians.<sup>20</sup>

On the other side of the theological spectrum, Williams points to the position of Athanasius (AD 328–373), whom he provocatively compares with Karl Barth.<sup>21</sup> In Williams' interpretation, Athanasius had responded to Arius' challenge that the pre-Nicene Trinitarian language required conceptual innovation of a kind that was similar to Barth's transformation of German theology in the 1920s.

Athanasius rejected Arius' attempt to separate God's being from God's doing. He insisted that there was no conceivable gap between God as God acts towards us, as the Father of Jesus Christ, and that activity in and by which God is eternally what God is. God is knowable solely because God is active; what can be said of God can be said because God (utters) himself as Word or Son.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Eckhard Lessing, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie von Albrecht Ritschl bis zur Gegenwart*, Vol. 1, 1870–1918 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000) 59.

<sup>19</sup> Lessing, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Alexander Grau, "Ein protestantischer Theoretiker der Moderne," *Deutschlandfunk*, November 3, 2013, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ein-protestantischer-theoretiker-der-moderne-100.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 237.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 238.

Likewise, for Barth, theology had no power over what it speaks because it is essentially the response to God's free address. This address is not arbitrary but expresses God's eternal self-determination as the Trinity.

Williams' interpretation clearly emphasizes that God the Father acts in history through God's saving Word. This allowed Athanasius and Barth to confidently sustain their belief in a spiritual authority that is not answerable to secular rulers. Their belief was firmly grounded in God's nature, as the external Father of the one from whom and in whom the church exists.<sup>23</sup> In both instances, the new language that Athanasius and Barth suggested had the character of a declaration of independence that set the church free from the embrace of politics and culture. The Barmen Declaration interpreted this new consciousness as a call to resistance against the Nazi regime.

As influential as the Nicene Creed has been in the history of the church, Athanasius and the other contributors to the Nicene language could not bring closure to the debate. Athanasius engaged in a situation in which the traditional language of the church could not adequately express the sameness of God's acting and being. The Nicene concepts that describe the divinity of Jesus Christ are the fruits of this energetic and conflictual wrestling with the question:

[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Son of God,  
the only-begotten of his Father,  
of the substance of the Father,  
God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,  
begotten, not made,  
being of one substance with the Father.<sup>24</sup>

The commotion among the citizens of Byzantium demonstrated the ongoing vitality of the debate. Until today, the language of the Creed has often been seen as too complex and inaccessible to satisfy believers' needs for spiritual clarity and guidance for the mission of the church. The practice of repeating the creedal text without a renewed engagement with its driving questions has not helped to keep the Nicene faith alive. In Williams' interpretation, the Nicene tradition has been successful not so much through its language but through its ability to inspire fresh theological thinking to sustain the church during periods of crisis.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 239.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. The text of the Nicene Creed in the appendix.

Like the citizens of Byzantium at the end of the fourth century, Williams only offers a tentative judgment on the relevance of the Nicene text. He calls for a hermeneutics of engagement with the theological questions and warns against a hermeneutics of repetition of the texts.

In this spirit, Williams concludes the Postscript (Theological) with a call to critics and affirmers of the Nicene Creed alike:

Even those who believe, as I do not, that Nicaea represented a damaging or mistaken shift in the history of doctrine are bound to consider how it has shaped and continues to shape Christian speech and prayer. As for those content to affirm the faith of Nicaea, they too have questions to answer as to the nature of doctrinal continuities, questions which the very fact of a doctrinal crisis in the fourth century presses upon us.<sup>25</sup>

## The Characteristics of Reformed Confessions

In connecting Athanasius with Barth and the Nicene Creed with the Barmen Declaration, Williams, in a remarkable ecumenical spirit, referred to the hermeneutics in which the Reformed tradition engages with creeds and confessions. Reformed theology was never satisfied with what Williams calls the «loyal and uncritical repetition of traditional formulas» but called for a hermeneutics of engagement that responds to the pressing challenges of today.

Karl Barth, who, in the twentieth century, had an enormous influence on the theology and praxis of Reformed confessions, systematized the Reformed understanding of confessions in his 1923 *Theology of Reformed Confessions*. In this book, Barth identifies five significant characteristics that mark the role of confessions in the Reformed church. These characteristics are in close alignment with Williams' understanding of doctrinal hermeneutics, which engages with the crises of the day.

1. Reformed confessions are the *products of local processes*.

They do not look for affirmation by the empire and the imperial church as visible expressions of their catholicity. Catholicity was accorded to them because their content was relevant to other churches that adopted them in response to the challenges that they experienced. Reformed confessional texts, therefore, cannot be regarded as «ecumenical confessions» in the established sense.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 244.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 1.

The Catholic and Lutheran understanding of symbols was based on the belief in the spiritual and worldly unity of Roman-Christian-German Europe. The Swiss Reformers, however, strived for local confessing churches. These churches proved and defended the truth of their confessions solely through their connection to Holy Scripture. They did not do so by formally connecting them to a universal church or a normative exposition of Scripture. For the Reformed, the legitimate pathway to universality was the pathway of particularity.<sup>27</sup>

The reasons for this lack of desire for official ecumenical affirmation were historical and theological. Not only was the connection of Zurich, Geneva, and Strasbourg to the Roman Empire much weaker than that of the Lutheran churches in the electorates in Germany, but the Swiss also had no heart for the idea of the empire and its united church. From the very beginning, Zwingli and Calvin had broken with historical Catholicism in a different way from the Lutheran Reformation in Germany. While Luther and Melanchthon wanted to bring about the victory of the Reformation through a general council, Calvin remained sceptical. For him, the universality of faith was not something that a council could establish but a gift of God that the church had to receive continuously.<sup>28</sup>

2. Reformed confessions are *expressions of the freedom of the churches to testify to their faith in a particular situation*.

Each Reformed confession is a singular work. There is neither a united Reformed confession nor a united interpretation of Reformed confessional texts. The early Reformed confessions emerged from local debates that strived to ground their confessions upon holy Scripture alone.

This common grounding defines the confessional freedom of the particular churches in their relationship with each other. In this spirit, many Reformed church orders emphasize that «no church shall claim authority or dominion over any other».<sup>29</sup> For this fellowship of free churches that respected and affirmed each other's different confessions, Calvin coined the phrase «godly compact».<sup>30</sup>

In his introduction to the *Geneva Catechism of 1538*, Calvin emphatically urges pastors, magistrates, and people of Geneva to commit themselves to such a compact:

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 11f.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 12f.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 14.

But if we desire to prove our obedience to Christ our Leader, we must enter into a godly compact among ourselves and foster mutual peace, which he not only commends to his own, but also inspires in them. Why? Ought not the enemy also, the devil himself, to shoot his arrows to make us achieve reconciliation? For even if he is a beast of many heads, still we see, don't we, how he would hunch himself into a thick wedge to attack Christ's kingdom? If in the prince of hatreds, factions, schisms, this is agreement, how much more tightly is it fitting for us, who contend against him on behalf of the King of Peace, to join purposes and forces? To this end this sort of combat urges us.<sup>31</sup>

3. Reformed confessions are public *testimonies of faith* that respond to a specific challenge of the faith.

They do not claim the historical authority of a symbol in the Roman Catholic or Lutheran sense. For Calvin, a confession was a «testimony of the inwardly conceived faith», in which nothing should be included other than the «most authentic truth of Scripture, devoutly composed of choice and solemn words».<sup>32</sup>

This character defines the status and authority of confessions. As testimonies of inwardly conceived faith, confessions do not claim historical authority. Barth quotes the *Second Helvetic Confession*: «The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by Holy Scriptures, of which the Apostles' Creed is a compendium».<sup>33</sup>

From the beginning of his work in Geneva, Calvin made it clear that, based on this principle, he found the Athanasian and Nicene creeds unappealing and suspect. He felt that he was dealing with idle speculation and redundant wordiness. He refused to sign the Athanasian Creed, for he had pledged faithfulness to God and not to the symbol of Athanasius.<sup>34</sup>

However, in the Institutes of 1536, he was more lenient and conceded that he might not reject the terminology of these confessions as a way to describe the biblical truth. Still, for his person and use, they had nothing more than historical value. This perspective was not the end of Calvin's journey with Trinitarian theology. In the *Gallican Confession*, drafted by Calvin in 1559, he confirmed that the church confessed the «Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creed, because they are in accordance with the Word of God».<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> I. John Hesselink. *Calvin's First Catechism. A Commentary. Featuring Ford Lewis Battles's Translation of the 1538 Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 5.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 18.



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In Reformed understanding, however, such an affirmation could never be final. Many Reformed confessions emphasize that testimonies of faith are texts of human origin and, therefore, prone to error. What is given and revealed in Scripture must, therefore, not be confused with what one subsequently confesses. Scripture remains Scripture, unique, incommensurable, one of a kind. The Reformed confessions, hence, did not claim a higher level of holiness for the ancient church's symbols but denied such a claim.<sup>36</sup>

4. Reformed confessions are *open to corrections from Scripture* and do not claim absolute authority.

They were intended as improvable and replaceable offerings, always open to instruction and correction from Scripture. Barth quotes the Bern consensus of 1532 as an example:

If anything were presented to us by our pastors or others which might lead us closer to Christ and in the power of God's Word be more supportive of common friendship and Christian love than the views presented here, we will gladly accept it and not block the course of the Holy Spirit. For it is not directed backwards to the flesh but always forwards towards the image of Christ Jesus, our Lord.<sup>37</sup>

This provision emphasizes the personal character of confessions. It is human beings who are wrestling with each other about the correct interpretation of Scripture in a given situation. The confession and the confessor cannot be separated. If things are proceeding correctly, the confession stands or falls with the stance of the confessor.<sup>38</sup>

5. Reformed confessions *call for commitment* and do not demand obedience.

Confessions are testimonies of the inwardly conceived faith, but they have the character of public statements. With the acceptance of a confession, a community becomes a «godly compact».

In Barth's eyes, however, this compact was fragile and depended on the commitment of each individual believer. If this commitment was lacking, everything was left to chance. Without faith commitment, it was really not all that important whether the church had an old confession or a new one or none at all. Where the

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<sup>36</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 19f.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 31.

commitment dwindled, the «godly compact» ceased to exist. In this case, the only way to reestablish the eucharistic community was to convene a new synod and formulate a new confession.<sup>39</sup>

## The Hermeneutics of the Confessions of Barmen, Belhar, and Accra

It is at this last point that the trajectories of Williams and Barth connect. Williams' point can be summarized in Barth's language: A collapse of the early church's godly compact provoked the debates that finally led to the Nicene Creed and, 1,600 years later, to the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. In these moments of crisis, new theological language was required to sustain the church's mission.

Barth's affirmation of confessions as theological instruments to respond to crises inspired churches all over the globe to engage in processes of confessing. This chapter will explore three confessions that guide the vision and mission of the World Communion of Reformed Churches today, namely, the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the Confession of Belhar from South Africa (1986), and the Accra Confession, adopted by the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004. The newer confessions closely relate to the earlier ones, but they differ in context, theological method, and the witness that they call for.

This chapter researches how the three texts apply the Nicene hermeneutics of confessing. The analysis focuses on the letters that accompany the confessions and introductions and explain the approach to confessing in the given situation.

### The Theological Declaration of Barmen<sup>40</sup>

The Barmen Declaration was published with a preamble and a postscript that gave reasons for the need for an act of confession, explained the Declaration's character, and called Christians in Germany to commit to its affirmations and rejections.

Surprisingly, the preamble opens with a quote from the constitution of the German Evangelical Church, which the Nazi Government had approved only a few months ago. What, at first glance, might seem like a rather odd move, at second

<sup>39</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the text of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* in the appendix.

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glance, appears as a paradigm for a hermeneutics that moves from repetition to confessing.

In 1933, the Nazi led German Evangelical Church propagated a national church in close alliance with the Nazi state. Article 1 of the Constitution, however, still used classical language to describe the theological basis of the church:

The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in holy scripture and brought to light again in the confessions of the Reformation. The full powers that the church needs for its mission are hereby determined and limited.

What the Barmen Declaration now did was to take the classical formulation seriously and build a new confessing language upon it. In the process, it also affirmed language from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed:

We, the representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and united churches, of free synods, church assemblies, and parish organizations united in the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, declare that we stand together on the ground of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of German confessional churches. We are bound together by the confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

In a third step, the preamble publicly declares that the very government that had approved the constitution endangered the basis of the church as defined in Article 1:

We publicly declare before all evangelical churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this confession is grievously imperiled, and with it the unity of the German Evangelical Church. It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling church party of the «German Christians» and of the church administration carried on by them.

By rejecting the enforced conformity with the Nazi state, the confession, in a language that reminds of Calvin's warning of the ceasing of the «godly compact», wanted to reestablish the church's theological identity, independent from the government:

This threat consists in the fact that the theological basis on which the German Evangelical Church is united has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the «German Christians» as well as on the part of the church administration. When these principles are held to be valid, then, according to all the confessions in force among us, the church ceases to be the church and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of confessional churches, becomes intrinsically impossible.

This renewed embrace of the theological identity of the church also allowed an ecumenical breakthrough. Lutheran, Reformed, and united churches were deeply divided in their understanding of the function and role of confessions. But threatened by the Nazi take-over, they were able to speak with one voice and discovered that, at the moment when the Gospel itself was threatened, principles were at stake that weighed more than confessional identities.

The six theses of the Barmen Declaration unfolded the theological basis of the church. Like Athanasius and his fellow campaigners during and after the Council of Nicaea, they proposed a language that grounded the church in Scripture and its confessing nature. It was this renewed theological identity that allowed the church to reject state interference.

Since the German churches were deeply divided in their understanding of confessions, the text adopted at the Confessing Synod in Barmen could not be called a confession. In today's Germany, the formal authority of the text is only expressed in vague terms at the national level. But the postscript of the Declaration bypasses this obstacle to the authority of the Declaration by calling for faithful acceptance of the affirmations on the basis of the confession's theological principles:

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgement of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of confessional churches. It invites all who are able to accept its declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in church politics. It entreats all whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope.

## The Belhar Confession<sup>41</sup>

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid and confronts the sin of racism and its theological justification by Reformed churches. The confession was formally adopted in 1986 by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). In recent years, the confession has been received by churches in southern Africa, North America, and Europe.

The Confession of Belhar draws from the Barmen Declaration and the Reformed confessional tradition. The Accompanying Letter opens with a theological description of the situation that calls for a confessing response to the crisis in South Africa:

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<sup>41</sup> See. the text of the *Confession of Belhar* in the appendix.

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We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church family calls for such a decision.

The following sentences distinguish the confession from other texts produced by church and theology:

Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand.

The second paragraph of the letter emphasizes that the authority for such a confession can only be the Word of God. Confessions have to recognize that the confessing act cannot be separated from the confessor. The confession also judges those who adopt the confession:

We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies, or achieve any ulterior purposes. [...] We do not make this confession from God's throne and from on high, but before God's throne and before other human beings.

The third paragraph marks a decisive shift from the imperial framing of the Nicene tradition. Confessions reject false doctrines, but they do not have the authority to condemn people. Confessing is aimed at liberation:

This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no-one will identify themselves with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it [...]. Our church and our land have an intense need for such liberation.

The Belhar Confession expresses itself in the classical format of Reformed confessions. It opens with a declaration of faith in the triune God and affirms the description of the holy catholic church. Multiple scriptural references back up every section of the confession. This method points to a particular scriptural hermeneutics. The references are not presented as scientific truth that would close all conversation. They are signposts for the church's discernment.

The Belhar Confession engages the false gospel that justified the ideological foundation of the apartheid system in three major articles under the headings *Unity*, *Reconciliation*, and *Justice*. Following the example of the Barmen Declaration, each article begins with an affirmation, which is followed by the rejection of false doctrine.

The exposition of the affirmations, however, differs from the Barmen Declaration. While the affirmations in the Declaration can be read as testimonies of the inwardly conceived faith (cf., e.g., the affirmation in thesis one: «Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death»), the Belhar Confession binds faith and ethics together. It stresses that God's gifts are also obligations and presses for the visibility of the confession in the life of the church.

In emphasizing the visibility of the church's commitment, the Belhar Confession takes up a critique of the Barmen Declaration. While many people cherish the clarity, with which the Declaration rejects the capture of the church by the Nazis, critics point to the Declaration's silence in the face of the persecution of the Jews and the maltreatment of all opposition against the totalitarian state. In the light of these blatant injustices, the Declaration's focus on the integrity of the church's proclamation might appear self-centered. In taking up this critique, the Belhar Confession emphasizes that the confession must become visible in the witness of the church. –Article 2 on *Unity* makes the call:

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.

Article 3 on *Reconciliation* makes it clear that failing to make reconciliation visible in the life of the nation contradicts God's gifts

because the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity.

Article 4 on *Justice* affirms that

in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God

and calls that the

church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.

Article 5, at the end of the confession, reflects upon the consequences that the church will experience if it lives out its call to make its faith visible:

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

## The Accra Confession

The Accra Confession that the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted in 2004<sup>42</sup> is based on the theological conviction that the economic and ecological injustices of today's global economy require a faith response.

The Accra Confession follows the Belhar Confession in its insistence that the church is called to live out its witness in the challenges of today's world and, therefore, calls for faithfulness to God's covenant (§ 15). The Accra Confession stands in the tradition of the Barmen Declaration and shares many of the commitments that are expressed in the Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession: i.e., the need to confess anew when, in a specific situation, the heart of the Gospel is at stake (§16); the conviction that the authority for such a confession can only come from Scripture as the Word of God (cf. the affirmations in §§17–32); and the recognition that the confession as well as the confessors stand under the judgment of God's justice. ACCRA, therefore, demands that the church acknowledge its complicity in the injustice. (§34).

However, the theological method of the Accra Confession differs from the earlier confessions. While Barmen and Belhar follow a vertical format and open with references to Scripture and doctrine, the Accra Confession follows a lateral approach that proceeds from human experience to human witness. This structure is based on the See–Judge–Act method from Latin American theology of liberation. The Accra Confession translates the See–Judge–Act language into a Reformed idiom: *Reading the Signs of the Time, Confession of Faith in the Face of Economic Injustice and Ecological Destruction*, and *Covenanting for Justice*. This lateral structure

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the text of the *Accra Confession* in the appendix.

has the advantage that it is open to the experiences of people and creation, which, in vertically structured confessions, often only enter as an afterthought.

Critics, however, have denounced this approach as a contradiction to the Nicene tradition and accused the Accra Confession of turning away from the theological basis for the church that would allow it to denounce ideology and power from first principles that transcend the political discourse.

This critique, however, does not do justice to the method of the confession. Accra is different from other confessions in that it integrates the discernment of what is at stake into the text of the confession itself. The confession was, therefore, not published with an accompanying letter like Belhar, but it shares the story that led the World Alliance to proclaim the confession in the confession itself: Accra responded to an urgent call of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC's) African constituency that was strengthened by the encounter of church-sponsored injustice during the visit to the dungeons of the slave forts in Elmina and Cape Cross in Ghana:

Gathered in Accra, Ghana, for the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we visited the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast, where millions of Africans were commodified, sold, and subjected to the horrors of repression and death. The cries of «never again» are put to the lie by the ongoing realities of human trafficking and the oppression of the global economic system. (§ 3).

The discernment of the “Reading the Signs of the Times” chapter is complex. It not only analyses economic injustice but also engages the ideological and theological arguments that are brought forward to justify or resist the current economic order. The discernment, therefore, does not only analyse the economic situation but also seeks to understand God’s call to action. As a result, this discernment does not take a neutral position but calls for the church to take a side:

We see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. This is a global system that defends and protects the interests of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Lk 16.13). (§ 14)

However, such discernment, as well-researched as it may be, does not yet have the authority of a confession as long as it cannot demonstrate that the witness of



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Scripture supports it. Only if this theological basis is established can the church proclaim the discernment as God's Word.

Therefore, it is essential to recognize that the Accra Confession, like any other Reformed tradition, engages Scripture to test the discernment of economic injustice. The confession follows the example of Barmen and Belhar and examines every rejection in the light of an affirmation of God's gifts:

We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (Jn 10.10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.

We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. «The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.» (Ps 24.1)

Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule." (§§ 17–19)

Unlike Belhar, however, the Accra Confession does not integrate the obligations that make God's gifts visible in the life of the world into the exposition of the affirmations. Following the See–Judge–Act methodology, this integration takes place in the section on 'Covenanting for Justice'. Also, here, it is crucial to note that the confession provides the hinge that connects the 'Reading of the Signs of the Times' with the call for 'Covenanting for Justice'. As the discernment needs to be tested in the engagement with Scripture, all acts of covenanting stand under the judgment of God's justice:

We commit ourselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God. We humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgment of God's justice. (§§ 33–34)

## Conclusion

Confessions are expressions of the living faith. Rowan Williams follows Karl Barth's insistence that the need to confess arises in response to a particular challenge to the Gospel. In each confessing moment, the church has been saying, *«we, here, now,*

and for the time being, want to understand in this particular way, not the articles of faith, but the Word of God given alone in Scripture».<sup>43</sup>

The confessions that are discussed in this chapter demonstrate the potential of the confessing faith for theology and witness of the church. Barth and Williams trace the origins of this understanding of confessions back to the Council of Nicaea without concealing the ambiguities of the Nicene tradition. For both theologians, the debates that led to the confessions are almost as important as the confessional texts themselves. Barth describes the link between the discernment and text in the early Reformed confessions:

The stringency with which they were acknowledged in the earliest years, and the unquestioned and universal acceptance with which they were immediately received, were based upon the *seriousness* with which, at decisive times, Reformed Christians determined that they must confess, and upon the *vitality* of the knowledge out of which the confession emerged. (This is true apostolic authority [...] which is not built upon place or persons, and this is derived from sacred scripture) [Bohemian Confession (1609)]. [...] The commitment to the confession as a binding *juridicial* act was, in terms of its substance, a secondary matter of merely external order.<sup>44</sup>

The need to confess arises when the «godly compact» in a community becomes fragile and a crisis demands renewed commitment. In such situations, the church is called to move beyond the secure patterns of tradition. Such exercise is risky. Despite a careful reading of the signs of the times and scrupulous scriptural testing, some language that arises will later be declared false or even heretical. Nonetheless, Barth and Williams agree that the church should take the risk. The possibility of failure should not lead to stronger policing of the theological discourse. On the contrary, both theologians call for a hermeneutics of confessing that continuously tests the traditions of the church in the light of Scripture and discerns the new language that is coming up in situations of crisis.

The confessions of Barmen, Belhar, and Accra embrace the Nicene faith. But they interpret it in the Reformed tradition, which is determined to liberate confessions from the imperial framing introduced by the Council of Nicaea. Confessions do not have authority because they are enforced by empires, but because of the persuasiveness of their claim to proclaim God's Word in a given situation.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 23. Cf. also, Karl Barth, "The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed (1925)," in *Theology and Church*, trans. Louis P. Smith (London: SCM Press, 1965), 112–135, esp. 116.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 31.

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As one can see in the development of modern confessions from Barmen to Accra, churches in the twentieth century became increasingly aware that their mission could not be restricted to a narrow focus on individual salvation. In confrontation with totalitarian and unjust structures, churches were forced to articulate their theological truth claims without reference to imperial power. In such moments, the confessing witness of the church could not be anything other than an intervention into history. The confessions of Belhar and Accra made this implicit notion of the Nicene Creed and the Barmen Declaration explicit and insisted on the visibility of the confessing commitment in the church's witness.

If one follows the journey of Reformed Christians from Barmen to Accra, one sees that the circle of the church's witness is continuously widening: Barmen engages the relationship between church and state, Belhar calls for the visibility of the church's witness in the entire life of the nation, and Accra, finally, focuses on the whole creation.

None of these confessions remained unchallenged. Like Nicaea, the modern confessions strove for clarity and unity in situations marked by high levels of polarization. Confronted with the problem of what to prioritize higher, the confessions opted for clarity in the hope that the truth would eventually prevail and lead to a unity grounded on the Gospel.

The commotion among the citizens in Byzantium is clear evidence of the controversial nature of processes of confessing. A living hermeneutics of confessing creates a robust culture of engagement because the participants feel that their highest faith convictions are at stake.

Reformed people sometimes look enviously at the orderliness and hierarchical courtesy that mark the atmosphere in other Christian communions. But few would want to renounce the energy and sincerity of the practice of Reformed discernment. For us, who do theology in the Reformed tradition, the commotion is a sign of trust in the living God who «gathers, protects, and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end».<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The Confession of Belhar, Art. 1.

# Reformed Wrestling with the Spirit: Navigating Nicaea 325 and Beyond

*Heleen Zorgdrager*

The Holy Spirit has always retained a more prominent place in the Church of the East than in the West. This is evident in what scholars allude to as the *filioque* addition to the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople by the Latin Church, that was rejected by the Eastern Church. Eastern theology appeared less inclined to bind the Spirit exclusively to Christ and granted the Spirit a relatively independent position. While the Spirit proceeds from the Father as ‘one God’, the Spirit is conceived as active and effective in all of creation. A second example of the more prominent position of the Spirit in Eastern theology is the emphasis on the Spirit’s role in the Eucharist. It is only after invoking the Holy Spirit that the consecration of the sacraments take place.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware and others warned not to exaggerate the difference between East and West on the issue of the *filioque*.<sup>1</sup> Much of the controversy might be more in the area of semantics than in any basic doctrinal differences. Recent ecumenical dialogues show that it is possible to overcome the rigorist position. A good example is the joint declaration on the *filioque* of Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians from North America: “The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue?: An Agreed Statement.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Kallistos Ware, in *Diakonia* no. 6 (1985), quoted in Elias Zoghby, *A Voice from the Byzantine East: A Handbook for Inter-Church Relations* (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), 43.

<sup>2</sup> “The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue?: An Agreed Statement”, Statement of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, last modified October 25, 2003, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/filioque-a-church-dividing-issue>.

Notwithstanding such ecumenical attempts of finding common ground, we cannot deny that in Western classical theology the Holy Spirit has received significantly less attention than in Byzantine tradition. Authors reflect this relative neglect of the Holy Spirit through vivid metaphors. The Spirit is called «faceless» (Walter Kasper), a «shadow figure» (John Macquarrie), the «poor relation» in the Trinity (Norman Pittenger), the «unknown» or «half-known» God (Yves Congar), the «forgotten» God (Elizabeth A. Johnson), and – my favorite – the «Cinderella» of the Trinity (Nicola Slee).

For several decades now, a reappraisal of the Spirit is going on in mainstream Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. This reappraisal was necessitated by realities such as the ecological crisis, the growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal movement, globalization and migration, the «material turn» with its focus on embodied agency, and the intensified encounter with other religious and indigenous traditions. Feminist, womanist and queer theologians have contributed substantially to this renewed attention to the role of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> New insights, daring visions, innovations of church life and practices, and liberating actions of (black) women, queer folks, people with disabilities and other marginalized groups are acknowledged to spring from the Holy Spirit who gives life, creates, sustains, liberates, heals, and allows for organic connections with deeply engrained epistemologies. The Spirit empowers to say ‘no’ to principalities and powers and to see possibilities for renewed life in the future. The Spirit is (re)discovered as the vital force present within and amid the personal and political struggles people find themselves in.

## Nicaea 325 and the Spirit as ‘third’

This ‘turn to the Spirit’ calls for a re-evaluation of the achievements of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in AD 325. Clearly, the Holy Spirit was not high on the agenda of the conciliar meeting. The doctrinal debates were on the relationship of the Father and the Son, and not on the role and nature of the Spirit. Challenged

<sup>3</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (New York: Fortress Press, 1999); Linda E. Thomas, “The Holy Spirit and Black Women: A Womanist Perspective,” in eds. Jenny Daggers and Garce Ji-Sun Kim, *Christian Doctrines for Global Gender Justice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 73–88; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (Chestnut Ridge NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003); Patrick S. Cheng, *Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011).

by the Arian position, the first ecumenical council attained consensus on the Christological issue of the divine nature of God the Son and his relationship to God the Father. The early version of the Nicene creed barely mentions the Spirit. After the confessional-liturgical affirmations of the *homoousios* of the Father and the Son there is a very short statement on the Holy Spirit: «and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit».<sup>4</sup> More detailed explanations would only come half a century later.

In what came to be known as the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (AD 381) it is read: «and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets».<sup>5</sup> These textual amendments are attributed to the council of Constantinople, as clarified by the *acta* of the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in AD 451.<sup>6</sup> Most probably various versions of the later authorized creedal text were already in use in liturgies. Thus, in the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople the consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the Spirit was confirmed, alongside several explanatory details.<sup>7</sup>

Both Eastern Orthodox and Western Trinitarian traditions find normative orientation in the Nicaea-Constantinople conciliar affirmations. It is not the aim of my chapter to further inquire about the reasons why, in the subtle doctrinal balancing between unity and diversity of the divine persons, the Spirit has retained a more prominent position in the Eastern Church.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I am intrigued by the approach of the Anglican feminist, patristic, and systematic theologian Sarah Coakley, who shifts our attention to what happened in the process leading up to the first council of Nicaea. She points to how certain decisions of Nicaea-Constantinople impacted both East and West and how both have suffered consequences in their Trinitarian theologies, despite the relatively more acknowledged position of the Spirit in the East. Coakley explores what happened to the diversity of lived traditions of the Spirit of the early church.

As Eduard Schweizer aptly formulated: «Long before the Spirit was a theme of doctrine, the Spirit was a fact in the experience of the church».<sup>9</sup> The Spirit was

<sup>4</sup> See the text of the *Nicene Creed* in the appendix.

<sup>5</sup> See the text of The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the appendix.

<sup>6</sup> John N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition (London: Longman, 1972), 323–331.

<sup>7</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Baker Academic, 2018), 37–67.

<sup>8</sup> For the post-Nicene debates see the influential study of Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Eduard Schweizer, “pneuma, pneumatikos,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6:396.

already embedded in worship, liturgy, prayer life, ministry, in an abundance of mystical-charismatic experiences of men and women, both individual and communal, and reflected in contemplative and ascetic writings of church fathers. In her book *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (2013) the first volume of a planned systematic theological tetralogy, as well as in multiple articles and lectures,<sup>10</sup> Sarah Coakley narrates a different story of the theological journey of the Holy Spirit in the early centuries up to the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, as well as after the councils. It is the story of a Spirit-led minority tradition of Trinitarian theology that was sidelined, with serious implications for the post-conciliar church and theology. Coakley holds the thesis that the doctrinal decisions of Nicaea-Constantinople specified the relations between the persons of the Trinity in such a way that the Spirit was defined as 'third' in the processional order, and this implicitly led to a certain type of trinitarian theology being favored over another as 'orthodox'.

In this chapter I will present Coakley's view and bring her into dialogue with some significant Reformed theological voices. Where is Reformed theology in this picture of the role of the Spirit? Is the verdict of a relative neglect and devaluation of the Spirit's role and work also applicable to Reformed engagements with the Spirit? In my view we can speak of a particular Reformed way of wrestling with the Spirit. I will depict the pneumatological ambivalence in Reformed tradition first – an ambivalence that is also present in the *Institutes* of John Calvin. In a second step, I present Coakley's nuanced but critical interrogation of Nicaea-Constantinople and the developments thereafter, and her hypothesis of a Spirit-led trinitarianism in the early church. Finally, I will turn to an alternative Reformed voice on the Spirit, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher, who tends also to prioritize the Spirit in his much underrated and neglected Trinitarian design. What would be the potential of Schleiermacher and Coakley for an ecumenical pneumatology today that will inspire people to perceive God amid creation, to experience God under earthly living conditions, to receive and embrace a novel vision of life in fullness that resists the values and principles of a world «fallen among thieves» (Luke 10.30; John 10.10) and leads into life in

<sup>10</sup> Among them Sarah Coakley, "Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity: Vying Models of Authority in Third-Fourth-Century Debates on Prayer and 'Orthodoxy'," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 4 (2013): 379–399; "The Spirit in the Trinity: Mystical Theology," lecture, Vancouver School of Theology, 5 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O9SdjevV-vY>; "On Desire and Gender," lecture, Harvard Divinity School, 3 June 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhJWpR6\\_8i0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhJWpR6_8i0).

communion with God, fellow human beings, and the more-than-human nature – safe, empowered, and dignified?<sup>11</sup>

## Reformed Wrestling with the Spirit

There is something highly paradoxical in the Reformed tradition's engagement with the Holy Spirit. If one looks at *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*,<sup>12</sup> a separate chapter on pneumatology will not be found, while there is one on all other loci of systematic theology.<sup>13</sup> It is also well-known that the Reformed theologian Karl Barth did not touch upon the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in his *Church Dogmatics*. Does it indicate a certain unease with the work of the Spirit in Reformed theology? However, on the other hand, we encounter a surprising frankness and even a warm embracing of the Spirit in Reformed theology as well. When searching to characterize Reformed theology, and giving expression to what gives this tradition its vitality, a theologian like David H. Jensen posits that the central drive behind all has been a theology of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup> He argues that Reformed tradition resists defining its «common core» in a single uniting confession, liturgical-devotional text such as the Book of Common Prayer, or an ethics (such as pacifism). Reformed scholars have tried to describe a «common core» by appealing to essential tenets or an overarching theme such as covenant theology, or in a pattern of habits and traits which could be called a 'Reformed ethos'. These attempts, however, all fall short, according to Jensen. Instead, he considers a theology of the Spirit as the powerful, if often unarticulated, drive that made theology inherently open to the confessional plurality that characterizes the Reformed churches. He also names it as the animating force behind Reformed theology's politically engaged understanding of the Reign of God.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Welker, *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2015, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1992), 306.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford Academic, 2020), online edn, *Oxford Academic*, 8 October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198723912.001.0001>.

<sup>13</sup> An exception is the chapter on "John Owen's *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*," authored by Suzanne McDonald 266-279. This chapter is located in Part II, Texts, whereas Part III, Topics and Themes, lacks a separate treatment of the Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> David H. Jensen, "Reformed and Always Being Reformed: A Tradition of the Spirit?" in *Always Being Reformed; Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David H. Jensen, 3-20 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 4.



He admits that this is a perhaps surprising outlook on Reformed tradition:

Rarely has Reformed Christianity been described as a tradition of the Spirit. The stereotype of the tradition is that it is too preoccupied with order, too suspicious of winds that quickly get carried away. Calvin was wary of enthusiasts, Westminster guards against spiritual excess, Barth was suspicious of pietists. Each generation in the Reformed tradition, it seems, has been cautious of granting the Spirit too much ground. Pneumatology is the slipperiest of doctrines in the tradition, and, as a result, often gets short shrift in the tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Be that as it may, Jensen points to the fact that theologians such as Calvin and Schleiermacher have been described as theologians of the Spirit.<sup>16</sup> He suggests that one can read the entirety of Calvin's Book III of the *Institutes* as pneumatology.<sup>17</sup>

To substantiate his proposal to consider the Reformed tradition from the perspective of a theology of the Spirit, Jensen clarifies how Reformed theology has provided parameters for contemplating the work of the Spirit, linked to six doctrinal areas. The Spirit works in the areas of Scripture, of the unification of the believer with Christ, of both individual and corporate faith, of the sacraments, of the transformation of the person in the work of sanctification, and – in what Jensen calls ‘the most comprehensive note of Reformed articulations of the Spirit’<sup>18</sup> – in its intimation as divine presence in creation. As for the latter, he underlines, with Jürgen Moltmann and others, that a theology of the Spirit needs to be creation-centered, allowing us to see the presence of God in all things. He deems it a genuine Reformed posture to affirm this: «If we ask where the Spirit is active, the answer is *everywhere* in creation».<sup>19</sup> Jensen refers to the Nicaea-Constantinople creed where the Spirit is appraised as «Lord and Giver of life» and to Calvin's view of the Spirit who is «excepted from the category of creatures, but transfusing into all things his energy».<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> See for Schleiermacher as a Trinitarian theologian who begins with the Spirit, besides the famous suggestion of Barth, also Del Colle, R., “Schleiermacher and Spirit Christology: Unexplored Horizons of The Christian Faith,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999): 286-307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00020>; Theodore Vial, *Schleiermacher: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Shelli Poe, *Essential Trinitarianism: Schleiermacher as Trinitarian Theologian* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2017) and Heleen Zorgdrager, *Theologie die verschil maakt. Taal en seksedifferentie als sleutels tot Schleiermachers denken* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum: 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 11, footnote 20.

<sup>18</sup> Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 14.

<sup>19</sup> Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 14–15.

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion* 1.13.14.

## Tension Between Expansive and Restrictive Understanding

The bold proposal of Jensen together with his awareness that Reformed theologians have always been «cautious of granting the Spirit too much ground» is helpful for understanding the nature of wrestling with the Spirit in Reformed tradition. Perhaps it is best described as two strands that have always provoked and challenged each other in an unresolved tension and thus impacted the further history and development of a Reformed doctrine of the Spirit. On the one hand, the creational breadth of the Spirit's activity is emphasized, and, on the other hand, the Spirit is strongly linked to Word and Sacrament. An expansive and a more restrictive view of the Spirit's work stand in a strained relation. «Reformed articulations of the Spirit are thus», Jensen writes, «marked by striking particularity (connecting Spirit to Word and Sacrament) and unbounded by any particular (as Spirit is discerned in all life)».<sup>21</sup>

With a closer look at the work of the Spirit in relation to the Bible, so to speak in the hermeneutical inner circle, Jensen detects a similar tension. Reformed tradition confesses the Spirit as both the author and interpreter of the Word. If the pole of authorship is emphasized, it could lead and has led in tradition to a sacrosanct use of the source of Scripture, bordering at fundamentalist ways of reading and interpreting the Bible. If the pole of interpreter (*testimonium Spiritus sancti internum*) is emphasized, much more space *can* emerge for a Spirit let loose in the world, indwelling in traditions, science, culture and human experience, and for dynamically integrating these sources in reader-response, context-informed approaches to the biblical text.

Though the unbounded nature of the Spirit is confessed, Reformed have also carefully delineated some bounds to discern the work of the Spirit. Reformed confessions (up to Belhar and Accra) can be read as guides to discerning the Spirit.<sup>22</sup> The World Communion of Reformed Churches has 'discerning' as one of its key verbs: Discerning, Confessing, Witnessing, and Being Reformed Together. Communal discernment is identified as a foundational principle in Reformed theology. Discernment is understood as a corporate, Spirit-led process that involves the entire church community.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jensen, "Reformed and Always being Reformed," 15.

<sup>22</sup> Jensen, "Reformed and Always being Reformed," 18.

<sup>23</sup> "The Power of Discernment in Christian Witness: Discerning God's Call for the Future," 25 February 2025, <https://wcrc.eu/the-power-of-discernment-in-christian-witness-discerning-gods-call-for-the-future/>.

Discerning the Spirit was a central theme in the Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue on Mission, 2014–2020.<sup>24</sup> In delineating the ways of empowerment by the Spirit, from the Reformed side, the need for communal, careful discernment was strongly emphasized:

36. [...] Power is expressed in various dimensions, such as spiritual, ecclesial, emotional, psychological, cultural, political, economic, and military. Hence, we believe that we need careful discernment (Romans 12:2) a) of the understanding of empowerment, b) of the social context of empowerment, and c) of past shortcomings. This discernment regarding power is guided by God's authority (1 Cor 12:10), as a self-emptying power that brings wholeness to life (Phil. 2:5-11).<sup>25</sup>

37. [...] All claims to empowerment require discernment in connection and keeping with God's mission. [...] <sup>26</sup>

## Rationalizing Tendencies

Two more areas of Reformed wrestling with the Spirit can be pointed out. The first is in the field of liturgical theology and pertains to the reduction of the work of the Spirit to intellectual understanding and to one-sided emphasis on moral meaning at the cost of emotions, affects and embodiment. Shannon Craigo-Snell calls it the «rational slant of Calvinism».<sup>27</sup> The focus on Scripture involved a shift away from experiencing the divine through the body, through sight, touch and ingestion. Overly rational Calvinism participated, according to Craigo-Snell, in generating a disintegrated theological anthropology in which the mind is set as guard over the unruly emotions, will, and body. She identifies the roots in the Reformation and its subsequent enmeshment with modern epistemology, in particular Descartes and Locke. By elevating reason above all other human faculties Reformed tradition helped paving the way for rationalizing modes of 'othering' that became productive in upholding chattel slavery and colonialism.

<sup>24</sup> "Called to God's Mission: Report of the Third Round of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and Representatives of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, 2014–2020." *Reformed World* 69 no.1 (2021): 117–148.

<sup>25</sup> "Called to God's Mission," 129.

<sup>26</sup> "Called to God's Mission," 129–130.

<sup>27</sup> Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Reforming Calvinism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, eds., Bruce Gordon, and Carl R. Trueman, Oxford Handbooks (2021); online edn, *Oxford Academic*, 14 July 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198728818.013.30>.

Although already Calvin had affirmed that Christian faith is about «tasting of the goodness of God», the correction of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was needed who insisted on knowing the spiritual truth through «the sense of the heart».

Craig-Snell concludes that, for Reformed faith to remain a vital and nourishing tradition, it will need to develop more integrative Christian disciplines and practices. With Talal Assad (and with Sarah Coakley, as we shall see), she affirms that affections can be formed and sustained through such disciplines of devotion and prayer.<sup>28</sup> Practices of worship and devotion are needed that make God ‘real’ for the people.

Also, Michael Welker, who worked extensively on a biblical, realistic theology of the Holy Spirit ‘from below’, from the perspectives of witnessed experiences of the Spirit, criticizes the rationalizing tendencies in Western-style theology, including in Karl Barth. A reductionist presentation of the Spirit, he argues, is the result of a dominant Aristotelian identification of spirit with reason, intellectual reflection and self-reflection. This sort of dualizing thinking of spirit and matter, together with a Hegelian totalitarian-metaphysical conception of the Spirit, impacted Protestant pneumatology in a detrimental way. For Welker, the event of the «outpouring of the Spirit» (Acts 2) points in a different direction: «The outpouring of the Spirit and the efficacious actions of the Spirit, in general, are an essentially multipolar rather than bipolar event».<sup>29</sup> By this he means that the Holy Spirit is to be understood first as the multifaceted unity of perspectives on Jesus and of spoken and lived testimonies of him. He understands the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* as the activity of God in and through which the witnessing voices of the Bible refer to God’s presence and glory, and as the multipolar response to the Word of God that is heard, received and bears fruit in multiple contexts. This multipolar understanding leads Welker to the view of the Holy Spirit as a *public* person: the Spirit actualizes the public work of Jesus Christ in its rich complexity. The Spirit is the power that recognizes, revitalizes and preserves the Body of Christ in the community that embodies the selfless love of Christ in the world.<sup>30</sup> Welker stresses that the rule of

<sup>28</sup> Craig-Snell, 619–620. Reference to Talal Assad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 138.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Welker, “God’s Spirit, the Human Spirit, and the Outpouring of the Spirit,” in *Leaning into the Spirit: Ecumenical Perspectives on Discernment and Decision-making in the Church, Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds., Virginia Miller, David Moxon and Stephen Pickard, (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 23–38, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Welker, *Gottes Geist*, 286–288. He considers here the kingly office of Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Christ is not limited to ‘word and sacrament’ alone. Christian humanism also influences other religious and secular forms of practiced love and compassion while also receiving strong impulses from them.<sup>31</sup> We hear resonances with the intuition behind the notion of ‘common grace’ from the works of neocalvinist theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.<sup>32</sup>

With his elaborated pneumatology Welker accentuates the continuous generation of novelty and newness out of the inner depths of God.<sup>33</sup> He does not speculate on an immanent Trinitarian being of God.

## Federal Theology Prioritizing Father and Son

Speculation on an immanent Trinitarian being of God, however, is present in a second area that reveals the problematic relation of Reformed theology to the Spirit. It is the Reformed scholastic doctrine of the divine decrees.<sup>34</sup> Did the decree to elect come *before* or *within* the decree to create and permit the human fall into sin? A solution was thought to be found in the so-called federal theology, with its focus on the *foedus* or covenant of God with creature, proposing that the saving works of God *ad extra* were themselves predicated upon a covenant within the divine life itself.

In this doctrinal conception, the divine being is the original, eternal covenant. Francis Turretin (1623-1687) depicts the covenant of redemption as a pact or agreement between the Father and the Son in their immanent Trinitarian being.<sup>35</sup> The covenant of grace is the outworking of the fruit of the covenant of redemption in time by application of the Holy Spirit on the church.

Covenantal theology has been extremely powerful in the history of Reformed churches, also harmful in its excluding effects and closeness to racist and ethnic ideologies. For the topic of this chapter, I notice that first and foremost dogmatic

<sup>31</sup> Welker, “God’s Spirit, the Human Spirit,” 31–32.

<sup>32</sup> “All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The Spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation.” In: “Herman Bavinck’s Common Grace.” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 1, 51, <https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Herman-Bavinck-Common-Grace.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Welker, “Der schöpferische Geist, Kreativität und Neues in Gott,” *Evangelische Theologie* 78 (2018): 339–348.

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, “The Doctrine of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, eds., Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, Oxford Handbooks (2020); online edition, Oxford Academic, 8 Oct. 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198723912.013.25>,

<sup>35</sup> Sonderegger, “The Doctrine of God,” 398.

attention is given to the Father and the Son, whereas the Holy Spirit's task is that of applying and mediating the fruit of the divine covenant to human beings. Although Turretin also calls the Spirit a «cause together with the Father and the Son»,<sup>36</sup> it is not clear what exactly the causal work of the Spirit would have been.

## John Calvin: Distinction of Order in the Trinity

Calvin for whom the knowledge of God, far from empty speculation, «takes root in the heart»,<sup>37</sup> goes for an integral approach. In the *Institutes*, he aims to hold together a focus on the Spirit's creational work and a strong linking between the Spirit and Scripture. Does he succeed in keeping the two together?

Initially, yes. Scripture itself, he states, ascribes this office of the «Giver of life» to the Spirit, both in the creation story in Genesis 1 and in the sending of prophets (Is 48.16): «his [the Spirit's] being diffused over all space, sustaining, invigorating, and quickening all things, both in heaven and on the earth».<sup>38</sup> The Spirit «transfuses into all things his energy». And only after this appraisal of the Creator Spirit, we hear about the regenerating work of the Spirit in the believers: «In like manner, by means of him we become partakers of the divine nature, so as in a manner to feel his quickening energy within us».<sup>39</sup>

Problems arise when Calvin unfolds his view on the Trinity. In relation to Romans 8, the key text in Coakley's argument for an alternative tradition of a Spirit-led trinitarianism, Calvin ends up in the opposite direction. For him, Romans 8 evidences the *filioque* including conceiving the Spirit as 'third' in order. He argues that Romans 8 is the clue for attributing to the Father «the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son wisdom, counsel and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit».<sup>40</sup> From this «distinction of order» Calvin derives that «the Father is being considered first, next the Son from him, and then the Spirit from both». Does the Creator Spirit get lost along the way?<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. and ed. G. M. Giger and J. T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1992) 165. Quoted by Sonderegger, 398.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Instit.* 1.5.9, quoted in Sonderegger, 393.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.14.

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.14.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.18.

<sup>41</sup> An alternative possibility to this vanishing of the Creator Spirit behind the Spirit of elec-

With his saying that «the Father is being considered first», Calvin holds to the monarchy of the Father:

The Scriptures teach that there is essentially but one God, and, therefore, that the essence both of the Son and Spirit is unbegotten; but inasmuch as the Father is first in order, and of himself begat his own Wisdom, he, as we lately observed, is justly regarded as the principle and fountain of all the Godhead. Thus God, taken indefinitely, is unbegotten, and the Father, in respect of his person, is unbegotten.<sup>42</sup>

Calvin calls on the authority of Augustine: «But it is far safer to rest contented with the relation [of Father and Son] as taught by him, than get bewildered in vain speculation by subtle prying into a sublime mystery».<sup>43</sup> Augustine famously described the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son, and between God and humanity. Other metaphors he uses for the Spirit are ‘communion of Father and Son’, ‘shared love’, and ‘gift’. This is the Trinitarian tradition in which Calvin finds his home. He does not want to go beyond Augustine.<sup>44</sup>

## Coakley on Spirit-led Trinitarianism

Sarah Coakley narrates a different story of the theological journey of the Holy Spirit in the early centuries up to the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, with serious implications for the post-conciliar church and theology, as well as for the position of women in the church. This is how her alternative story goes:

In the early church we can find a distinctive approach to trinitarianism. This approach was founded explicitly in demanding spiritual practices of prayer, contemplation, and personal transformation. It characteristically appealed for its

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tion and regeneration is offered by Margit Ernst-Habib in her revision of the Reformed doctrine of election. Election, grounded in the divine decree, she argues, is not an event between Father and Son only, but happens in the communion of Father and Son with the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Holy Spirit in electing human beings is always and everywhere a Creator Spiritus, a life-creating and life-enabling Spirit, who creates *ex nihilo*. But, she emphasizes, also that preservation and conservation of created life, the *creatio continua*, is an act of grace of the Creator Spiritus, because without it everything would perish. See Margit Ernst-Habib, “‘Erwählt in Christus durch den Heiligen Geist.’ Pneumatologische ReVisionen einer reformierten Zentrallehre,” in *Unsere grossen Wörter: Reformatorische ReVisionen*, eds., Matthias Felder and Magdalene Frettlöh, (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2022), 187–205.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.25.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.19.

<sup>44</sup> Katherine Sonderegger speaks of the “conventional,” or even “predictable” way of Reformed confessions and teachings of the divine nature and the triune God, 390.

scriptural inspiration to Romans 8 with its Spirit-initiated account of prayer. It focused on the invitation to the pray-er to be drawn by an intervention of the Spirit into intimate incorporation into the life of Christ. The prayer-based approach to Trinitarian thinking was, as Coakley contends,

[...] implicitly different in its emphasis and starting point from that which started more extrinsically from the issue of the Son's status vis-à-vis the Father (as inflected particularly via the Logos Christology of John), and only then turned afterwards to fit the Spirit, as third, into the homoousion picture.<sup>45</sup>

As Coakley argues, it was the linear Johannine-based approach, and not the Spirit-led approach of Romans 8, that became, after Nicaea especially, more normatively associated with conciliar and 'orthodoxy', and thus protected by episcopacy. Coakley sees the radical equality of the Spirit compromised by the historic conciliar treatment of the Holy Spirit, for it defined the Spirit as a 'third' in the processional order. In the conciliar disputes from Nicaea through to Constantinople the reflection was dominated by a linear structure from the Father to the Son to the Spirit. The relationships in the Godhead became a logical if not ontological hierarchy. Everything leads back to the Father as sole source and cause. It became the normative creedal model. The main axis is that of the Father and the Son/Logos. In the order of salvation, the Son has to go so that the Spirit may come. The Spirit joins as a third.

The alternative, prayer-based, yet neglected minority tradition of the Holy Spirit emphasizes a radical equality of the persons. It is fully accounted for in Scripture. The key scriptural basis is Romans 8:14–30 where the apostle Paul describes how the creation has been groaning for redemption as in the pain of childbirth, and «we ourselves groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to divine sonship [...] We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit itself intercedes for us through wordless groans» (Rom 8.26). Prayer is imagined by the apostle not as a monologue but as joining of a conversation, an ongoing divine dialectical conversation, in an incarnational embodied space.

Coakley speaks of the practice of prayer as an intensely embodied activity, in which the desiring person experiences the relationship with God as the source and goal of all desire. In ecstatic or contemplative prayer, the person who longs for communion with God, will experience that she arrives at her limits, that she is drawn into a crisis of not-knowing and not-seeing, where all language, ratio-

<sup>45</sup> Coakley, "Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity," 380.



nality and control cease. In that void it may happen that God's own desire takes over, that «the Spirit itself intercedes for us through wordless sighing». This is, according to Coakley, the experiential basis of the doctrine of the Spirit. Here the Spirit is experienced as radical divine. The discovery of the Spirit, which ultimately leads to conceiving of God as Trinity, is not a product of the study, but a “spiritual necessity sweated out in the exigencies of prayer.”<sup>46</sup> In the surrender to the logic of divine love, a human being becomes a self that can graciously give room to others. The Spirit intervenes, purifies and ‘breaks’ our desire to possess, to use, to control, and makes the human desire free to align gracefully with God's desire.

Coakley argues that in the ascetic or mystical tradition the radical equality of the Spirit with the other two Persons was lived, experienced and practiced. We find such reflections on the believer's encounter with the life of God in the Montanist movement of the second century.<sup>47</sup> The Montanists focused on a certain loss of control to the leading experiential force of the Spirit, and on an entry into a realm beyond words, whether glossolalic or otherwise. The Montanist prophet spoke in ecstasy. Montanism was condemned by the emerging institutional church as ‘heresy.’ Coakley suggests that the church might have had problems with the experiential priority they gave to the Spirit because of the political implications on the one hand (it challenged ecclesial authority with a higher revelation possible) and sexual and gender implications on the other hand (it released women into positions of power and authority). Coakley's thesis is that the early Montanists with their ecstatic prophecies gave the Spirit «a bad name» and this discouraged explicit or apologetic use of a trinitarianism giving experiential priority to the Spirit; however, this alternative approach to the Trinity was not silenced but would take on different forms in church fathers like Origen, Tertullian, and Irenaeus.<sup>48</sup> In their works, in particular in their more contemplative-ascetic texts, Coakley finds evidence for a reception and continuation of the Romans 8 tradition. They granted less specific experiential effects of the Spirit and manifested no sectarian tendency, yet they continued to develop a theory of prayer and contemplation as an incorporative participation within the very life of the Trinity.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and Self*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Coakley, “Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity,” 383; *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 121–126.

<sup>48</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 126

<sup>49</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 142.

The Arian controversy, already addressed in Nicaea, came to its end in Constantinople AD 381 with the Cappadocian insistence on *homoousios* of the Spirit alongside Father and Son.<sup>50</sup> Coakley writes

[...] the more demanding incorporative rendition of the Spirit à la Romans 8 which we witnessed in Origen came to sit somewhat uneasily alongside obedient assent to the new achieved orthodoxy of 'three persons in one substance'.<sup>51</sup>

That formal creedal equality achieved in Constantinople in AD 381 was bought with a certain price. The tradition of the Spirit-led, «incorporative» Romans 8 approach to trinitarianism was sidelined. The tradition remained alive in social locations, always on the edge of the established church. The monastic movement kept the «subtle alternative» most vibrantly alive.<sup>52</sup> A manifested power-of-prayer to perfect and transform, kept on challenging the new forms of episcopal power mandated both by imperial support and by a post-Nicene understanding of orthodoxy as submission to creedal assent.<sup>53</sup>

Coakley's opinion on the authority of the conciliar creeds is that they must stand as historical creeds but it is our job as theologians «to expand» these conciliar agreements.<sup>54</sup> We can go *beyond* them, in retrieving spiritual traditions, present in the most distinguished church fathers that allowed women to exercise religious agency and freedom. Coakley understands 'orthodoxy' neither as mere creedal correctness, nor as imposed ecclesiastical regulation. For her, orthodoxy is a project of *théologie totale*, the longed-for horizon of personal transformation in response to divine truth. At the horizon of true orthodoxy, she sees theology, spirituality, and ethics as fully united.<sup>55</sup>

## Thinking Forward with Schleiermacher Beyond Nicaea

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is increasingly considered by contemporary scholarship a Reformed theologian. His work bears the main contours of Reformed tradition. Shelli Poe highlights two characteristic Reformed features in Schleiermacher's

<sup>50</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 134.

<sup>51</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 134.

<sup>52</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 135.

<sup>53</sup> Coakley, "Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity," 389–397.

<sup>54</sup> Coakley, "The Spirit in the Trinity," lecture.

<sup>55</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 89–90.

dogmatic work, *Der Christliche Glaube (Christian Faith)*.<sup>56</sup> First, the dogmatic theology he unfolds is anti-speculative, in line with Calvin. It opposes any tendency to make considerations about God apart from the world, as both are given only together in human consciousness.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, his theology is deeply Trinitarian in structure. Schleiermacher intendedly wanted to contribute to a Protestant doctrine of the Trinity measuring the scientific standards of his time and serving the ecclesial context of the uniting church in Prussia. The focus is on the love and wisdom of the living God, mediated by the Spirit in the Body of Christ, the church. The important place of the Spirit and the church in mediating the Word/Christ is characteristically Reformed.

Famously, Schleiermacher called the doctrine of the Trinity the «coping-stone» of the whole, fittingly summed up at the end of the book (§ 170.1). But far from devaluing the importance of theological attending to the Trinity, we should consider this concluding reflection as an interpretative key for the whole work, as Poe suggests, and I was on the same track before.<sup>58</sup> Then an intriguing possibility looms: Within the Reformed tradition, Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*, read backwards, holds out the possibility of a Trinitarian theology that begins with the Spirit.<sup>59</sup>

Are we finding in Schleiermacher's theology an alternative approach to the Trinity, what Coakley has called «a Sprit-led approach»? Can the 'father of modern theology' be seen as a major and modern representative of a minority tradition sidelined by the councils of Nicaea-Constantinople, a Christian strand that continued to emphasize the radical equality of the Spirit and its leading role both in prayer-based life and in reflection on who God is?

The answer needs to be nuanced. With the same persuasiveness it can be argued that Schleiermacher's theology is profoundly christocentric, as has been stated by many scholars. There is no either/or in this case. Indeed, Christology undergirds all of Schleiermacher's dogmatic theology. John 1.14 is the key text, the «Grundtext».<sup>60</sup> But as Christ is communicated and embodied ('*nachgebildet*')

<sup>56</sup> Shelli M. Poe, "Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*", in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, eds., Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, Oxford Handbooks (2020); online edn, *Oxford Academic*, 8 October 2020, accessed 2 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198723912.013.20>

<sup>57</sup> See also Sonderegger, "The Doctrine of God," 401.

<sup>58</sup> Zörgdrager, *Theologie die verschil maakt*, 372–375.

<sup>59</sup> Poe, "Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*," 325.

<sup>60</sup> In a letter to K.H. Sack, 9 April 1825: 'Das Wort Joh 1,14: Wir sahen seine Herrlichkeit u.s.w. ist der Keim alles Dogma und gibt sich selbst für nichts anderes, als für die in Rede übertragene Affection.' *Aus Schleiermacher's Leben. In Briefen*, eds., L. Jonas and W. Dilthey (Berlin 1858-1863. Reprint: Berlin/New York, 1974) Vol. 4, 334f.

in the shared love of the church in and through the Holy Spirit, there can be no discrepancy but only full congruency between Christ and the Spirit. In a dynamic mutuality and essential equality, Christ and the Spirit explain each other. As much as we can read Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith* in a christocentric way, we can do it in a pneumacentric way. Schleiermacher himself considered it a serious option for the structure of his dogmatic theology to begin with the Spirit/the Church.<sup>61</sup>

So, given our question in this chapter, how does Schleiermacher conceive of the role and place of the Spirit in his approach to the Trinity?

In the guiding principle § 170 of Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*,<sup>62</sup> he states that the essential features of the Christian life are «posited in the essential features of the doctrine of the Trinity». With this, the reality of redemption stands or falls. The divine being in the person of Christ and in the Spirit of the church have to be absolutely equal, and these two have to be equal with divine nature as such (§ 170.1).

True to his conviction that dogmatic theology should not transgress the limits of the actual Christian-religious consciousness in mere empty speculation, he rejects the doctrine of an immanent Trinity. He shares with Calvin the insight that we can only know God as revealed in our lived experience of how God is toward us. However, he draws a further conclusion for the doctrine of the Trinity: we can only retrospectively reconstruct and reflect, by way of a summarizing attempt, the threefold divine activity in relation to creation.<sup>63</sup> Shelli Poe carefully analyzes, «although Schleiermacher himself explicitly draws out only love and wisdom as essential to the divine being (§165),<sup>64</sup> his *Glaubenslehre* lends itself to a triune formulation of the divine essence as causality, love, and wisdom». <sup>65</sup> These essential features correspond with the stages of created life: the beginning of creation, the completion of creation, and the progressive perfection of creation. Now we can read backwards through the lens of an ecclesial pneumatology. Divine love corresponds with redemption as the love

<sup>61</sup> In the second open letter addressed to his friend Lücke: "Ich hätte gewünscht, es [die Glaubenslehre] so einzurichten, dass den Lesern möglichst auf jeden Punkt hätte deutlich werden müssen, dass der Spruch Joh 1,14 der Grundtext der ganzen Dogmatik ist." "Zweites Sendschreiben an Lücke," *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1/10, 343.

<sup>62</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: Two Volumes, A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Terrence N. Tice and Catherine L. Kelsey (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> § 170, second part: "however, in its ecclesial formulation this doctrine is not itself an expression that immediately conveys christian self-consciousness but is only a combination of several such expressions", Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* Vol. 2, 1019.

<sup>64</sup> Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, Vol 2, § 165, 1002.

<sup>65</sup> Poe, "Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*," 319.

of Christ shared in the church, while divine wisdom is revealed in the connection between the love of Christ and the church willing to expand the reign of God (both the themes of Part 2 of the *Glaubenslehre*). Divine causality is revealed in the power of new life found in the church, which the Christian self-consciousness experiences as identical with the living divine activity with which God governs the created world as a whole (the theme of Part 1 of the *Glaubenslehre*). In this creative and innovative way, in a reverse mode, Schleiermacher brings all the parts of his *Glaubenslehre* together in a theology of the Spirit.

Now for our goal it is not enough to evidence that it is possible to read Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* as a theology of the Spirit. We also need to go back with him in history, to understand Schleiermacher's wrestling with the Trinitarian doctrine as it had been established from the creedal affirmations of Nicaea onwards.

In 1822, shortly after the publication of the first edition of the *Glaubenslehre* 1821/1822, Schleiermacher published a major text titled «On the Contrast between the Sabellian and the Athanasian Conceptions of the Trinity».<sup>66</sup> In it, Schleiermacher discloses his theological sympathy for the position of the pre-Nicene Sabellius, who was excommunicated as a heretic by Callixtus in AD 220. As motivation for his research of the pre-Nicene discussions on the Trinity he referred to the shortcomings in the established ecclesiastical conception of the doctrine of the Trinity. He was of the opinion that, in order to escape the so-called Sabellian way of presentation, the church had done «too much». For the purpose of positing the twofold union of the divine being with the human nature «an eternal twofold separateness in the divine being [Father and Son] was posited,» as we find in the Nicæan teaching.<sup>67</sup> This motivated him to examine in detail what was actually problematic and worrying about the Sabellian way of presentation, and to analyze how the approach of Sabellius in fact resisted all kinds of Arian reductions of the divine in Christ and in the Spirit.<sup>68</sup>

Sabellius would have been the first to use the term *ομοούσιοι* to designate that the members of the Trinity were of the same being.<sup>69</sup> The established church doctrine assumes a purely immanent and originally separate Trinity in the Godhead,

<sup>66</sup> “Über den Gegensatz zwischen der Sabellianischen und der Athanasianischen Vorstellungen von der Trinität,” in *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1/10, 223–306. First published in *Theologische Zeitschrift*, Berlin 1822.

<sup>67</sup> Der Christliche Glaube 1821–1822, *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1/7, § 190 Zusatz, 370–71.

<sup>68</sup> *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (KGA) 1/10, 225.

<sup>69</sup> KGA 1/10, 290.

Father, Son and Spirit from eternity.<sup>70</sup> Sabellius contends that the Trinity exists only in relation to the different types and spheres of efficaciousness of the Godhead: the Godhead is world-governing as the Father, redemptive in the person of Christ which makes God known as the Son, and sanctifying in the community and unity of the believers which makes God known as the Spirit.<sup>71</sup> If this is the real difference between Sabellius and the church doctrine since Nicaea, Schleiermacher asks, what then makes the teaching of Sabellius irreligious? The Father, in Sabellius' view, is not the source of the Godhead for the Son and the Spirit. His opponents called this a blasphemy. Well, if that is the case, then it is a blasphemy against the Son and the Spirit if these are not immediately, but only through a third (the Father), taking part in the unity of the Godhead, as the main church doctrine formulated.<sup>72</sup> Schleiermacher goes for a radical divine equality. He theologically rehabilitates the so-called modalist theologians Noetus, Beryllus, and Sabellius. With them he concurs that the Son is not the Logos as preexisting eternally as different from the Father, but the Son is the «Logos *who became flesh*». Only after the incarnation, and even more strictly: only in reciprocal explanation of the *Urbild* through a plenitude of *Nachbildungen* in the church – mind Schleiermacher's historic-empirical approach! – can one speak of Christ as the Son, as a particular revelation of the divine being. For Christian doctrine it means that the Son is distinguished as different from the Father (and from the Spirit) only after the full explication of the Christian-religious consciousness at this moment in time, as he demonstrated in *Christian Faith*. Beryllus and Sabellius were right, in Schleiermacher's view, to call the Father, the Son, and the Spirit just a particular circumscription (περιγραφή) of the divine being.<sup>73</sup>

So where did Nicaea go wrong? In the Alexandrian Christology, Schleiermacher explains, two elements were in tension with each other: the subordination of the Son to the Father, and the divinity of the Son as the hypostasized Logos. The Arian part gave up the view of the hypostasized Logos in order to maintain the subordination of the Son to the Father, while Athanasius and his allies elevated the hypostasized Logos as the divinity of the Son in order to achieve the equality of being. They distanced themselves as much as possible from the Arian view of subordinationism, yet wanted to keep the difference of the Persons. To solve this conundrum the difference between being (ουσία) and hypostasis (υπόστασις) was

<sup>70</sup> KGA 1/10, 297.

<sup>71</sup> KGA 1/10, 297.

<sup>72</sup> KGA 1/10, 298.

<sup>73</sup> KGA 1/10, 266, 267, 273, 276f.

transferred to God's self. Because they could never define the difference firmly enough, they and their followers always had to waver [*'Schwanken'*] between the approach to tritheism and a 'Sabellian' view of modalism. Therefore, Schleiermacher concludes, it is «already implied in the way the church's view came into being that it could not develop into a pure and consistent doctrine of the Trinity».<sup>74</sup> The Father is a Person in a different way than the other two, and the other two are not Person in the same way, because the view of the second Person was founded on a theory of the hypostasized Logos and that of the third was not. «Therefore, everywhere, the third Person, regardless of all protests against any inequality, unmistakably steps back behind the others [...]».<sup>75</sup> The church's view has been formed more from a negative approach, to avoid other allegations, whereas Sabellius' view demonstrates a testimony of originality and independence. From the affirmation of the radical equality of the three-ness given the unity of the divine being it follows that the superior position, the monarchy, of the Father can and should be questioned.<sup>76</sup> By disrupting the hierarchical structures in the doctrine of the Trinity Schleiermacher effectively removes the pillars from under a patriarchal concept of God.

With Schleiermacher Coakley refutes a privileged dyad of Father and Son in the doctrine of the Trinity, «and that the Spirit then somehow has to be fitted in thereafter».<sup>77</sup> She calls it «the ironic (Nicene) tragedy of the Holy Spirit.»<sup>78</sup> In the very last pages of *God, Sexuality, and the Self* Coakley expresses a speculative thought, playfully formulated and shared. Indeed, there is a necessity to purify the linear subordinationism in Trinitarian theology and to consequently speak about divine equality and a Spirit-led «procession» into the Godhead. If we were to further speculate about the «processions», Coakley writes, we would not only need to speak of the Son eternally coming forth from the Father, but

[...] more daringly, we would also need to speak of the Father's own reception back of his status as 'source' from the other two 'persons, precisely via the Spirit's reflexive propulsion and the Son's creative effulgence. Here, in divinity, then, is a source of love unlike any other, giving and receiving and ecstatically deflecting, ever and always.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>74</sup> KGA 1/10, 305.

<sup>75</sup> KGA 1/10, 305.

<sup>76</sup> Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* Vol. 2, § 171.5, 1030: "The superior position accorded the Father in this respect proves that he is still conceived as having a different relationship to the unity of the divine nature."

<sup>77</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 330.

<sup>78</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 330.

<sup>79</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 333.

The Father is taken in in a radical dynamic reciprocity. The Father as source thus becomes ecstatic goal as much as ecstatic origin within the life of the Trinity. Coakley finds Schleiermacher fully at her side when she finishes her «daring thought» with the observation that «it is finally only the clarification of the place of the Spirit in the Trinity which can resist the (ever-seductive) lure back into patriarchal hierarchy».<sup>80</sup>

## To Conclude

For a Reformed navigating that is both appreciative of the achievements of Nicaea and necessarily moving beyond Nicaea, I recommend sailing with (at least) Schleiermacher and Coakley as reliable guides. They make us aware where the cliffs loom, are not afraid of storms, depths, and dangerous currents, and orient themselves to a bright horizon, with a courageous openness to tradition, Scripture, and contemporary challenges, empirically led by a piety «taken root in the heart». Moreover, they demonstrate a sound intuition for where in the history of the church fertile potential can be found and unearthed to articulate the Spirit in her full divinity and, in so doing, they greatly add to the feast of ecumenically commemorating the council of Nicaea (325).

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<sup>80</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 333.





# Viewing the Nicene Creed from the Lens of Justice

*Philip Vinod Peacock*

## Introduction

The role of the Nicene Creed in the liturgy across various denominational traditions is fascinating. In many churches worldwide, including my own, the congregation stands and recites the Nicene Creed aloud. Conversely, in many other churches, this practice does not occur. While some may recite the creed occasionally, perhaps once a year during Passion Week, others hold a healthy skepticism towards it. Although it remains in prayer books or at the end of hymnals, it is rarely, if ever, spoken aloud. Others, including the Baptist church I attended as a teenager, were more accepting of the Apostles' Creed, even though they seldom read it aloud.

It is not insignificant that the churches which read it regularly tend to be more formal and hierarchical, namely the Catholics, the Orthodox and the Anglicans – all of which are also close to state power in their respective contexts – while it is the non-conformist churches that maintain this healthy suspicion. There appears to be an almost intrinsic connection between the Nicene Creed and notions of power that are reified and reinscribed by liturgical practice, as evidenced by the standing to recite it, which suggests a bio-politics at work.

Aside from the regular recitation of the Nicene Creed in churches, it is perhaps not surprising that the only place where the Council of Nicaea has captured public imagination is in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. If nothing else, Dan Brown's work epitomizes conspiracy theories and perhaps highlights suspicion of non-conformist churches. After all, as Naomi Klein quotes Gilroy Ware in her book *Doppelganger* to

suggest, «Conspiracy Theories are a misfiring of a healthy and justifiable political instinct: suspicion».<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that Klein also argues that conspiracy theories resonate with those who are disenfranchised from the system and mistrust institutions.

Yet, despite conspiracy theories and healthy suspicions, the Nicene Creed is essential for defining the boundaries of Christian doctrine. In doing so, it delineates the lines of belonging and non-belonging. In this sense, for those who affirm the creed – the ‘in-group’ that belongs – it becomes a tool for Christian unity and has remained so for the last 1700 years.

The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of the Nicene Creed from a justice perspective and explore some of the possibilities and pitfalls it presents. It is divided into three parts: the first begins with examining the historical legacy of the Nicene Creed and particularly its christological formula in relation to the politics and social climate of the fourth century. The second attempts to engage with the possibilities of subversion and power relationships from within the text, and the last section explores the potential of fostering a theological imagination if we apply a lens of fluidity that ‘unfixes’ the christological formula of the Nicene Creed. We begin by trying to define what exactly a creed is.

## Of Creeds and Confessions

Gail Omvedt, writing in *Dalit Visions*, begins by discussing Hinduism and suggests that «Its greatest virtue has been its elasticity, its pluralism, its lack of dogma. Hinduism, it is said, has no ‘orthodoxy’ (although it may have an ‘orthopraxy’)». While Omvedt herself later disputes this popular perception of Hinduism, she makes an important point when she suggests that Hinduism has an orthopraxy instead of an orthodoxy. Christianity, for the most part, has presented itself as a religion clearly defined by a set of creeds that structure its doctrinal principles and boundaries.

It is perhaps common knowledge that the English word ‘creed’ is derived from the Latin word ‘credo’, meaning «I believe», and is taken from the first word of the Latin text of the Apostles’ Creed. But what is at stake here is not so much what a creed is as much as what creeds are about. Therefore, we begin by attempting to

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<sup>1</sup> Gilroy Ware cited by Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip to the Mirror World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023) 243.

define what creeds are about. This is not just a clever play on words; by definition, creeds are defining. That is to say that they create boundaries and impose limits. Jaroslav Pelikan in his work *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, suggests that the «definition of a creed» is «a technical term for the process of legislating what the church is required to believe, teach and confess».<sup>2</sup> The elements of Pelikan's definition are significant for our consideration. Two elements stand out for our consideration: firstly, he implies that creeds are mechanisms for defining belief, and this mechanism necessitates 'legislation', and secondly, it is significant that he uses the term 'required'.

The argument is that creeds obligate an authoritative process for their establishment, define both the ways and the means through which faith can be understood and expressed, and requires believers of that faith to adhere to the creed in order to belong. In the following sections of this chapter, each of these aspects will be addressed separately.

## Creeds, Power, and Authority

Today, we understand that the Indus Valley Civilisation, a Bronze Age society which thrived between 3300 BC and 1300 BC across northwestern South Asia, possessed some form of centralised authority. Archaeologists arrived at this conclusion based on evidence of a standardised system of weights and measures used throughout the extensive territory occupied by this largely urban civilisation. The implication is that a centralised power, with the appropriate authority and legitimacy, is necessary for establishing, implementing, and maintaining a system of standards. To 'fix' something and to prevent fluidity requires power.

For the Christian faith, the Nicene Creed sets this standard: an established and recognised formulation that defines the boundaries of Christian doctrine. It is well known that as the Christian faith evolved from a Jewish sect in the first century into a larger and potentially more diverse faith, various ways of expressing its articles and implications also arose. To preserve the unity of faith – and possibly also the unity of this diverse community – a consensus on the core tenets of the faith needed to be maintained. When the community was smaller, marginalized, and less influential, this could be achieved through discernment and agreement. How-

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<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale Theological Press, 2003), 1

ever, as the community expanded and became more influential, and as more was at stake, other mechanisms for reaching consensus became necessary. This was particularly true as the faith negotiated power with the empire. As Reiger points out, the idea of the separation of church and state within the Roman Empire is anachronistic; it involves applying a modern concept into a context where religious and political life could not be separated. The truth is that Christianity, in the fourth century, had a complex and intertwined relationship with power. While it is clear that Jesus, and perhaps the early church, had a critical stance towards the empire, this was not the case four centuries later. This does not necessarily mean that the church had fully sided with the empire either, but rather that there existed a variety of theological positions at the time. As Reiger states, «The heritage of the church – in all its orthodox and heterodox forms – has been shaped by the intersections of empire and church since the early days».

This dispute reached its height when the church, confronted with two conflicting views, was compelled to determine Christ's relation to the divine being. On one side was Arius, who contended that Christ was made rather than begotten, while the vehement opposite was the Athanasian stance, affirming that Christ was begotten, not made. This issue was significant enough to necessitate an ecumenical council to resolve it. Though not the first of its kind, what was remarkable was the attendance of Emperor Constantine – an emperor who ultimately dictated the church's orthodox stance. The issue was not about church and state relations, as Reiger has already noted that portraying the separation of church and state in fourth-century politics is indeed anachronistic, but about the emperor's capacity to articulate and enforce church doctrine. In particular, it was about asserting that Jesus was «of the same substance» as the Father, or more accurately, about enforcing the full excommunication of those who claimed otherwise. Reiger points out that those labelled 'heretics' were barred from gathering and had their properties confiscated.

However, the role of the emperor was not merely that of pontiff and policeman. The debate about the nature and person of Christ also carried political consequences in the emerging royal theologies of Roman imperialism, which were grappling with their own questions of relationships. In the following section, we shall analyse the question of the person of Christ within the context of a newly developing royal theology.

## Begotten and Not Made: Royal Implications

The feminist theologian Mary Daly famously stated in her work *Beyond God the Father* that «God is male then the male is God».<sup>3</sup> Through this, Daly highlights how the exclusive male imagery of the divine in the Judeo-Christian tradition contributed to and reinforced the development of patriarchy in society, leading to the oppression and exploitation of women as a class and putting them at a disadvantage compared to men on multiple levels. By making this assertion, Daly also implies that theological and sociological categories are interconnected and influence each other, rather than existing as separate, neat boundaries. In other words, theological ideas impact sociological realities and vice versa. By extension therefore, if God is king then all kings are god!

The fourth century marked the rise of a new royal theology. In earlier royal theologies, it was easy to depict Caesar as one of many gods within a polytheistic society. However, how could one develop a royal theology within a monotheistic faith that emphasised the sovereignty of the divine? It was achieved by asserting that the emperor was the God-ordained universal ruler. To accept Christ as the eternal king was also to accept the emperor as the universal temporal king. But the question that underpinned it was whether one became Christ or emperor, or to put it differently, are they begotten or made.

Undoubtedly, this is the central question of the Nicæan Creed: is Christ begotten or is Christ made? On the one hand, Athanasius argues that Christ is «one in being with the Father, begotten not made», and on the other hand, Arius contends that Christ was a being created by God and not co-eternal with the Father. The issue at hand had, not only divine implications, but also deeply temporal ones concerning how the emperor came to be.

Raymond Van Dam, writing in the *Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, argues that beside the Athanasian–Arian controversy, there was also a debate concerning the succession of kings. He states that the Council of Nicaea was «a crucible for the formation of both a theology of God and a political philosophy of a Christian emperor».<sup>4</sup> At the heart of these politics was the struggle between coordination and subordination, between order and hierarchy, particularly among the

<sup>3</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Van Dam “Imperial Fathers and Their Sons: Licinius, Constantine and the Council of Nicaea,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 21.

tetrarchs of the emperors. By the late third century, the Roman Empire was controlled by a group of rulers which, by the time of Constantine, had become a singular monarchy. Van Dam contends that the coding of the Nicaean creed symbolically represents this political power struggle.<sup>5</sup>

In his article titled *Imperial Fathers and their Sons: Licinius, Constantine and the Council of Nicaea*, Van Dam explains that when Diocletian became emperor in AD 281, he appointed Maximian as his co-ruler. Soon after, in AD 293, they promoted Constantius and Galerius to form a Tetrarchy, or a group of four emperors, with Diocletian and Maximian serving as the two senior emperors (Augusti) and Constantius and Galerius as the junior emperors (Caesars). Diocletian and Maximian retired in AD 305, and Galerius and Constantius became Augusti, while Severus and Maximinus assumed the title of Caesars. However, this order soon collapsed, for after the death of Constantinus in AD 306, his son Constantine was proclaimed emperor by some, while others elevated Maxentius to emperor. This sparked a succession war, ultimately resulting in a college of six rather than the usual four. In this new arrangement, Licinius was promoted to Augustus alongside Galerius, while Constantine and Maximinus held the title of Caesars, with the two previous Augusti, Diocletian and Maximian, still retaining some power.

What followed was a series of skirmishes and power struggles that eventually led to the rise of Constantine and Licinius. Both secured political and theological support from various bishops. In AD 324, Constantine defeated Licinius, which ultimately damaged Licinius's reputation. Van Dam suggests that this was achieved 'twice over': «Firstly the usual degradation of the loser in a civil war combined with the vicious infighting among bishops over theology to transform him into both an illegitimate 'tyrant' and a merciless 'persecutor'». <sup>6</sup> Prime among his accusers was Eusebius of Caesarea. Conversely, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia remained close to Licinius and was known for manoeuvring within Licinius' court. Interestingly, both Eusebiuses were known to have expressed support for Arius over and against the Bishop of Alexandria. The point here is that political intrigue, court patronage, and theological disputes played a role in efforts to resolve issues around sameness and difference, equality and hierarchy, and temporality and eternity. Van Dam, noting the similarity between the Tetrarch and the Trinity, states, «The Tetrarchy of emperors was something like a Trinity of divinities: collective but distinct, equal but

<sup>5</sup> Van Dam, "Imperial Fathers and Their Sons," 22 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Van Dam, "Imperial Fathers and Their Sons," 23.

hierarchical, somehow divine and human simultaneously».<sup>7</sup> Questions concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, especially regarding the person of Christ, sought resolution through the Nicæan creed.

At the centre of the political debate was the question of whether emperors were born or made. In the early Roman Empire, succession from father to son was generally the norm. However, civil war had destabilised this tradition, and the system of tetrarchs had indeed disrupted it, as biological or adopted heirs no longer had a straightforward route to power. Van Dam outlines three complications that arose: firstly, that direct sons did not necessarily become emperors. Secondly, the complex relations among the tetrarchs, where Diocletian and Maximian, the Augusti, were the fathers-in-law of Constantius and Galerius, yet they referred to themselves as brothers, and the two junior tetrarchs as sons. Consequently, while the tetrarchs were meant to be equal, they were hierarchically structured by differing notions of paternal and fraternal harmony. Unsurprisingly, this led to discord among the four. Thirdly, the fragile unity among the tetrarchs was constantly tested by their attempts to promote their own sons.

In the period after the civil war and the rise of Licinius and Constantine, they quickly worked to promote their own sons as Caesars and once again emphasized that emperors were born, not made, or perhaps begotten, not created.

It is no surprise then that the early church relied on this language to begin describing the relationship of Jesus to the Father. Terms such as begotten, or second-God, or familial patterns like father, son, and brother were used to describe this relationship. Interestingly, this conundrum was also exploited by the political side in that Constantine referred to himself as the son-father as he presided over Nicæa.

It is clear then that imperial ambitions and the structures of succession played a significant role in the Nicæan formulation. However, this does not necessarily mean that they cannot support a liberative critique of power and relationships. In the next section, we will explore these possibilities, first by employing a neo-orthodox approach that seeks new meanings in the ancient text, and second by utilising the insights of feminist and queer theology through ‘unfixing’ the text and employing imagination in constructing theology.

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<sup>7</sup> Van Dam, “Imperial Fathers and Their Sons,” 27.



## The Nicene Creed as a Subversive Text?

Perhaps what the christological formulation in the Nicaean creed enables is a coming to terms with the question of plurality. Neither the world, symbolic or material, nor the divine, can be comprehended without addressing the question of plurality – the fact that we are many and diverse. As we live and find our being within a varied society – the same principle applies to God. God is understood in plurality; only the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together allow us to grasp the fullness of God. God cannot be understood as singular. In fact, I would argue that viewing God as singular does a disservice to our understanding. In this way, the christological formulation presented in the Nicaean creed and extended through the Trinitarian doctrine affirms plurality and difference within our society. This concept is also reflected in Jewish theology, which professes strict monotheism, yet the Shema – «Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one» – illustrates that the idea of one is not about singularity but rather about unity, as in a bunch of grapes. It is one, yet many. This imagery is also extended within Christian theology and can be seen in Christian symbols. One particularly illustrative example is during Pentecost, where in several Christian traditions around the world, the pomegranate serves as a symbol of the event. This is because the pomegranate is composed of many seeds contained within one fruit. This symbol reminds us of the many that are united as one whole.

However, this sense of many yet united also carries political implications. It can be argued that this feeling of unity and oneness is linked to the fact that the christological formula developed as a critique of the power held by the singular emperor of the Roman Empire. While the Council of Nicaea depicted Constantine as the sole emperor emerging from the tetrarchs, it is evident that the Nicene Creed itself offers a critique of this concentration of power. The doctrine of the Trinity, which describes God in three persons, recognises that power cannot be concentrated in one individual and must be shared. This also provides a lesson for our leadership models today.

## Community of Being

Unity and oneness can also present issues. For example, there is the challenge between sameness and difference, as the famous line from U2's song 'One' states, «we are one but we are not the same». This raises questions about community and indi-

vidual identity, with significant political and social implications. In India, many oppose the idea of unity and nationalism, especially when it is associated with Hinduism and a particular brand of Hinduism. The promotion of this line by the Sangh Parivar obviously makes minorities uneasy. Additionally, in some cases, maintaining family unity involves subordinating the wishes and desires of women and children to the demands of men. A major problem today, both in India and globally, is balancing unity and diversity. On one hand, we emphasize our unity, that we are one people. On the other, we celebrate our diversity as individuals and unique communities. Moreover, we seek a society where minority groups and marginalised communities can coexist without the risk of being overshadowed or eliminated by the majority. How can we achieve this balance? The model offered by the Nicene formula or being of one substance but also being different, provides insight. Each person within the Trinity is unique and distinct, yet they are all of one substance. That's why we say, the Trinitarian formula is one substance, three persons! These three persons were present at Jesus' baptism, demonstrating how to live in community in a manner that is fair and equitable to all. Each has a place, and no one's existence diminishes another.

We also find that only the entire human community can truly represent the image of God: while the three persons of the Trinity reveal aspects of the community of being within the Godhead and speak to us of mutuality and dependence, the reverse is also true. It is only through the whole human community that the image of God can be reflected. What is meant here is that the complete nature of who God is cannot be embodied by a single human. In fact, the image of God as a community of being, as depicted in the three persons of the Trinity, can only be reflected in the human community as a whole. That is, no individual human or even a group of humans can claim to be made in the image of God or as God's representatives on earth. Instead, only the entire human race can genuinely claim to embody the image of God together. This includes humans of all sizes, shapes, colours, genders, abilities, and preferences. The diversity within the Godhead is only mirrored in the variety of humanity. This has profound implications for our world today, suggesting that God is best represented through diversity – the full spectrum of cultures, genders, and religious experiences – because only then can we truly comprehend who God is. It also means that no culture, gender, or religious experience can claim superiority over another. Collectively, they all reveal who God is.

## From 'Not' to 'And' ... Fluidity Funding Liberation

The christological formula of the Nicene Creed indeed provides us with an opportunity to rethink power and relationships, all of which inherently contain elements of power. However, perhaps we can approach this differently. This chapter started with the idea that what creeds do is to 'fix' things. They establish the boundaries of faith formulations by fixing them. The question to ask is what the theological possibilities are if we unfix this text?

It is here that the insights of queer studies can be valuable. Discussions on gender, initiated by scholars such as Judith Butler, go beyond the heteronormative theorisation of gender and sex as defined within the binary of male and female. Instead, Butler uses the term 'heterosexual matrix' to describe the grid created by institutions, practices, and discourses through which all bodies are categorised as belonging to either one of two sexes and genders. Queer theory further argues that categories of identity based on binaries, such as male and female, or 'homosexual' versus 'heterosexual', overlook the more complex idea that sexualities are expressed across an entire spectrum. What queer theory maintains is that binary identities oversimplify and fix these identities, rather than recognise their fluidity and ambiguity. But what if we applied this argument to text rather than just identity? It is here that the insights of queer studies can be helpful. Discussions on gender, initiated by scholars such as Judith Butler, go beyond the heteronormative theorisation of gender and sex as defined within the binary of male and female.

The Nicene Creed itself provides a clue to this. While it is true that the text mentions Christ being begotten and *not* made, thus closing an option and establishing a specific point, an earlier part of the Nicene Creed describes God as creating all things, visible *and* invisible. The idea of God as the creator of all things, seen and unseen, opens up many possibilities for us. On one hand, we could argue that this refers to the material world as well as the spiritual realm, including angels and demons. On the other hand, we might also suggest that the divine being is the creator of non-material aspects of life like love, joy, empathy, and so on. The point being made is that if one were to relax the fixed interpretation of the creed and allow for fluidity, the possibilities for theological imagination would open up.

This idea of fluidity supports the earlier point. The christological formula in the Nicene Creed actually arises from efforts to reconcile shifting identities. It questions how the divine can be both one and many simultaneously, how God can be singular yet possess multiple identities. The concept of the Trinity immediately

challenges fixed notions of identity by implying that even divine identity is fluid. This is where the doctrine of perichoresis is relevant; it seeks to address questions of unity and difference, aiming to preserve the beauty of diversity while maintaining unity. It encourages celebrating differences rather than suppressing them. In doing so, the Trinity challenges totalitarian regimes that seek to homogenise everything into a single identity, such as nationalism.

The Trinity offers a framework for challenging dominant authority. As theologians, especially within Christianity, we must recognise that the concept of God has frequently been exploited to justify absolutist and authoritarian regimes. This is particularly noticeable in monotheism, which concentrates all power and authority in a single figure. However, Christian theology, while not dismissing its monotheistic origins, reinterprets this idea through the Trinity. Historically, the Trinity can be seen as a response to the absolute authority of Caesar as Emperor of Rome. From this perspective, it provides a model of shared, non-hierarchical power. The doctrine critically questions the idea of unchecked power in one individual and offers an alternative view on authority.

Moreover, the Trinity further destabilises heteronormative assumptions about relationships and family by portraying a Godhead that interpenetrates and mutually relates to each other.

The question this chapter seeks to explore is what theological imagination can be justified when considering Christ as both begotten and not made. It is not insignificant that the christological formulation of the Nicene Creed is distinctly christological, meaning it avoids focusing on the historical Jesus by its aim to establish Christ's co-eternity and co-equality with the Father. It should be noted here that it does acknowledge Jesus as being born of the Virgin Mary, suffering under Pontius Pilate (naming the Roman Empire in connection with his death), being crucified, dying, and being buried.

Nevertheless, the imagery of Christ emerging from the creed differs greatly from the Jesus of the gospels. The Jesus portrayed there is a revolutionary leader who urges people to believe in something beyond the Roman Empire – namely, the Kingdom of God – which ultimately resulted in his crucifixion in a manner reserved for the most severe insurrectionists. Nonetheless, it is this Jesus whom the earliest creed referenced when they declared that Jesus is Lord. This simple statement was not only a claim that Jesus is divine but also extends on two levels. Firstly, it affirms that Jesus is the only true Lord, dismissing other earthly lords such as landlords and slave owners. Yet it also conveys something more profound: to truly compre-

hend the divine, one must look at Jesus. The historical, earthly Jesus is depicted as the complete revelation of the divine being. In doing so, it challenges traditional ideas of divine power and instead associates divine authority with powerlessness and vulnerability. It invites us to perceive the divine in entirely different ways.

But the fact remains that the earthly Jesus is not only begotten but also made, as Jesus exists within a specific society in Palestine at a particular time. This historical Jesus is someone who grows and learns. He learns from those around him. Jesus becomes who he is through his interactions with people, such as the woman at the well in John 4 and the Syro-Phoenician woman. He draws energy from people and has energy drawn from him.

Of course, we are changing the meaning of ‘made’ from the purest sense in which it was used in the Nicene Creed, but it allows us to perceive the Christ figure differently and outside the usual framework of power in which he is often placed. Furthermore, it gives us the chance to see Jesus as a being who is both existing and becoming.

In Exodus, the divine name is presented as ‘I am,’ expressing both being and becoming. This suggests that God should not be viewed as a static entity but as one who is continually evolving. The idea of a fixed God derives from patriarchal views of an unchanging, unmoving deity, rooted in philosophy’s conception of God unaffected by human history. However, considering Jesus’s incarnation, we can also understand the divine as a process of becoming, transforming, and being shaped through interactions with creation – a God moved by pain and moulded by the groans of all beings.

Viewing Jesus as both begotten and made opens a creative path that helps us understand a divine being who is moved and shaped through interaction with creation. Who evolves with creation. Moving beyond the binary of begotten and not made also allows us to reimagine hierarchies and speak of a plurality of God that provides a model of living in a community of being. But more importantly, and returning to the beginning of this chapter, it offers us a way of living and loving into discipleship rather than merely having a doctrinal statement of faith. After all, disciples are made rather than simply emerging because of a specific set of faith boundaries. Let’s revisit the question: what happens when we unfix the creed?

We don’t just loosen a theological formula – we open up an entire field of imagination. We move from dogma to encounter, from boundary to relationship. This isn’t about tearing down tradition for its own sake. It’s about creating space

– space for complexity, ambiguity, and becoming. And at the centre of it, for love that isn't conditional on doctrinal purity.

But what if Christ is both begotten and made? Not merely as a linguistic twist, but as a theological claim with real consequences. It would mean that God is not only eternal and untouched but also historical, material, shaped by others, shaped by us. The Jesus who learned from the Syro-Phoenician woman, who touched and was touched, who wept, argued, listened, and changed – that Jesus becomes our lens into the divine. Not a God who sits above history, but a God in process. In relationship. In movement.

This shifts our understanding of power. The creed, as it is, centres divine power as eternal, unchanging, and singular. But the Trinity – if taken seriously – already destabilises that. It offers a model of fluid, relational power. Shared authority. Mutual becoming. And when we take that further – when we queer the binaries of begotten/not made, male/female, divine/human – we begin to imagine a God who is not the guarantor of empire but the undoer of it. A God who does not lord over us but dwells among us. Who grows, listens, and evolves in and through creation.

This isn't just abstract theology. It matters because it reshapes how we live. If God is not fixed, then neither are we. We are not bound to identities or roles assigned by ability, caste, birth, culture, or creed. We are made – and being made – through love, struggle, community, and encounter. Discipleship isn't about ticking off doctrinal boxes. It's about entering into a way of becoming. Of being made, together. So perhaps queering the creed isn't about replacing one dogma with another. Maybe it's about resisting the need to fix everything too quickly, about staying open to what the Spirit might still be saying – through history, through our bodies, through the groaning of creation.

Maybe it's about learning to say and instead of not.

## **Conclusion: Unfixing Creed, Reimagining Faith**

The Nicene Creed, for all its historical significance and doctrinal clarity, has long stood as a fixed point in Christian orthodoxy – a boundary marker for belief, authority, and identity. Yet, as this chapter has explored, creeds do more than define theology; they shape socio-political realities and reinforce structures of power, often in ways that exclude, marginalize, and constrain. The very formulation of the creed,

born from imperial negotiations and theological contestations, reflects a moment when the church sought not only to clarify faith but also to consolidate authority.

But what if, instead of merely reciting the creed as a doctrinal checkpoint, we engaged it as a living text – one that invites interrogation, fluidity, and imagination? What if we dared to unfix it?

Through the lens of justice, feminist critique, queer theory, and liberation theology, the Nicene Creed can be re-read not as a static boundary but as a dynamic possibility. Its Trinitarian structure, far from legitimizing hierarchy, can instead model shared power, mutuality, and diversity. Its christological formulation, rather than closing off meanings, can open us to see Christ as both begotten and made – divine and human, eternal and historical, transcendent, and situated.

To affirm faith through a justice lens is to resist the singularity of power and the rigidity of dogma. It is to recognize that divine truth is best reflected not in uniformity but in community, not in dominance but in mutual relationship, not in fixed identities but in the fluid dance of being and becoming.

Ultimately, this is a call to reimagine discipleship not as mere doctrinal assent but as a liberative, loving practice – one that sees the divine in the faces of the marginalized, hears God in the voices of dissent, and proclaims with bold humility: we believe, but we also imagine.

# Nicaea and the Empire

## Introduction

What happens when we look at the Council of Nicaea not from the thrones of emperors or cathedrals of dogma, but from the debt-laden lands of those colonized in Christ's name? What if the creeds we so easily recite are not merely declarations of faith but also echoes of imperial violence, threads in the fabric of Christian complicity with systems of exclusion, conquest, and epistemicide? This section gathers six remarkable voices that read Nicaea and its legacy from the underside of history – from the wounded yet witnessing bodies of the colonized, the displaced, the heretic, the forgotten. Together, these chapters offer a powerful, necessary unmasking of the entanglements between creed and empire, creed and faith, to extend an invitation toward liberative, postcolonial, and plural theological imaginations.

**Sara Parvis** sets the stage with a historiographically rigorous reconstruction of the Council of Nicaea and its long, contested reception. Yet even here, beneath the surface of theological debate, we glimpse the imperial scaffolding – Constantine's political calculus, Athanasius's theological finesse, Eusebius' strategic ambivalence. Parvis reminds us that what we call 'orthodoxy' was not born clean or consensual; it was forged amid ecclesial struggles and imperial ambitions. Her careful attention to the politics of creed-making offers an entry point to explore how theological language can be both a tool of communion and a weapon of domination.

**Andreas Müller's** reflection on Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* uncovers a stunning rhetorical move: the recasting of the council as a new apostolic assembly. In silencing dogmatic controversy and replacing it with imperial harmony, Eusebius erases theological dissent and Jewish roots alike. His narrative not only masks conflict but also sets the pattern for future theological memory: a memory shaped not by truth-telling but by imperial mythmaking. The consequences of this silence rever-



berate across centuries, particularly in the erasure of theological voices that do not conform to the constructed 'orthodox' centre.

**Jayakiran Sebastian's** Asian perspective calls for a hermeneutics of memory and hope reaching back – not to enshrine empire but to re-interpret theology from below. He exposes the ways the theological legacies of Nicaea have shaped, constrained, and sometimes suffocated the Asian church's witness. For churches wrestling with colonially inherited traditions, the challenge is not to discard Nicaea wholesale but to reengage it critically allowing the memory of empire to teach humility, the memory of resistance to inspire agency, and the memory of marginalization to birth new forms of solidarity and unity.

**Kathleen Griffin's** chapter exposes how Christian empires – Constantinian and Hispanic alike – have used creeds not as instruments of unity but as ideological tools of coercion and persecution. The tragic story of Miguel Servet, executed despite his commitment to a humanistic, scripture-rooted Christology, confronts us with the violent cost of doctrinal hegemony. That Servet was executed in Geneva, under the oversight of Reformed authorities, must also trouble the Reformed conscience. Heresy, it seems, is often just theology voiced in the wrong accent or from the wrong body. The complicity of Reformation movements in this violence – not merely as victims but as enforcers – must be acknowledged and lamented. This chapter is a lament and a warning: whenever orthodoxy is policed by the empire, it will shed the blood of its own.

**Henry Kuo's** contribution seeks to reclaim Nicaea for the Reformed tradition – but not uncritically. He probes whether decentralizing ecclesial power, a core Reformed aspiration, truly leads to decolonial ecclesiology, or whether it simply localizes colonizing habits. His chapter proposes a 'Reforming Nicene ecclesiology' – one that holds memory, tradition, and the call to justice in creative tension. Henry does not throw away the creeds; he seeks to unbind them from empire and reweave them into communities of resistance and hope.

Finally, **Jason Goroncy** and **John Flett**, writing as settler-theologians listening to Australian Aboriginal Christians, offer a searing critique of Nicaea. For them, the creedal Jesus is not liberator but colonizer – a figure wielded by missionaries and theologians to annihilate Indigenous worldviews. Their chapter is a prophetic call to dismantle the theological machinery of 'oneification', to repent of universalisms that erase difference, and to listen – really listen – to the Spirit already at work in the stories, rituals, and land-based wisdoms of Indigenous communities. They reject the idea that theology can ever be disembodied or a-cultural. The Spirit,

they argue, does not come bearing Greek metaphysics or Latin categories but as wind and fire in every tongue and tradition.

Together, these chapters refuse the sanitized memory of Nicaea. They uncover the layers of empire embedded in our theological DNA and dare to imagine what a post-imperial, liberative reception of Nicaea might look like. They implicitly enquire whether the Nicene Creed faithfully retells the Nicene faith in all places. They do not seek to destroy the creed, but with all theological sensitivity, seek the possibility to understand theology without it, and to liberate the creed – from the palace to the village, from the emperor’s pen to the people’s liturgy, from the colonizer’s gospel to the God of the margins.

This is Nicaea retold from below. It is a cry and a song, a wound and a witness. It is the beginning of a new traditioning – not built on imperial orthodoxy, but on the Spirit’s wild work among the wounded and the waiting. Let those who have ears, hear.



# Nicaea to Constantinople I: Lessons from Fourth-century Ecclesiastical Politics

*Sara Parvis*

The theological and legislative fruits of the Council of Nicaea are the original Nicene Creed (not the one normally recited today under that name), and the twenty Canons of Nicaea. Of these, the two which might be considered of most enduring importance are the theological term *homoousios* (the same in essence) and Canon 13, which lays down that all those who want to receive the Eucharist on their deathbed should be allowed to do so. The Council of Nicaea also addressed the Melitian schism in Egypt, and attempted to establish a universal means of calculating the date of Easter.

The original Nicene Creed was this:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things seen and unseen.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, from the essence (*ousia*) of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being (*homoousios*) as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, becoming human, who suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that there was a time when he was not or he did not exist before he was begot-

ten or he came to be from nothing or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence, or a creation, or changeable, or alterable.<sup>1</sup>

Effective modern ecumenical discussion of the Council of Nicaea depends on several things. It depends on each party to the discussion having a clear theological view of the status and importance of the council and Creed of Nicaea in their own tradition. Is its establishment of the term *homoousios* to describe the relationship between Father and Son something to rejoice in, or something to be deeply suspicious of? Theologically speaking, does Nicaea's insistence that those who have definitively left the Church be welcomed back on their deathbed if they request it and receive the Eucharist, matter? It also depends on having at least some agreement on a historically accurate account of what happened at Nicaea, and what can be discarded as myth, or at least treated as unclear or unproven. In addition, it demands a clear sense of the relationship between the original Nicene Creed of AD 325 and the 'Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed' of AD 381, which is the creed normally called the 'Nicene Creed' today.

In this necessarily short chapter, I will offer three contributions to these goals:

- A reminder of the sources for the Council of Nicaea, and the problems associated with them;
- A summary of what can be reliably said about the course of the council itself, including its immediate aftermath;
- A narrative of the path from the original Nicene Creed to the drawing up of the 'Creed of Nicaea' at Constantinople in AD 381, now generally called 'the Nicene Creed'.

In conclusion, I shall argue that the hundred and twenty-six years of debate which led from the original Nicene Creed in AD 325 to the promulgation in AD 451 of the Creed now called the Nicene Creed can be considered an important model for present and future worldwide attempts at ecumenical agreement on theological terminology.

<sup>1</sup> English translation of *Creed of the Council of Nicaea*, G. L. Dossetti, *Il Simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli: Edizione critica*, (Roma: Herder, 1967), 226–241 trans. Aaron West, *Fourth-Century Christianity*, accessed March 10, 2025. <https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-24/>.

## Sources about the Council of Nicaea and the Problems Associated with Them

Thirty-four documentary sources for theological discussion in the period leading up to Nicaea, for the proceedings of the council itself, and for what happened afterwards were first gathered together by Hans-Georg Opitz (1905-1941) under the title *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites*.<sup>2</sup> This is part of a monumental ongoing project, to publish a full critical edition of all of Athanasius' works. These, as well as other historiographical sources identified more recently, can be found on the admirable website titled *Fourth Century Christianity*,<sup>3</sup> maintained by the history department of Wisconsin Lutheran College, and the Asia Lutheran Seminary, under the direction of Dr Glen L. Thompson. The site includes Greek texts and English translations of all the documents in Opitz' *Urkunden*, all the accounts in fourth and fifth-century continuations of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, and many other documents relevant to Nicaea, freshly updated for the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the council. It identifies in particular three sets of eyewitness documents and seven accounts from ancient histories of the proceedings of the council. The three sets of eyewitness documents are:

- Ten letters of Constantine;
- A number of documents by Eusebius of Caesarea including passages from his *Life of Constantine* and his *Letter to the Church of Caesarea*;
- Athanasius' *On the Decrees of Nicaea*, *On the Synods of Ariminum and Seleucia*, and *Letter to the Bishops of Africa*.

Athanasius' *On the Decrees* is the key defence of the council's use of the term *homoousios*, and of the associated phrase «from the essence of the Father». Nicaea had been criticised since the beginning for using these two technical philosophical terms which were not in Scripture, and Athanasius, who was present at the council, though not a bishop but a deacon at that point, sets out the reasons why it did so. In particular, he argues that the Scriptural terms describing the relationship between the Father and the Son, «Image of the invisible God», and «Christ, Power of God and wisdom of God», had to be clarified in such a way as to rule out Arius' interpretations of these passages.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Opitz, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites* (Berlin: De Gruyter & Co., 1934-1935).

<sup>3</sup> *Fourth-Century Christianity*.

Eusebius of Caesarea's description of the council in the *Life of Constantine* (III.4–22) is important for its account of the 'feel' of the occasion itself, as well as for the portrait it draws of Constantine's involvement. It stresses how strange the bishops found it to be ushered into the imperial chambers past the same armed guards who had tortured and executed their predecessors. His *Letter to the Church of Caesarea*, (*Urk(unde)* 22), on the other hand, shows how unhappy he was at having to sign the creed, as well as the way in which he justified doing so theologically to his own supporters. It argues that the term *homoousios* was insisted on by Constantine, and that his own aim in agreeing to it was peace.

Three of Constantine's letters are associated with Nicaea itself: the fragment (which survives in Syriac) moving to Nicaea a council which had originally been called to Ancyra, (*Urk.* 20), a letter on the date of Easter preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine*, (III.17–30 = *Urk.* 26), and a letter to the Church in Alexandria from Athanasius' *On the Decrees of Nicaea*. (38.1–9 = *Urk.* 25). The first of these raises the question of whether Constantine himself first called the council and later moved it, or whether he simply took control of a council which had already been called. The second is the main evidence for Nicaea's debates concerning the date of Easter. The third is an important witness to how Constantine wanted to present the council's activities vis-à-vis Arius, at the close of the council. Other letters of Constantine (including the complex *Letter of Constantine to Alexander and Arius*, from Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* II.64–72 = *Urk.* 17) show his early attitude to the dispute shortly after his defeat of Licinius, and his changes of mind regarding Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Theognis of Nicaea. A final important work of Constantine's is his *Speech to the Saints*, which survives as an appendix to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, and probably dates from just before Nicaea. It uses the term *homoousios* to mean two things at the same level.

It is worth pausing at this point to note that the historiography of Nicaea always has been, and still effectively is, a debate between Athanasius' and Eusebius of Caesarea's interpretations of the council. A third option – which we might consider Eusebius of Nicomedia's option – is to forget it, overwrite it or sideline it as quickly as possible.

The Palestinian bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who was a Scripture scholar, historian and theologian, had invented the idea of telling church history through selected sources to illustrate the ecclesiastical trends he was writing about.<sup>4</sup> His

<sup>4</sup> On Eusebius, see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), and Johnson, 'Narrating the Council: Eusebius on Nicaea,' in *The Cambridge*

sources for the period up to the mid-third century are mostly derived from the episcopal library of Caesarea in Palestine, whose materials were primarily collected by the great third-century Scripture scholar Origen, with help from a number of Christian communities with whom he was in contact, including the women librarians of Rome. Origen's biographer and Eusebius' predecessor Pamphilus had added to these, as had Eusebius himself. Eusebius was thus able to write a history of the church, normally called the *Ecclesiastical History*, from the time of Jesus up until his own day. He identifies three particular organising themes of interest to him in writing the work: martyrs, Christian scholars (mostly bishops) and heresies. Eusebius selected documents and writings, that he cited wholly or partly, to illustrate these themes. Nonetheless, his choice of documents, despite the richness of his collection, is necessarily partial and tendentious: he chose documents that best illustrated his own narrative in the way he wanted. This is evident in the way Eusebius tended to use the documents he selected in cases where a fuller version existed elsewhere, as for example with the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Eusebius had no hesitation in omitting sections that were too long, or because they could seem implausible to educated readers, as in the account of a dove coming out of Polycarp's body when he was stabbed, which Eusebius silently omits.

The *Ecclesiastical History*, it has been argued, ran through three editions. The first seven books ended in Eusebius' own day in what he took to be a time of peace; the second edition added books 8 and 9 in order to tell the story of the Diocletian Persecution, and the third added book 10, including the accession of Constantine. However, after that point, the sort of triumphalist ecclesiastical history, focused on the unity of the bishops, which Eusebius had been writing up until then, became impossible to continue. The Council of Nicaea was for him a narrow escape from condemnation, and there was no way he could tell its story as part of a wider narrative of a united church battling heresy, because it was he himself and his own party who had been deemed to be the heretics before it began. Instead, he turned to writing a *Life* of the Emperor Constantine, in which he included the sources (many of them letters from Constantine himself) which he had gathered concerning the council, probably originally with the intention of carrying the *Ecclesiastical History* into a fourth edition. Even so, the work remained unpublished during his lifetime, and was published by his successor, Acacius of Caesarea.

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*Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021) 202–222.



The other main sources for documents associated with the council itself are Athanasius of Alexandria's *On the Decrees of Nicaea* of AD 353, as already noted, Epiphanius' *Panarion* of AD 375, and Gelasius of Caesarea's lost continuation of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* from the late 380s, which is probably behind most of the documents preserved in the fifth-century histories not known from other sources.<sup>5</sup> The fifth-century Antiochene historian Theodoret also had access to some other original documents, probably from the archives of the church of Antioch, which had been thoroughly searched twenty years before for legal materials used in the compiling of the *Theodosian Code*.

The documents and histories which tell the story of Nicaea were always a historiographical battleground between Eusebius of Caesarea and his successors, and Athanasius and his successors. Athanasius of Alexandria in Egypt and Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus were both 'Old Nicenes', from the party which had been led by Athanasius himself from AD 328, when he became Bishop of Alexandria, until his death in AD 373. Athanasius, following his associates Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra, first concentrated on the political wrongs of the period after Nicaea, but gradually came to focus on and defend first, the general theology of the Nicene Creed in the 340s, and then its exact wording, in the 350s. Epiphanius, writing just after Athanasius' death, worked hard to separate the theology of the different parties which developed in the mid to late fourth century, and to show which individuals were the heretics and which were not. Both Epiphanius and Athanasius sought to undermine the 'middle party', the 'homoiousians', which had drawn closely on Eusebius of Caesarea's prestige and theology. It is important to note that the reasons for this were partly political. Eusebius had been closely involved in the condemning of Athanasius and his allies in the years between AD 328 and Eusebius' death in AD 339, and his successor Acacius had carried on the quarrel, so Athanasius had to undermine them both, to establish his own innocence. But the differences were also theological.

Gelasius of Caesarea, on the other hand, worked hard to obfuscate the whole story, because he and his uncle Cyril of Jerusalem had initially been part of the middle party which had followed the path of Eusebius of Caesarea and refused to accept Athanasius' innocence, or indeed, in their case, the original Creed of Nicaea. By the time Gelasius wrote his work in the late 380s, they had both attended Constantinople 381 and were fully signed up to the original Nicene Creed. Cyril, indeed,

<sup>5</sup> See Wallraff, Stutz and Martinides, eds. *Gelasius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History, The Extant Fragments, with an Appendix Containing the Fragments from Dogmatic Writings* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

was probably one of the main authors of the new Nicene Creed of AD 381. So Gelasius had a good deal to conceal in his writing.

The early Arian Controversy, and particularly the years immediately after Nicaea itself, are often described as ‘a battle by night’, where those on the same side could be found attacking one another. But I have argued elsewhere that the fog which enshrouded the ecclesiastical history of the years after Nicaea issued from a smoke machine operated in the 370s and 380s by Gelasius of Caesarea and the other ‘new Nicenes’ (including, for very different reasons, Basil of Cappadocian Caesarea). Those who battled one another in the 320s and 330s knew exactly what they were fighting about, theologically and politically, as is clear from all of Athanasius’ writings.

Constantine’s writings are more difficult to characterise. Some of them would have been written or touched up by speechwriters; others appear to be in his own voice. He comes across in a number of them as vacillating and rambling, and given to strong and often strange emotional responses to the individuals to whom they are addressed. Constantine’s aims and intentions have been extensively analysed, and given widely different interpretations. The view taken here will be that Constantine was an interesting and idiosyncratic individual, but that his religious policy and that of his successors was mainly shaped in the long term by the ecclesiastical actors.

So, the sources, though they are essential to making sense of the council and the creed alike, need to be read with caution. The notarised proceedings of Nicaea, unlike those of the Council of Seleucia of AD 359 and those of key fifth-century councils, do not survive. Everyone who writes about the Arian Controversy, from Eusebius of Caesarea to the present author, has theological reasons for interpreting the sources the way they do. Ecumenism demands that we test one another’s narratives against the sources, and keep as open a mind as we can about their different possible interpretations.

## The Council and Aftermath: Reliable Conclusions

The following facts about the Council of Nicaea of 325 are not in serious doubt:

- The council was invited by Constantine to meet in the imperial palace in Nicaea, less than a year after he had taken over the Eastern portion of the

empire, the last portion he conquered, some twenty years after he had first been acclaimed as emperor.

- Constantine attended at least some of the sessions, and although he made play of being there by permission of the bishops, his authority was decisive.
- At least 218 bishops, nearly all from the Eastern part of the empire, signed up to the Nicene Creed, and probably close to 300 were present, along with other clergy in attendance as secretaries.
- A creed was drawn up at the council, which was not a baptismal creed to be said by new Christians but a ‘test-of-orthodoxy’ creed for clergy, intended to ensure that they interpreted the relationship of the Father and the Son in an orthodox manner.
- The anathemas in particular targeted linguistic formulas to which Arius had previously committed himself.
- Those who did not sign the creed were sent into exile, including Arius himself and two Libyan bishops, Secundus and Theonas, but most of Arius’ supporters signed the creed, including Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia (Licinius’ capital city), who had previously been Arius’ most illustrious supporter.
- The condemnation of Arius, at least, had always been the intention of the majority party at the council, and they worked hard to come up with a text incompatible with his theology.
- Nonetheless, the twenty canons the council also produced were for the most part more eirenic, working out the terms on which those who were estranged were to be welcomed back into the church, though they also restricted some practices regarding the ordination and conduct of the clergy. The subject matter and terminology of the canons were both influenced by the canons of the Council of Ancyra of AD 314.

A few other points concerning the council are contested. Theodoret claims that there were seventeen ‘Arian-minded’ bishops who corresponded with one another before Nicaea. I have argued that the evidence of Theodoret’s narrative of the period before the council suggests that most other bishops at Nicaea were already signed up to Alexander of Alexandria’s party before they arrived; other scholars have assumed that the majority of the bishops were uncommitted one way or the other at the time the council met. RPC Hanson, following Manlio Simonetti’s lead, argued that there was a ‘moderate majority of Origenist bishops’ present at Nicaea,

who found Arius' views extreme, but would go on at later councils to condemn Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra for being Sabellian (being unclear on the abiding reality of the distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit). I have argued that this 'moderate majority of Origenists' is not clearly visible in the evidence before the Council of Seleucia in AD 359. Several scholars, including Timothy Barnes, have argued that the «great and hieratic synod at Ancyra» referred to as impending at the Council of Antioch of late AD 324 had already been called before Constantine's victory; that Licinius, Constantine's predecessor, had forbidden it to take place; and that Constantine had allowed it on being petitioned to do so, but moved it to Nicaea in order to have greater control over it.

In other words, it is possible to argue that Constantine intended to be a calming influence on a collection of angry bishops who were fully intending to depose a number of their fellows, including Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and others. This is the view taken by HA Drake, who believes Constantine was actually following Eusebius of Nicomedia's agenda at the time of Nicaea itself. It is important to note that Eusebius of Nicomedia was related to Constantine's half-sister and half-brothers: the complex politics of Constantine's relations with him are therefore family politics.

It is not always noted that most of the decisions of Nicaea were reversed two years after it took place, when Constantine returned from Rome with his mother Helena as his main female associate in governing, having executed his wife Fausta as well as his eldest son Crispus. Arius was recalled from exile, as were Eusebius of Nicomedia and his associate Theognis of Nicaea, who had been exiled themselves shortly after Nicaea for not taking the council's exile of Arius and his companions seriously enough. Eustathius of Antioch, whom Constantine had previously supported as bishop there, was deposed at the same time when Arius returned. Constantine also put pressure on Alexander to receive Arius back into the church of Alexandria, although Alexander died before anything could come of it. The text of the Nicene Creed, meanwhile, largely disappeared for the next twenty-five years. Careful attempts were made to replace it with other test-of-orthodoxy creeds and professions of faith in both East and West. I have shown elsewhere that the ecclesiastical leaders of the anti-Arian party at Nicaea were all carefully targeted and removed by Arius' supporters by the time of Constantine's death in AD 337.

Had Constantine not defeated Licinius and taken the remaining Eastern portions of the empire, a major council might still have taken place at Ancyra and condemned the propositions of Arius, though one suspects that Eusebius of Nico-

media would have escaped deposition in most scenarios. Whether the council would have used the term *homoousios* to condemn Arius is another question: the term does not appear in any previous theological discussions in proximity to the council. We cannot be sure who introduced this word, but it was Athanasius who became its main defender in the medium term. We can say, however, that this word, as a descriptor of the relationship between the Son and the Father, became the council's main theological fruit.

## The Path from the Nicene Creed (325) to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)

It is important to realise that Constantine's involvement with church politics was not of itself an innovation: he was drawing on precedents which had been established in the third century. In AD 260, the emperor Gallienus ended the general persecution of Christians and legally restored to them property which had been confiscated. In AD 270, Christians petitioned Aurelian on his reconquest of Antioch from Zenobia to remove Paul of Samosata as bishop there. Aurelian had said he would do so if the Bishop of Rome endorsed the request, recognising the empire-wide nature of Christian organisational structures.<sup>6</sup> Constantine widened the scope of imperial involvement in episcopal elections and depositions to the extent that he could be seen as systematically backing one ecclesiastical party over another, although his choice of party changed more than once. His son Constantius II extended this practice to a degree which was widely seen as bringing Christianity into disrepute. We should be clear that in both cases, almost all their ecclesiastical actions were reacting to petitions from the Christians themselves. Subsequent emperors, beginning with Julian 'the apostate', attempted to draw back from this extent of State involvement in ecclesiastical politics; however, Christianity's political importance by this point meant that State involvement in its affairs was unavoidable. Too many people cared deeply about the identity of local bishops and their theological, sexual, and financial probity for the emperor not to have a policy on the process of appointing and dismissing them.

It is useful to remember that Constantine's practice of calling councils to solve ecclesiastical problems was initially triggered by property disputes caused by the

<sup>6</sup> H.A. Drake, 'The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council', in *The Cambridge Companion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 111–32.

Diocletian persecution.<sup>7</sup> When he took over North Africa from Maxentius in AD 313, he instructed that property confiscated from Christians in the persecution be returned to them. But the Christians themselves were in dispute over who owned the property, because the Bishop of Carthage, Caecilian, had been ordained by Felix of Aptungi, who was deemed to have handed over the Scriptures to soldiers during the Diocletian persecution. The lay people who held the deeds for the church property, which had been given to them to protect it in the time of persecution, refused to return it to Caecilian on the grounds that his ordination was invalid. Constantine had therefore asked the Bishop of Rome to adjudicate. However, those in control of the property appealed to Constantine himself, and he therefore called a council at Arles in Gaul in AD 314, which came to the same decision as the Bishop of Rome had done. This was the first occasion on which an emperor had directly called a council. Constantine said that he would abide by the bishops' decision, but, in fact, did not do so for long, as would again be the case at Nicaea.

The path from Nicaea to Constantinople (AD 381) is a convoluted one, and the story can be told in different ways, but it is helpful to highlight the main creeds and parties which developed in response to different imperial policies. I have noted that Constantine side-lined both Nicaea and its creed after two years, recalled Arius from exile and eventually deposed all the surviving leading actors of the anti-Arian party, Eustathius of Antioch, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Marcellus of Ancyra. Athanasius and Marcellus returned on his death in AD 337, only to be deposed again by his successor in the Eastern Empire, his son Constantius II. They sought support from the Bishop of Rome, who was in a different jurisdiction, that of Constantius' brother Constans. Constantius and Constans agreed that an 'ecumenical council', in other words, a council which would include bishops from both portions of the empire, would take place in AD 343. Nicaea was retrospectively also deemed to be an 'ecumenical council', and taken as the model for the new meeting at Serdica. The Eastern and Western bishops never met as one council, but each held a separate council which supplemented or replaced the Nicene Creed. Athanasius worked hard to suppress the 'Western' creed and to argue that it was not an official document of the Council of Serdica (which he otherwise recognised). He later returned after Constans' death in AD 350 to defending the Creed of Nicaea.

Athanasius' career is an excellent test of the relative impotence of emperors to determine ecclesiastical policy in the medium and long term: almost every emperor

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<sup>7</sup> Drake, 'The Elephant in the Room', 114–116.

during Athanasius' career as bishop from AD 328–373 tried to depose him (Constantius did so twice), but he always managed to be re-instated. He was crucial to the growing Egyptian Christian identity, and particularly Egyptian Coptic identity, which liked to hold Roman rule at arm's length as far as possible. Athanasius is a saint in all the main church traditions of the ancient world- the Byzantines, the Latins, the ('Nestorian') Church of the East and the Miaphysite African and Near Eastern Churches. Nonetheless, it is to the African Miaphysite churches, the Coptic and Ethiopic churches, that he is most central, being at the fountain-head of their separate linguistic, theological, and canonical tradition. The later post-Nicene tradition told many colourful stories about Athanasius, which are mainly preserved in Rufinus' *Ecclesiastical History*, but although they are highly entertaining, they derive from Gelasius, and were part of a strategy of relegating Athanasius to the status of popular hero while sidelining his theology. Fortunately, Athanasius' own words survive in abundance.

Athanasius was deposed by Constantine in AD 335, but returned on his death in AD 337 with the permission of his other son, Constantine III. He was deposed by Constantius in AD 339, re-instated in AD 345, and fled into exile himself in AD 356 to escape Constantius' soldiers, who at that point were trying to execute him. He returned under Julian in AD 362, was deposed by Julian in AD 363, and re-instated by Jovian after Julian's death. Valens attempted to depose him again in AD 365, but was persuaded against it by the local authorities, and lived out his life relatively peacefully until his death in AD 373, though continuing to take a close interest in the politics of the three different parties who were by then claiming to support the Nicene Creed.

Constantius II became sole ruler of the empire after AD 353. He was involved in a number of councils of different sizes, some formal, others informal, two of which produced major creeds, the Dedication Creed of AD 341 and the 'Homoian' Creed of AD 360, which pronounced that the Son was «like the Father according to the Scriptures». This merely underlined why the term *homoousios* (officially banned in AD 360) had been necessary: to say «like the Father according to the Scriptures» was to say that any interpretation of the Scriptural terminology was possible, which had been the original point of dispute. Athanasius' defence of the Nicene terminology in *On the Decrees of Nicaea*, and his defence of abandoning the fruits of all the later councils in favour of Nicaea in *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* in AD 359, was crucial to gradually winning the theological argument in favour of Nicaea.

He added the importance of recognising that the Holy Spirit was not created and was «not alien to the essence of the Father» in the Council of Alexandria in AD362.

From AD 360–380, theological debate was severely circumscribed for much of the time. Julian ‘the Apostate’ was sole emperor from AD 361–363. Julian, who turned Christianity into a private religion unsupported by the State and cut all its tax breaks, may be credited with restoring the possibility of genuine theological conversation, as well as allowing five different theological parties to develop, each with their own rival set of bishops and aspirant bishops: the Eunomians, Eudoxians, Macedonianists, Old Nicenes and New Nicenes. The ‘Eudoxians’ (also called ‘Arians’ by the Council of AD 381 and, by modern scholars, ‘homoians’) controlled all three major Eastern sees of Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria after 373, but they did not survive the death of Valens in AD 378. The ‘Old Nicenes’ (Peter and then his brother Timothy) took Alexandria, and the New Nicenes (Meletius and Gregory Nazianzen) took Antioch and Constantinople. However, Gregory’s legitimacy was questionable, and so Theodosius I, who had entered Constantinople as emperor of the East in November of AD 380, called a new Council of Constantinople AD 381 to confirm a bishop there and to restore the (original) Creed of Nicaea, still legally banned since 360 because of its use of the term *homoousios*.

It is not always recognised that it was the original Nicene Creed which was legally re-instated by the Council of Constantinople of AD 381, although this was argued by A.M. Ritter in 1965 in his monumental work on the Council, *Das Konzil von Konstantinopel und sein Symbol*. The Council of AD 381 did draw up the creed which is now normally called the ‘Nicene Creed’. However, as Ritter shows, it was not promulgated until AD 451. Its most important theological move in relation to the original Nicene Creed was to retain the phrase «homoousios with the Father».

### **The ‘Nicene Creed’**

(Drawn up at Constantinople 381, promulgated at Chalcedon in AD 451)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us, humans, and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became fully human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered death and was buried.



He rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

[We believe] in one holy universal and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

## **Lessons from Fourth-century Ecclesiastical Politics Regarding the Nicene Creed**

From the account recounted thus far, it is evident that there were a hundred and twenty-six years of debate between the original Nicene Creed of AD 325 and the final promulgation in AD 451 of the Creed now called the Nicene Creed. This can be considered an important model for present and future worldwide attempts at ecumenical agreement on theological terminology in the following ways.

1. Real creedal ecumenism is slow, because what matters is not only what is said and done at the time when a creed is drawn up, but how it is received afterwards, up until today. Some councils (for example, the Council of Constantinople of AD 360 and its creed) do not last. The Creed of Constantinople (known as the creed of Ariminum in the West) was still being appealed to in the fifth century and beyond, and 'Barbarian Arianism' existed in Visigothic Spain until AD 589, but the arguments in the East had moved on after the fifth century, and the new 'Nicene Creed' became the main point on which all the different Eastern Churches were agreed.
2. Some aspects of a council, including its creed, can be received even by those who do not receive the council as such. The Council of Chalcedon was not received by the Church of the East, or by the Miaphysite churches, but they all accepted the new 'Nicene Creed', which it promulgated for the first time.

3. Ecumenical Trinitarian discussion is still a fruitful work in progress across all the main traditions. The 'Nicene Creed' in the Latin tradition adds the 'Filioque' clause that the Spirit proceeds from the Father «and the Son». The Patristic justification for this was thoroughly discussed at the fifteenth-century Council of Florence. Although it remains a point of dispute between the different Chalcedonian churches, it thereby also remains a fruitful source of Trinitarian theological discussion between the churches, given that the difference is one not of theology but authority.

The 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea above all highlights the complexities of fruitful ecumenical dialogue. Real progress is made, and it takes real work, thought, and discussion to move the debates forward. Progress on the most complex theological questions must be measured in centuries. This is a good thing. God has so far given us twenty centuries to try to make sense of the gift of the incarnation, which was a good deal more time than the early Christians were expecting. Time to resolve quarrels is grace – we should give thanks for whatever opportunity is still left to us to carry on working on resolving them, before we have to give an account to the author of our being of what we have done.



# Council of Nicaea: Through the Eyes of Eusebius of Caesarea

Andreas Müller

The Council of Nicaea has already been portrayed as a historical event by contemporary historians although entire records of it have not been preserved.<sup>1</sup> Only individual accounts recorded by council participants such as Athanasius of Alexandria are available. However, there are several canons of the Council, and its symbols that are useful for reconstructing the history. In addition, late antique literature offers early evidence of the reception of the major event that took place in the imperial residence in Bithynia. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea Maritima, was a direct witness to the events of the Council. He is known to have created literary monuments to himself as an exegete and apologist, but also as a historian. These include his chronicle, the report on the martyrs in Palestine and his *Ecclesiastical History*, which was revised several times, and finally his *Vita Constantini*. Even though this text was little received in late antiquity,<sup>2</sup> it was nevertheless fundamental to the further development of the «Byzantine imperial ideal». Eusebius constructed Constantine as an apostle-like ruler who made a massive contribution to the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. The historical reliability of this icon has rightly been the subject of much debate. Nevertheless, it has had a massive impact on the Eastern Orthodox perception of Constantine, at least up to the present day, and should therefore not be neglected. The emperor is venerated as a holy and apostolic person even today in the orthodox churches. In the following article, the question

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Horst Schneider, in *Eusebius von Caesarea. De Vita Constantini*, Bruno Bleckmann (ed.) / Horst Schneider (tr.), *Fontes Christiani* 83, (Brepols, 2007), 316 n177.

<sup>2</sup> On the weak reception of the *Vita Constantini* see Friedhelm Winkelmann, *Euseb von Kaisareia. Der Vater der Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin: Verlags-Anstalt-Union 1991), 156.

of how Eusebius portrayed the emperor and his role in the Council negotiations will be discussed at length. It is also important to consider how Eusebius organised the overall outline of his *Vita Constantini* to portray the emperor's work at the Council of Nicaea in detail. Eusebius had a specific agenda behind this strategy. As I have already explained in detail elsewhere, the *Vita Constantini* has a close inter-textual relationship with the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>3</sup> Roughly speaking, we must analyze more precisely that the Council of the Apostles in Acts 15 and the deeds of the apostles form the *typos*, of which the *antitype* was the Council of Nicaea. For all these reasons Eusebius thus offers an interpretation of the Council that needs to be analysed more closely. To do this, however, we must first trace the depiction of the Council in his *Vita Constantini*.

## The Events of the Council According to the *Vita Constantini*

In the run-up to the Council, Eusebius first describes the turmoil within the churches of Alexandria (τὰς κατὰ τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ἐκκλησίας) and in this context also speaks specifically of a schismatic evil that had even burdened the emperor. This does not refer to the conflict between Alexander and Areios, but to the Melitian schism.<sup>4</sup> This is supported by the fact that there is talk of differences between the inhabitants of the Thebaid and Egypt, which implies not just an initially rather localised conflict in the metropolis. According to Eusebius's account, the society in Egypt was so divided, that almost civil war-like conditions prevailed.<sup>5</sup> Another reason for the emperor's supposedly deep anguish was the dispute over the date of Easter. According to Eusebius, there was one party that believed that Jewish practice should be followed (ἔπεσθαι δεῖν τῇ Ἰουδαίῳ συνήθειᾳ), and another, which strictly followed the season for calculating the date (προσῆκειν τὴν ἀκριβῆ τοῦ καιροῦ παραφυλάττειν ὥραν) – meaning the dominical practice. According to Euse-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Andreas Müller, "Eusebius' Reception of the Acts of the Apostles in the *Vita Constantini*," *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* eds., Jörg Frey, Clare K. Rothschild, Jens Schröter, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 162 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 393–417. My further remarks are strongly based on this article.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the Melitian schism, see Andreas Müller, "Athanasius und die Melitianer," in *Athanasius Handbuch*, ed. Peter Gemeinhardt (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 122–126.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 3,4 (FC 83,312–314 Schneider).

bius, the second party was also pitting belief in a life according to the grace of the gospel against Jewish practice.<sup>6</sup> He himself interpreted the situation in such a way that the divine statutes had become disorganised, especially as some were still fasting around the date of Easter while others were already celebrating joyfully. Therefore, a therapist with a divine mandate was needed, namely Emperor Constantine.<sup>7</sup> He initially addressed a letter to the inhabitants of Alexandria, but this had no effect. Accordingly, Eusebius interpreted the dispute as diabolical,<sup>8</sup> and the convening of an ecumenical assembly (σύνοδον οἰκουμένην) as a battle of God against the devil.<sup>9</sup> The emperor not only summoned the delegates with honourable letters, but also supported the journey by providing the *cursus publicus*, the state postal system which allowed them to travel comfortably. Eusebius even interpreted the name of the city in which the Council was to take place with a view to the battle to be fought: Nicaea ultimately means victory.<sup>10</sup>

According to Eusebius, the bishops were probably motivated to participate for different reasons: some may have hoped for a good (ἀγαθὸν ἐλπίς) outcome to the dispute; some anticipated to participate in peace (εἰρήνης μετουσία) as it was the emperor who had called for the Council; and still more may have just harboured hopes to witness the spectacle of the extraordinary sight of the emperor (τοῦ τε ξένου θαύματος τῆς τοῦ τοσούτου βασιλέως ὄψεως ἢ θέα).<sup>11</sup> So very different people gathered in one place in terms of disposition and origin and Eusebius uses the image of a wreath made up of very different flowers to capture this eclectic mix.<sup>12</sup> Eusebius never tires of listing the regions from which the participants came – even Pope Sylvester would have come if he hadn't been too old. According to Eusebius, Constantine, the one emperor, knotted a bond of peace and thus created an image of the apostles (εἰκόνα χορείας ἀποστολικῆς).<sup>13</sup> This is probably intended to refer to the apostles at Pentecost, but can also refer to the apostles at the Council in Jerusalem according to Acts 15. According to Eusebius, bishops alone numbered 250 at the Council.<sup>14</sup> Of these, several were good in rhetoric, others were strict confessors

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 5,1 (FC 83, 314 Schneider).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 5,2 (FC 83, 314 Schneider).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 5,3 (FC 83, 316 Schneider).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 6,1 (FC 83, 316 Schneider).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 6,1 (FC 83, 316 Schneider).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 6,2 (FC 83, 316 Schneider).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 6,2 (FC 83, 318 Schneider).

<sup>13</sup> Eus. V.C. III 7,2 (FC 83, 318 Schneider).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 8 (FC 83, 320 Schneider).

or ascetics.<sup>15</sup> In any case, Constantine had provided for all of them sufficiently. The assembly took place in the innermost house of the palaces (ἐν [...] τῷ μεσαιτάτῳ οἴκῳ τῶν βασιλείων), where there was a fixed seating arrangement.<sup>16</sup> The emperor staged himself like a heavenly messenger of God (οἷα θεοῦ τις οὐράνιος ἄγγελος), who in his appearance even worked with the metaphor of light (ὥσπερ φωτὸς μαρμαρυγαῖς ἐξαστράπτων περιβολήν), which in later times was a symbol of faith associated with Christ.<sup>17</sup> Eusebius describes in detail the welcome speech of the presiding bishop and then reproduces verbatim the speech given in Latin by the emperor, who emphasised above all the unity of the assembly that he promoted, which was to strive for a common opinion (μίαν τε κοινὴν βραβεύουσιν τοῖς πᾶσιν εἰρηνικὴν συμφωνίαν). To this end, the reasons for the disputes were to be named and possible solutions sought to overcome them.<sup>18</sup> As numerous arguments of this kind were put forward, the emperor endeavoured to mediate between the disputing parties, now in Greek, and urged unity (ὁμόνοιαν), which was expressed in unanimity and all those present being of the same opinion (ὁμογνώμονας καὶ ὁμοδόξους).<sup>19</sup> In this case, Eusebius also speaks of unanimous faith and the unanimous determination of a date for Easter, without specifying the first point more precisely.<sup>20</sup> The resolutions, Eusebius claims were written down and signed by all participants.<sup>21</sup> This is followed by descriptions of the *Vicennalia*, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Constantine's accession to the throne, which immediately followed the Council and is described by Eusebius as the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>22</sup> Eusebius also includes a letter from Constantine to the churches, in which he emphasises his ideal of unity,<sup>23</sup> but in particular refers to the celebration of Easter on one and the same date.<sup>24</sup> Eusebius also quotes the emperor to the effect that the Council had rejected the quartadeciman practice of the feast «according to the custom of the

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 9 (FC 83, 320 Schneider)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 10,1 (FC 83, 320 Schneider).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 10,3 (FC 83, 322 Schneider). In the following section, Eusebius also uses all the registers of panegyric.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 11f. (FC 83, 322-326 Schneider).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 13 (FC 83, 326 Schneider). Constantine himself formulated the same goal of unity in the letter to the synodals reproduced by Eusebius, Eus. V.C. III 17,1f. (FC 83, 330 Schneider). Accordingly, division and disputes over faith were no longer to exist.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 14 (FC 83, 326 Schneider).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 14 (FC 83, 328 Schneider).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 15f. (FC 83, 328 Schneider).

<sup>23</sup> In the quotation from the letter, Constantine emphasises that, despite the regional diversity, the church is or should be characterised by a single spirit, cf. V.C. III 18,5 (FC 83, 334 Schneider).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 18,1f. (FC 83, 332 Schneider).

Jews» (τῇ τῶν Ἰουδαίων [...] συννηθεία).<sup>25</sup> The anti-Jewish rhetoric even escalates to the statement: «So we should have nothing in common with the most hated rabble of Jews».<sup>26</sup> According to the allegedly quoted letter from the emperor, which Eusebius certainly includes in the account with royal approval,<sup>27</sup> there is a call to distance oneself from «habits of quite evil people» (ἔθеси παγκάκων) – that means from the Jewish practice of dating pascha.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it also pointed out that some Christians should not still fast while others were already celebrating Easter due to two different festival calendars,<sup>29</sup> but rather all should adhere to an exact calculation (ἀκριβῆς λόγος) of the festival

To conclude the description of the Council, Eusebius mentions a letter to each eparchy with the same content as well as a final exhortation from the emperor to the bishops to unity and to refrain from envying the spiritual gifts of other bishops – rather, the latter should be regarded as part of a common good.<sup>30</sup> Even minor mistakes made by others should be forgiven in the spirit of unity.<sup>31</sup> The emperor dismissed the bishops from Nicaea with a request for a prayer for himself. Eusebius summarises the event referring to the image of the one body from 1 Cor 12.12–32: «But they went back rejoicing, and from then on there was one opinion among all of them, which had been agreed upon in the presence of the emperor, since they, who were actually far apart, were united as if in a single body».<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 18,2 (FC 83, 332 Schneider).

<sup>26</sup> Eus. V.C. III 18,2 (FC 83, 332 Schneider): μηδὲν τοίνυν ἔστω ὑμῖν κοινὸν μετὰ τοῦ ἐχθίστου τῶν Ἰουδαίων ὄχλου.

<sup>27</sup> According to Averil Cameron, Eusebius also included Constantine's letters for apologetic reasons. Eusebius certainly wanted to support his Christian image of the emperor, which was embedded in the history of salvation, with the documents as well as his own dogmatic position, cf. Averil Cameron, *Eusebius' Vita Constantini and the Construction of Constantine*, in: Mark J. Edwards/Simon Swain, Portraits. Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire (Clarendon Press, 1997), 166 s. It is no longer possible to determine with certainty to what extent Eusebius always quotes Constantine's letters correctly. In any case, such a strong anti-Judaic stance on Constantine's part seems excessive for a *pontifex maximus*, even in view of his edict of AD 321. On Constantine's attitude towards Judaism and its ambivalent portrayal, see also Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999) 43–47.

<sup>28</sup> Eus. V.C. III 18.4 (FC 83, 334 Schneider).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 18,6 (FC 83, 334 Schneider).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 20,3–21,1 (FC 83, 338 Schneider).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. III 21,2 (FC 83, 338 Schneider).

<sup>32</sup> Eus. V.C. III 21,4 (FC 83, 340 Schneider): οἱ δ' ἐπανήεσαν σὺν εὐφροσύνῃ, ἐκράτει τε λοιπὸν παρὰ τοῖς πᾶσι μία γνώμη παρ' αὐτῷ βασιλεῖ συμφωνηθεῖσα, συναπτομένων ὥσπερ ὅψ' ἐνὶ σώματι τῶν ἐκ μακροῦ διηρημένων.



## A One-sided Depiction of the Council in Eusebius

It has often been observed in the literature that Eusebius did not mention numerous resolutions of the Council and did not quote corresponding synodal letters and imperial letters in its context of the Council. Instead, he concentrated on dealing with topics such as the date of Easter. According to his report, the dispute over Areios does not seem to have played any role at all.<sup>33</sup> There are no references to the exile of Theognis of Nicaea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theonas and Secundus from Libya, or even to the condemnation of Areios. In the course of his account, he also makes no reference to the rejection of Melitians and Novatians. Authors such as Horst Schneider certainly rightly explain this with the origins of the *Vita Constantini*, and with the lack of its agreement with the principle of concord, the ὁμόνοια, which was so important to Eusebius.<sup>34</sup> For this very reason, Eusebius may have omitted the fact that some of the Council Fathers did not sign the Council's anathematisms. His statement that all bishops signed the Council's decisions is clearly misleading. Ultimately, the Council's decisions did not correspond to Eusebius's personal faith, who is known to have taken the position of a central party that was very close to Areios in the later disputes.<sup>35</sup> In a eulogy to the emperor, who, according to the quotation from the letter, was primarily interested in unity, Eusebius may have concealed his dissenting opinion and possibly put forth symbolically only his irrelevant interpretation of the ὁμοούσιος. Even Constantine did not con-

<sup>33</sup> An indirect reference can be found in the letter of Constantine quoted above, in which 'the Jews' are described as murderers of fathers and masters, cf. V.C. 19,1 (FC 83, 336 Schneider). The term patricide (πατροκτόνοι) can only be understood against the background of the equality of essence between father and son, which, however, was not further elaborated on at this point and was thus more or less overplayed by Eusebius.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Schneider, FC 83, 330 note 193.

<sup>35</sup> On Eusebius' Arianism, see Holger Strutwolf, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Eusebius von Caesarea*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 72 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Friedhelm Winkelmann, ed., *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, Eusebius Werke I 1, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1991) XXVIII. The essay by K.[evin] R. C.[onstantine] Gutzman, "Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and his 'Life of Constantine'", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 (1997): 351–358, attempts to recognise Eusebius' significance for the Byzantine tradition despite his "heretical" orientation. Following James Stevenson, he makes the interesting observation that of the 22 imperial charters that Eusebius was in possession of, he did not quote the eight that dealt with Arianism (cf. *ibid.* 355). Cf. also Schneider, FC 83, 316f. Note 177: "For Eusebius, the account (scil. of the Council) was problematic insofar as he – at least at times himself an Arian – could not report impartially and had to observe the genre boundaries. He completely omitted the immediately preceding Council of Antioch, at which Eusebius himself was condemned for his closeness to Arianism, from his report." Translation into English by Andreas Müller.

sistently adhere to this statement of the Council. Eusebius may also have refrained from mentioning the dogmatic disputes in Nicaea in view of his change of position. Since the *Vita Constantini* was probably written after Constantine's death, probably between AD 337 and 339,<sup>36</sup> a clear reference to the Nicene dogmatics would have had to be brought into congruence with the later theological developments at the imperial court, at least in some way. However, this would have been difficult to argue in a panegyric.

All of the above reasons for the strangely one-sided presentation of the Council are entirely plausible and may have played a role in the composition of the *Vita*. According to my own observations on the *Vita Constantini*, however, the reasons why Eusebius omits the treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in Nicaea, for example, may have been in another area, namely that of intertextuality. I would like to briefly develop this idea below.

## The *Vita Constantini* in Intertextual Relation to the Biblical Acts of the Apostles

The *Vita Constantini* and the Acts of the Apostles exhibit astonishing parallels, some of which have been little emphasised in research to date, which indicate that Eusebius may have oriented himself towards the model of the biblical book when writing the imperial *Vita*, and ultimately even wanted to stylise Constantine as an apostle through intertextual references. Similar to the Acts of the Apostles, it places one protagonist in the foreground and is therefore at least remotely comparable to its increasing focus on Paul as an important player in early Christianity.

Eusebius was very familiar with the Acts of the Apostles. He not only generally refers to Luke as the author of the Acts of the Apostles,<sup>37</sup> rather, he also quotes it in numerous places – at one point even in the *Vita Constantini*. There, Eusebius compares the Council participants in Nicaea with the apostles, whom he describes with words from Acts 2.5, 9–11 as «God-fearing men» «from every nation under heaven».<sup>38</sup> A look at Eusebius' church history makes it clear how strongly Eusebius was

<sup>36</sup> On the authenticity of the *Vita Constantini*, see already Friedrich Vittinghoff, "Eusebius als Verfasser der 'Vita Constantini'," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 96 (1953) 330–373.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Eusebius h.e. I 7, *Eusebius Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Eusebius, V.C. III 8 (FC 83, 318–320 Schneider).

otherwise influenced by the Acts of the Apostles in terms of content.<sup>39</sup> Eusebius's ideal of the emperor, which he developed in particular from the typos of Moses,<sup>40</sup> may also have been constructed in the *Vita Constantini* on the basis of the Acts of the Apostles. In any case, it would be an interesting question whether Eusebius' typology of Moses and Constantine was inspired by Stephen's speech in the Acts of the Apostles.

The two texts certainly differ form-wise, although the *Vita Constantini* is not easy to categorise in terms of form history. There is now widespread agreement among scholars that it is a «peculiar hybrid form».<sup>41</sup> According to Raffaele Farina's 1966 investigations, for example, it simultaneously contains elements of a biography, a panegyric or encomium<sup>42</sup> and the idealisation of a ruler in the sense of a princely mirror.<sup>43</sup> Most recently, Bruno Bleckmann has pointed out that encomium and biography were in any case fused in imperial literary life.<sup>44</sup> Like Plutarch, Eu-

<sup>39</sup> A general reference to Book II of *Church History* will suffice here. The content of this book is almost saturated with the Acts of the Apostles.

<sup>40</sup> On Moses in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, see Michael J. Hollerich, "The Comparison of Moses and Constantine in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine*," *Studia Patristica* 19(1989) 80–85; *Eusebius of Caesarea. De Vita Constantini*, ed., Bruno Bleckmann, trans. Horst Schneider, FC 83 (Brepols: Turnhout, 2007) 101–104; Averil Cameron, "Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine," *Portraits. Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, M.J. Edwards and S. Swain, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 145–174, here 158–161, where Cameron interprets Constantine's vision in a very interesting way against the background of Moses' vision at the burning bush. There are indeed parallels here. Nevertheless, I have decided to interpret the vision scene more strongly from the model of Paul, because some elements (e.g. witnesses at the vision; conversion theme; interpretation of the vision by third parties) speak more strongly in favour of this. Nevertheless, Eusebius probably also drew on elements from the Call of Moses, especially the basic idea of a vision in which the "liberation action" was based. On Constantine's identification with Moses, see also Claudia Rapp, "Imperial Ideology in the Making: Eusebius of Caesarea on Constantine as 'Bishop'," *Journal of Theological studies* 49 (1998), 685–695.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Bleckmann, *Eusebius*, 33. On the uncertainty about the definition of the genre, cf. a. A. Cameron, "Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*", 145. A peculiar hybrid form is noted by Timothy D. Barnes, "Panegyric, history and hagiography in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*", in *From Eusebius to Augustine, Selected Papers 1982–1993*, XI ed. Timothy D. Barnes, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 116: "The so-called *Life of Constantine* is a combination of conventional panegyric and something daringly original which hovers between ecclesiastical history and hagiography."

<sup>42</sup> Socrates (h.e. I 1,2) and Photios (*Bibliotheca* cod. 127) already considered the *Vita Constantini* to be an encomium, see the quotations in F. Winkelmann, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, XXXI and XLIX.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Bleckmann, *Eusebius*, 27; Jan Willem Drijvers, "Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* als fürstenspiegel," in *Lampas* 37 (2004): 161–164.

<sup>44</sup> B. Bleckmann, *Eusebius*, 28. I also follow Bleckmann's introduction. In older literature, a sharp distinction was occasionally made between encomium and biography, cf. e.g. W.[il-

sebius concentrates on praising particular moral qualities.<sup>45</sup> The *Vita Constantini* was probably intended as a kind of mirror for Constantine's sons to present «das Leben ihres Vaters in ahistorischer Weise als Modell eines idealen Christen und eines idealen Herrschers» (their father's life in an ahistorical way as a model of an ideal Christian and an ideal ruler).<sup>46</sup> Even if the two texts differ in terms of form, the *Vita Constantini* is close to the Acts of the Apostles as «mimetic historiography» due to its emphasis on the religious exemplarity of the protagonist<sup>47</sup>, even if the latter does not focus as strongly as the *Vita Constantini* exclusively on one protagonist.

Eusebius' account is not just about a special emperor. The final chapter of his *Vita* makes it clear that he also sees the emperor's speciality in the fact that, like an apostle, he openly proclaimed the message of Christ, glorified the Church and abolished idolatry, thereby distinguishing himself through a special form of worship.<sup>48</sup> Eusebius not only praises the emperor as an apostle, as it were, at the end of the *Vita Constantini*, rather, there are also numerous passages in the historical part of the *Vita Constantini* where the emperor is portrayed by Eusebius as closely acquainted to the apostles, in particular to Paul.<sup>49</sup> Some of these passages have long been discussed by scholars, but have been linked less to Eusebius' specific intentions than to the question of Constantine's self-image. However, if the *Vita Constantini* is understood in terms of its intertextual references, the parallels between Paul and Constantine can also be explained in terms of Eusebius' composition. Not only Constantine's vision in the run-up to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge,<sup>50</sup> even his

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liam] Telfer, "The Author's Purpose in the *Vita Constantini*", *Studia Patristica* 1 (1957), 157–167, here 157.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the comparison between Plutarch and Eusebius in Gerhard Ruhbach, "Apologetik und Geschichte. Untersuchungen zur Theologie Eusebius von Caesarea", (diss., Heidelberg, 1962), 201–203.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. B. Bleckmann, *Eusebius*, 31; Averil Cameron, "Eusebius of Caesarea and the Rethinking of History", *Tria corda: Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano*, Biblioteca di Athenaeum 1, ed. Emilio Gabba (New Press, 1983), 71–88, here 82–85. F. Winkelmann, *Eusebius*, 154 speaks of the ideal image offered in the *Vita Constantini* as an "orientation norm" for Constantine's sons.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. e.g. Eus., V.C. I 3,4; I 4 and I 9,1.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. IV 75 (FC 83, 500 Schneider).

<sup>49</sup> In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is also referred to as an apostle in a broader sense beyond the circle of twelve (cf. Act 14.4,14). Paul was therefore an apostle above all because of his witness. In Acts 1.8, this is associated with the apostles in the narrower sense, the circle of twelve, and in Acts 22.15 with Paul.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. on this Act 9.1–18; 22.6–16; 26.12–18 and on Constantine's vision against the background of the Acts of the Apostles most recently Reinhard Staats, "Kaiser Konstantin der Große und der Apostel Paulus", *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008): 334–379, here 354–358.

burial in the Church of the Apostles,<sup>51</sup> even the description of his *consecratio* against the background of a consecration coin available to Eusebius,<sup>52</sup> which he interprets as an ascension (gr. ἀνάληψις), can be understood intertextually against the background of the Acts of the Apostles. When the *Vita Constantini* ends with the declaration of Constantine's love of God (θεοφιλία), but immediately before that describes his *consecratio/ascension* (in 'pagan' thinking, the deification of the emperor) and Constantine's death on Pentecost, one could see a chiasmic inclusion of the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>53</sup> After all, the latter first addresses a Theophilus, then reports on the ascension and finally on Pentecost. Accordingly, the story of the apostles would have found a worthy conclusion in Constantine. References to the Acts of the Apostles can now also be found in the account of the Council of Nicaea.

## The Description of the Council of Nicaea as a New Council of the Apostles

Similar to the Acts of the Apostles, the *Vita Constantini* also contains a depiction of a council roughly after its first half. Certainly, parallels between the depiction of the Council of Nicaea and the Council of the Apostles are not as obvious as those between the visions of Paul and Constantine. In particular, there are no terminological similarities. Nevertheless, Eusebius also clearly refers back to the apostolic times at this point – as already mentioned – by commenting on the presence of representatives of all churches: «From the beginning of time, only the one Emperor

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Unlike Staats, I do not claim that Constantine already made a parallelisation of his vision with Paul's Damascus experience, even if this cannot be ruled out. However, only the parallelisation by Eusebius is certain, and only in his second account of the event. This can be easily explained in view of the strong influence of the Acts of the Apostles on the image of the emperor that can also be observed elsewhere. On the significance of the vision in the context of the *Vita Constantini*, see already Vittinghoff, *Eusebius*, 336. The vision is thus «compositionally the central starting point of the Vita». Translation into English by Andreas Müller.

<sup>51</sup> On the 'apostolic church' see, among others, Stefan Rebenich, "Vom dreizehnten Gott zum dreizehnten Apostel? Der tote Kaiser in der Spätantike", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 4 (2000): 300–324, esp. 309–313.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. IV 73 (FC 83, 498 Schneider) and Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, "Zur Darstellung der Himmelfahrt Constantins des Grossen", in *Jenseitsvorstellungen in Antike und Christentum*, FS Alfred Stuiber, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband 9, (Münster: Aschendorff, 1982) 215–224.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Eus. V.C. IV 64.74f. (FC 83, 488.498–500 Schneider).

Constantine knotted together such a large wreath with the bond of peace and offered it to his Saviour for his victory over opponents and enemies as a gift of thanksgiving due to God, thus creating an image of the apostles in our time».<sup>54</sup> However, Eusebius does not parallel this diversity here with the diversity of the representatives at the «Apostles' Council» but explicitly – as already observed – initially with the Pentecost event (Act 2.5, 9–11).

Even if the sequence between the two meetings is roughly similar, this certainly does not reflect Eusebius' reception of the Acts of the Apostles. References to the meeting, intensive dispute about different positions, agreements, and sending a letter to those who could not attend the respective meeting, are such general motifs in the description of such a meeting, that they do not point to a closer dependence of Eusebius on Acts. The reason for the very independent description of the Council of Nicaea,<sup>55</sup> which differs in many places, is probably that Eusebius himself took part in it and therefore probably endeavoured to describe the actual events at the imperial court. In addition, the historical context of the 'councils' in the first and fourth centuries was completely different. Accordingly, Eusebius was very much concerned with emphasising the role of the emperor in bringing peace and unity<sup>56</sup> – a motif that is naturally missing in the Acts of the Apostles.

If one reads the description of the Council of Nicaea against the background of the «Council of the Apostles», despite the lack of terminological and direct overlaps in content, then at least the questions already raised can be answered with regard to Eusebius' (lack of) presentation of the Trinitarian theological discussion<sup>57</sup> and the emphasis on Easter.

In Eusebius' letter to his congregation about the Council of Nicaea from June 325, he is known to have described the genesis of the symbol of Nicaea in such a way that it ultimately originated from his pen and was only supplemented by the emperor with the word ὁμοούσιος.<sup>58</sup> While Eusebius at least wanted to emphasise the proximity between the imperial theology and his own theology in his letter to

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Eus., V.C. III 8,2 (FC 83, 318, Schneider): τοιοῦτον μόνος ἐξ αἰῶνος εἰς βασιλεὺς Κωνσταντῖνος Χριστῷ στέφανον δεσμῶ συνάψας εἰρήνης [...] εἰκόνα χορείας ἀποστολικῆς ταύτην καθ' ἡμᾶς συστησάμενος.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Eus., V.C. III 6–22 (FC 83, 316–340 Schneider).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. e.g. Eus., V.C. III 13f. (FC 83, 326–328 Schneider).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. on this a. Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, (Harvard University Press, 1981) 270; id., “Panegyric”, 105. On the abridged account of the councils of Nicaea and Tyre in the *Vita Constantini*, cf. also A. Cameron, *Eusebius*, esp. 77.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites*, Athanasius Werke III/1, ed. Hans-Georg Opitz, (de Gruyter, 1934), no.22.

his own congregation and free himself from the suspicion of heresy, years later he may have completely refrained from presenting the dogmatic discussion in Nicaea for the same reason in the *Vita Constantini*. But other reasons could also speak in favour of his selective reporting: By emphasising the unified statement of the date of Easter, the unity of the Church, which was so important to Eusebius, is also particularly emphasised in an overtly perceptible form. Against the background of the Acts of the Apostles, there is an even more plausible reason for Eusebius' selection of the Council *topoi*: In both cases, it was a matter of customs in Christianity that were to be redefined in confrontation with Jewish customs. According to Acts 15.1, the assembly in Jerusalem was in any case triggered by a dispute about the custom of Moses (τὸ ἔθος τὸ Μωϋσέως). And Eusebius' description – at least according to the imperial document he quotes – is also about the habits of very evil people (ἀνθρώπων ἔθῃ πανγκάκων).<sup>59</sup> According to the same document, these utterly wicked people clearly refer to «the Jews».<sup>60</sup> While the Acts of the Apostles emphasised the Jewish prohibition of the consumption of blood even in «Gentile Christianity» with the Apostles' Decree, and even understood the people of God as «Israel extended around the chosen – which specifically means: Christ-believing-Gentiles»,<sup>61</sup> the Council of Nicaea, according to the *Vita Constantini*, strictly rejected a quartadeciman orientation towards the Jewish Passover practice. This consistent attitude towards Jewish customs also corresponds to Eusebius' other position on Judaism.<sup>62</sup> It is possible that he did not describe this important gathering in his church history precisely because of the broad opening to Jewish customs in the «Apostles' Decree». If he explicitly referred to the «Apostles' Council» or the «Apostles' Decree» elsewhere, he did so at least in a rather unconventional way: in the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, Eusebius used the Apostles' Decree in a not entirely unobjectionable way as proof that the Law of Moses could not bind the Gentiles.<sup>63</sup> The

<sup>59</sup> Eus. V.C. III 18.4 (FC 83, 334 Schneider).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Eus., V.C. III 18,2 (FC 83, 332 Schneider).

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Jens Schröter, «Lukas als Historiograph», in *Die antike Historiographie und die Anfänge der christlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 129 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 253.

<sup>62</sup> On Eusebius's relationship to Judaism, see Jörg Ulrich, *Eusebius von Caesarea und die Juden*, Patristische Texte und Studien 49, (De Gruyter, 1999): 239–246, in which Ulrich argues that Eusebius was very close to the imperial attitude towards Judaism, especially in his depiction of the Council. As Pontifex Maximus, the emperor probably did not pursue such a harsh policy against the Jews. At least, there is no clear evidence of this in other sources.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* I 3,42. However, Eusebius was by no means alone in this interpretation, cf. the further evidence in Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Acts



selective depiction of the Council of Nicaea in the *Vita Constantini* can be understood in a similar sense as a correction of account of the early Christian assembly, which is admittedly not mentioned here. According to divine will,<sup>64</sup> they had set themselves apart from the «habits of very wicked men»,<sup>65</sup> from the customs of Judaism. Similar to the «Council of the Apostles», however, according to Eusebius' account, Nicaea was also only concerned with such customs. This would place the Council of Nicaea in Eusebius' account in the tradition of the Acts of the Apostles, at least in terms of its localisation in the overall corpus and its thematic focus on Jewish customs. In terms of content, Eusebius makes an indirect correction through such intertextuality by now thematising a clear demarcation from Judaism. By characterising the Council Fathers as a reflection of the apostolic group and having Constantine describe himself as their co-servant in the cited document, Eusebius once again places the emperor in a quasi-apostolic function.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

It has become clear that Eusebius presented the events and results of the Council of Nicaea according to a certain pattern. This also seems to have been influenced by intertextual references to the depiction of the Council of the Apostles in the Acts of the Apostles. Eusebius was therefore not interested in depicting the dogmatic decisions of the Council in the *Vita*. Rather, he was concerned with the organisation of the practice of faith, in particular the timing of Easter. In his account, he strongly rejects the orientation towards a Jewish-influenced quaternary practice with clearly anti-Judaic arguments. He also allegedly refers to an epistle from the emperor or himself. According to Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, the emperor's efforts to achieve

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13–28), Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar V, no. 2 (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Benzinger Verlag/ Neukirchner Verlag, 1986) 90. On the history of the interpretation of the Apostle's Decree, cf. Karl Six, *Das Aposteldekret (Act 15, 28.29): Seine Entstehung und Geltung in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten*, Veröffentlichungen des biblisch-patristischen Seminars Innsbruck 5 (Innsbruck: Rauch, 1912) and Jürgen Wehnert, *Die Reinheit des 'christlichen Gottesvolkes' aus Juden und Heiden*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments, 173 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> The term appears explicitly again in the imperial document, cf. V.C. III 18,5 (FC 83, 334 Schneider). However, Eusebius also sees the council as a work of God, cf. V.C. III 6,2 (FC 83, 316 Schneider).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. again the term in the imperial document, cf. Eus., V.C. III 18,4 (FC 83, 334, Schneider).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Eus., V.C. III 17,2 (FC 83, 330 Schneider). On Constantine's self-designation as a servant, cf. Staats, *Kaiser Konstantin*, 360. Here, however, the emperor refers to himself literally as συνθεράπων ὑμέτερος, not – more commonly “Pauline” – as σύνδουλος.



unity in his empire, in the sense of a homogeneous society, and his emphasis on the unity of the Church and the civil community, primarily had practical consequences, including the exclusion of supposedly non-Christian practices. The lack of presentation of dogmatic decisions is probably also due to the fact that the Council of the Apostles did not discuss dogmatics either, but only customs.

As already mentioned, the *Vita Constantini* received surprisingly little attention. Eusebius was also generally well known to Reformed authors such as John Calvin. The church history of the Bishop of Caesarea was, as Irena Backus has impressively pointed out,<sup>67</sup> clearly and sometimes critically received at least in the work of the Geneva reformer. The *Vita Constantini* was even read by Reformed theologians – Heinrich Bullinger, for example, left numerous marginal notes in it, although these have not yet been systematically analysed.<sup>68</sup> It would be a task for future research to determine whether Eusebius' – one-sided – presentation of the intentions of the Council of Nicaea influenced the concept of the unity of church and civil community in the Reformed area or the treatment of Jewish practices in Reformed Christianity.

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Irena Backus, "Calvin's Judgment of Eusebius of Caesarea. An Analysis", *The Sixth Century Journal* 22 (1991): 419–437.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Silke-Petra Bergjan, "Bullinger und die griechischen Kirchenväter in der konfessionellen Auseinandersetzung", in *Zwingliana* 31 (2004): 133–160, here 141 note 34; 143 note 42. On the edition, translation and reception of late antique church history works in the sixteenth century in general, cf. a. Martin Wallraff, "Die Rezeption der spätantiken Kirchengeschichtswerke im 16. Jahrhundert", in *Auctoritas Patrum II. Neue Beiträge zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Leif Grane et al. (Mainz: von Zabern, 1998) 223–260.

# An Asian Perspective on the Council of Nicaea and the Empire

*J. Jayakiran Sebastian*

Consciously or not, churches channeled dead empires.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The events and legacy of what happened 1700 years ago in Nicaea continue to impact the life and witness of churches all over the world in theological, ecclesial, hermeneutical, sociological, and ecumenical terms even today and it is incumbent on us in the Asian context to engage in an honest and courageous discussion and interrogation of those events. I am keenly aware of the reality that ‘Asia’ itself is a construct and represents the «power of the formulaic» in «a mythic geography» as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writing in a different context strikingly reminds us.<sup>2</sup>

A new book investigates the material remains of the purported place where the Council was held and examines the material remains of what the writer asserts is «the birthplace of Christian theology».<sup>3</sup> While this seems to be an exaggeration

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Kingdoms of this World: How Empires Have Made and Remade Religions* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2024), 77. Much of what follows draws from my keynote address delivered at the first thematic plenary session of the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X), held at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 24<sup>th</sup>–29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, on the theme “Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity- Asian Ecumenical Responses”.

<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 283. She writes about «thinking without nation, space-names as shifters, in a mythic geography, because of the power of the formulaic».

<sup>3</sup> Mark R. Fairchild, *The Underwater Basilica of Nicaea: Archaeology in the Birthplace of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2024).

since one can make the case that Christian theology was born three centuries before Nicaea, there is something to ponder upon here in terms of what I call attempts to formalize Christian teaching and Christian theology seen in Trinitarian terms, recognizing, of course, that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was left open at that time, to be filled in during those years of tumultuous ferment leading up to the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. At the same time, one has to reckon with what is seen as the ‘fall’ of the church given the nexus between the empire and the Church at the Council of Nicaea and beyond. Daniel H. Williams writes: «The fourth century saw that moment in ecclesiastical history when the context and community of Christian faith was radically changed once a Roman emperor adopted its beliefs and lived long enough to enforce politically its way of expressing those beliefs».<sup>4</sup> It is also an obligation on our part to consider and respond to the query as to whether in ‘receiving Nicaea’ «we ought to consider if we also have received and implicitly accepted the narrative of the winners».<sup>5</sup>

I have spent a lot of time and energy in my own work on the early teachers of faith, including in my published doctoral dissertation on the baptismal controversy in Cyprian of Carthage,<sup>6</sup> developing the principle of «reaching back in order to move forward», and also on ways of «enlivening the past», which forms the title of my other book, the subtitle of which is ‘An Asian Theologian’s Engagement with the Early Teachers of Faith’.<sup>7</sup> I concluded the book with these words «[r]eaching back in order to move forward would imply that one needs to problematize the present and in so doing one needs to understand and represent the past in order to shape the future».<sup>8</sup>

All this leads us to ask about the role of the past in the present including in terms of our desire for unity – unity in mission, unity in witness<sup>9</sup> – to ask about the

<sup>4</sup> Daniel H. Williams, “Constantine, Nicaea, and the ‘Fall’ of the Church,” in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, eds. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London: Routledge, 1998), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Young Richard Kim, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 8.

<sup>6</sup> J. Jayakiran Sebastian, “... baptisma unum in sancta ecclesia ...”: *A Theological Appraisal of the Baptismal Controversy in the Work and Writings of Cyprian of Carthage* (Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek/ Delhi: ISPCK, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> J. Jayakiran Sebastian, *Enlivening the Past: An Asian Theologian’s Engagement with the Early Teachers of Faith* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian, *Enlivening the Past*, 176.

<sup>9</sup> See my “Revitalizing the Fading Ecumenical Memory and Reenergizing the Promise of our Ecumenical Future: Can Ecumenism be Taught?” in *The Whole Is Greater Than Its Parts: Encountering the Interreligious and Ecumenical Other in the Age of Pope Francis*, eds. Peter Casarella and Gabriel Said Reynolds (New York: The Crossroad Publishing

construction of the past in the present, including the reality of past theological controversies and debates in the life of Asian Christians and indeed in Asia itself. The Bulgarian winner of the International Booker Prize 2023 for his novel *Time Shelter*, Georgi Gospodinov, in looking at the past wrote:

Does the past disintegrate, or does it remain practically unchanged like plastic bags, slowly and deeply poisoning everything around itself? Shouldn't there be factories for recycling the past somewhere? Can you make anything else out of past beside past? Could it be recycled in reverse into some kind of future, albeit secondhand? Now these are some questions for you.<sup>10</sup>

Among the issues that we Asian theologians need to consider is the question about whether Nicaea should in any way determine our own theological quest, a rather odd question to ask one may say, since the purpose of this book, of which this forms a chapter, is to commemorate Nicaea! How do we respond to the point made by a formidable patristics scholar of a previous generation, Robert Grant, who wrote about the need to «free ourselves from the belief that either Nicaea or Chalcedon was predestined?»<sup>11</sup> Not all churches found in Asia have bound their theology inextricably to Nicaea. The reality is that churches in Asia diverge on post-Nicaean developments, including the events leading up to and beyond the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451,<sup>12</sup> and the emergence of the *filioque* clause in Western Latin theology, that have intensely engaged ecumenical conversations at multiple levels, most recently in the *Common Statement on the Filioque* coming from 'The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church' on May 27, 2024.<sup>13</sup>

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Company/Herder & Herder, 2020), 141–156 and “Estranging the Stranger? Revisions and Re-visioning Ecumenical Missiology,” in Michael Biehl et al., *Witnessing Christ: Contextual and Interconfessional Perspectives on Christology* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020), 63–69.

<sup>10</sup> Georgi Gospodinov, *Time Shelter*, trans. Angela Rodel (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2022), 116.

<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Jesus After the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 14. As a BD student in the early 1980's at the United Theological College, Bengaluru, I was greatly impacted by his earlier evocative article that enabled me to understand church-state relationships in a new way, “Religion and Politics at the Council at Nicaea,” *The Journal of Religion* 55, (1975): 1–12.

<sup>12</sup> See *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite? Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology*, eds. Paulos Gregorios, William H. Lazareth, Nikos A. Nissiotis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981). One should never forget the brilliant book by V. C. Samuel, *The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined: A Historical and Theological Survey* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, *Common Statement on the Filioque*, July 2024, 1 page, The Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, accessed July 6, 2025,

As we look back at an event that continues to reverberate, directly and indirectly and impacts our identity as Asian Christians today in many different ways, sometimes clearly seen and sometimes more opaquely, we now need to focus on how we, as Asian Christians, wrestle with the Council of Nicaea. I want to offer five ways of dealing with this.

## Nicaea and the History of the Church in Asia

As anyone who has taught or studied Asian Christian theology and the history of the Church in Asia can attest, getting a handle on «what is Asia?» is a herculean task and almost impossible to get a clear answer, even in geographical terms.<sup>14</sup> Some ecumenical international church organizations have bundled up things in talking about «Asia-Pacific», but does this help or complexify matters further? What about «Asia-Atlantic»? Or what about the Asianness of Asia, something that Spivak admits that she has «strained to imagine», pointing out that «it is not a place, yet the name is laden with history and cultural politics».<sup>15</sup> Is there a way of encapsulating that in terms of food, clothes, climate, shared histories, or ethnicity? An attempt to answer this question reveals the absurdity of essentializing ‘Asian-ness’. Yet, here we are, celebrating our diversity and, at the same time, seeing in the faces of one another, not strangers but fellow-sojourners and fellow-explorers of the Nicæan legacy, whether we come from the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, or Pentecostal traditions, or others that are a hybrid of these broad categories, or even fall outside these over-simplified umbrella terms that often do not do justice to the involvedness of our faith-identities within the Christian fold, not to say anything about the reality that many of us personify manifold religious belongings and assorted denominational identities in who we are and from where we come.

As Asian Christians who, for the most part, affirm our baptismal identity as a primary step in our Christian belonging to Christ and to Christ’s church, Nicaea offers us much to think about given that the Roman Emperor Constantine was now

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<https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Lutheran-Orthodox-Joint-Statement-Filioque-EN.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> A valiant attempt was made by the Princeton Theological Seminary historian who was born to missionary parents in what is now North Korea, Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume I – Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), and *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume II – 1500–1900* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 9.

playing the role of imperial patron of the church and in the decade leading up to the Council of Nicaea, it was his «intent to end all arguing about the ‘god-ness’ of Christ» and the wrangling between Arius and those who opposed some of his views didn’t help the imperial desire for theological uniformity and clarity.<sup>16</sup> What all this led to at the Council was «voting about God»<sup>17</sup> by a large group of Eastern bishops, with hardly anyone from the Latin west.

Canon 19 of the Council has a direct reference to the followers of Paul of Samosata, Bishop of the Church of Antioch around AD 260, the «first theologian known to have used the word *homoousios* in Christian discourse»<sup>18</sup> and says «Concerning the Paulianists who have come over to the Catholic Church, the decision is that they must by all means be baptized again [...]».<sup>19</sup> This itself is an outcome of the baptismal controversy that tore the church apart in the middle of the previous century, as exemplified in the writings of Cyprian of Carthage, leading to questions of the ‘boundaries’ of the church only within which it was claimed that the Holy Spirit operated. How then could those judged to be outside claim the efficacy of baptism? Is all this taking us far from our urgent work today as Asian theologians, or is all this underlying our own belief-systems? and if so, why and how? Can we just shrug our shoulders and «move on» or should we put our shoulders to the wheel of Nicaea and play our own part in continuing to unpack those long-ago events and disputes and offer our own perceptive and unique contributions to scholarship, not all of which is abstract but basic to our Asian understandings of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church?

Another important reality that we need to analyze and free ourselves from would be dominant Western approaches to the history of the church that focused on one trajectory post-Nicaea and labeled this dominant trend as being Christologically ‘correct’. Take for example, the reality of the Church of the East, the so-called

<sup>16</sup> For a superb reassessment of the life, work and legacy of Arius see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>18</sup> See the entry “Paul of Samosata” in John McGuckin, *The SCM Press A – Z of Patristic Theology*, 2nd. ed. (London: SCM Press, 2005), 255–256. Also see Andreas Weckwerth, “The Twenty Canons of the Council of Nicaea,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* Young Richard Kim, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 158–176, with the discussion on Paul of Samosata and his followers on 171–172.

<sup>19</sup> Translation in J. Stevenson, ed., revised with additional documents by W. H. C. Frend, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1987), 323.

Nestorian Church, headquartered in Iraq.<sup>20</sup> An influential book dealing with Christological ‘conflicts’ pre-Nicaean, Nicaean, and post-Nicaean lists Nestorianism as part of ‘heresies’ and the book itself is an attempt to «discover orthodoxy».<sup>21</sup> Students of mine in the United States who think that Nestorianism is some kind of ancient ‘heresy’ that has vanished are intrigued when I tell them that I have visited the headquarters of the alleged Nestorian Church in India, in Trissur, Kerala, and that the Metropolitan of the Chaldean Syrian Church of the East<sup>22</sup>, Mar Aprem,<sup>23</sup> not only studied at the United Theological College in Bengaluru, but had been the President of the Church History Association of India for several years!

We have to recognize that the post-Nicaean developments did not live up to the Emperor Constantine’s expectations that theological and ecclesial divisions would cease once the Nicaean formula was more or less agreed upon in AD 325.

Constantine’s efforts to consolidate orthodoxy had resulted in the shocked recognition that the notionally united *catholica* in fact encompassed many local variations in practice, discipline, belief, and doctrine. [...] Creeds as consensus documents served as occasions for further fracturing. Coercive measures, at imperial initiative, soon followed.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For the vicissitudes that the church faced and faces in Iraq, see the Chapter “The Last Christians,” in Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 139–172.

<sup>21</sup> David E. Wilhite, *The Gospel According to Heretics: Discovering Orthodoxy through Early Christological Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). Chapter 7 is on “Nestorius: Dyoprosopitism” (145–168).

<sup>22</sup> The church is a long-standing member of the National Council of Churches in India – see NCCI Member Churches section, <https://ncci1914.com/member-churches/#toggle-id-5> As part of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, the church is a member of the World Council of Churches – see WCC Member Churches Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East section, <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/holy-apostolic-catholic-assyrian-church-of-the-east> The information there notes that the «Assyrian Church was represented at the Council of Nicea in 325. The Nicene Creed is the universally received faith of the church».

<sup>23</sup> Among his many writings, that include biographies of the leaders of the Church of the East, see Mar Aprem, *The Chaldean Syrian Church in India* (Trichur: Mar Narsai Press, 1977); *The Council of Ephesus 431* (Trichur: Mar Narsai Press, 1978); *The History of the Assyrian Church of the East* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 2003). I note with a deep sense of loss and yet with immense gratitude for his life and contributions, the death of Mar Aprem on July 7, 2025, at the age of 85. See, Asir Ebenezer, “Metropolitan Mar Aprem: An Ecumenical Episcopal Public Witness,” *National Council of Churches in India*, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://ncci1914.com/2025/07/07/metropolitan-mar-aprem-an-ecumenical-episcopal-public-witness/>

<sup>24</sup> See the comments by Paula Fredricksen, *Augustine and the Jews* (New Haven: Yale, 2010), in the Postscript to the Yale Edition, 369, where she is commenting on the «new bloom of rhetoric *contra Iudaeos*».



Given that Christological arguments, issues, and themes became even more polemical following what was supposed to be a ‘consensus’ at the Council of Nicaea, and that the events and councils leading up to the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 were leading to even more fractures within the churches,<sup>25</sup> and recognizing that Chalcedon itself, did not ‘resolve’ all these issues including those of the ‘nature/s’ of Christ and the work of Christ,<sup>26</sup> the persistence of churches and traditions that owe allegiance and theological gratitude to people like Nestorius,<sup>27</sup> is something that the Asian churches have to seriously and systematically reckon with, especially in the way in which church history or the history of the Church in Asia is taught. Recognizing that «far from ending theological debate, Nicaea actually opened whole new battlefronts»,<sup>28</sup> Asian churches are called to examine how the empire played such a major role in doctrine and church administration and recognize how this impacted not only the intricacies of past debates and the parsing of the person and work of Christ,<sup>29</sup> but also more recent developments in the quest and search for

<sup>25</sup> See the comment of the prolific historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), regarding the impact of Nestorius, where he writes about «the time of the Council of Chalcedon, with Nestorius declared a non-person, despite the council’s quiet acceptance of much of his theology [...]». (245).

<sup>26</sup> V. C. Samuel, carries out an erudite and thorough investigation in his *The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined*, including on Syriac, Greek, and Latin terminology, and the challenge is made to recognize that various positions, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, «continue in the living stream of the Church’s doctrinal heritage. Reckoning with their existence we should proceed on their basis to expound the faith meaningfully to our generation», at 302.

<sup>27</sup> See the section on “Nestorius,” in Frances M. Young, with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 288–298, where there is a sincere and sophisticated attempt to disentangle the meanings of *propopon*, *hypostatis*, *ousia*, and *physis*, and it is clarified that given the «ambiguity» of the term *hypostatis* and its use interchangeably with *propopon*, the «prosopic union» thus becomes Nestorius’ attempt to provide a metaphysical account of Christ’s unity of person which did not involve the difficulties of a «natural» of «substantial» union», at 294. Also see the dictionary entry on “Nestorius of Constantinople (c. 381–452)” in John A. McGuckin, *A – Z of Patristic Theology*, second ed. (London: SCM Press, 2005), 237–238, where it is noted that it was «by no means clear» what exactly Nestorius said, given that so many of his writings did not survive or were destroyed, and that the «popular (if inaccurate)» perception was that his was «the doctrine that a man, Jesus, dwelt simultaneously alongside the divine Word in the in the person of Christ», at 238. My question is who are these who held this ‘popular’ perception and how does one ‘unlearn’ the ‘inaccurate’ perceptions of the teachings of Nestorius?

<sup>28</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1500 Years* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 52.

<sup>29</sup> Including such terms as ‘Dyoprosopitism’, the debates at the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Formula of Reunion (433), without forgetting the Council of Chalcedon and those who could not agree with those formulations.



Christological understanding.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, recognizing the power of the empire to ‘exoticize’ the ‘other’, as for example the reality that «India gained a place in Roman minds as the ultimate exotic, a sense consciously expressed in artifacts and historical texts, but also, even more tellingly perhaps, in passing references to a wide variety of texts»,<sup>31</sup> how can the so-called ‘exotic’ strike back at the empire, where the ‘other’ becomes the interlocutor?

## Nicaea and Linguistic Domains

The remarkable African-American scholar, Robert Hood, posed a very poignant question in one of his books, namely, «Must God Remain Greek?»<sup>32</sup> and we need to ask as to what extent the Nicaean creed must remain Greek, even as we consider the implications of language, linguistics, and translation in the shaping of our Christian imagination and our conceptualization of God and Jesus Christ. To what extent is it incumbent upon us to understand the phraseology of the creed in the context, which includes the metaphysical and philosophical terminology used to come up with this compromise formula, and to reckon with the way the creed has ‘travelled’ across time and space and embodied itself in our theological, liturgical, and devotional language, not to say anything about hymnody? Are we still banging our heads together on these and related theological issues just as the Emperor Constantine seeking to bring uniformity to the empire considered the Arian controversy «a nuisance to be removed ahead of the Council» and sought to overcome this «by writing to Alexander of Alexandria and Arius and banging their heads together» as the German academic, Wolfram Kinzig, colourfully puts it?<sup>33</sup> Banging heads together can only result in headaches or worse, so how best can we use the linguistic tools that we as Asian theologians possess, not only in Greek, Latin, and Syriac, but

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the *Common Christological Declaration of Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Mar Dinkha IV, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East*, November 11, 1994, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1994/november/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19941111\\_dichiarazione-cristologica.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1994/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19941111_dichiarazione-cristologica.html) where it is stated that the «controversies of the past led to anathemas, bearing on persons and on formulas. The Lord’s Spirit permits us to understand better today that the divisions brought about in this way were due in large part to misunderstandings».

<sup>31</sup> Grant Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 219.

in the multitude of languages that are either our mother tongues or languages that we have mastered? Can we, Asian Christians, who, as the Indian theologian Stanley Samartha reminds us «are heirs to a double heritage – that of the Bible and that of other scriptures» really function as «a bridge through which the insights of different scriptures might be shared in the larger community»?<sup>34</sup>

Let me give you one example, and that is the phrase «ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ» which in my mother tongue, Kannada, is translated «ತಂದೆಯ ತತ್ವವು ಈತನ ತತ್ವವೂ ಒಂದೇ». What is the linguistic domain of «ತತ್ವ»? The German philologist-missionary from the Basel Mission, Ferdinand Kittel, in his monumental *A Kannada-English Dictionary*, looks at this word and says that it connotes «the state of being that: true state, real state: reality, truth: essential nature: the very essence: the real nature of the human soul as being one and the same with the universal soul». This obviously draws on ancient Hindu philosophy and Kittel also notes this when he points to its provenance in the literary and religious traditions.<sup>35</sup> The well-known Upanishadic formula तत् त्वम् असि, translated as «That thou art» now raises the question as to whether the knowledge of Sanskrit in my own context is needed to unpack the meaning of the Nicaean creed and begs the question as to whether we can engage in God-talk only if we know Sanskrit? Obviously, opinions are sharply divided about the need for mastering the languages of those who were responsible for one's marginalization or using such skills in smashing the power of the oppressors.<sup>36</sup>

## Nicaea and the Marginalized Realities Today

While all may seem esoteric and far-removed from the messy realities of marginalized and suffering people in our own contexts, does Nicaea have anything to do with communities like the one I am most familiar with, the Dalit communities in India, including those who taught me what theology was all about when I served as

<sup>34</sup> S. J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* [1991] 3rd. Indian ed. (New York: Orbis Books/ Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute, 2000), 75.

<sup>35</sup> Rev. F. Kittel, *A Kannada-English Dictionary* (Mangalore: Basel Mission Book and Tract Depository, 1894), 686.

<sup>36</sup> I note that many of the ancient Hindu scriptures contained in the Vedas were edited and translated by that outstanding theologian, Raimundo Panikkar, who embodied hybridity in his own being. See *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari* (Pondicherry: All India Books, 1983 [1977]).

a pastor straight out of theological seminary with five congregations of the Gauribidanur Pastorate of the Karnataka Central Diocese of the Church of South India, from mid-1984 to mid-1986?

Drawing on what I experienced, in an essay on the methodology of Dalit theology, one of the things that I stressed was that

the traditional understanding/s of religion, religious practices, the (why) of conversion, religious (objects), the instrumentality of worship and the liturgy, the importance given to the mediation of priests and those believed to have access to the numinous, have to be investigated using methodological tools that recognize that so-called academic (respectable) modes of inquiry not only have serious in-built shortcomings and overt and covert (prejudices), but that such modes of inquiry are deliberately skewed against the knowledge-praxis of the modes of inquiry of those marginalized communities, whose very marginalization was actively promoted by such (scholarship).<sup>37</sup>

As theologians and public faith practitioners in this context of religious pluralism, most notably explored by Stanley Samartha,<sup>38</sup> and economic disparities, all impacted massively by new ways of interconnectedness and interdependence, where a small handheld device can contain worlds within worlds, where everything I say can be checked or questioned, responded to or disparaged in real time, I'm wondering what a revised Asian theology of liberation would look like, without undermining the importance of the work by Aloysius Pieris, who reminded us that «contemplation and action can be vitiated by self-seeking, by a veiled refusal to drink of the chalice of Christ or to undergo the baptism of the cross».<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> “‘Can We Now Bypass That Truth?’ – Interrogating the Methodology of Dalit Theology,” in *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, 25, no. 2–3 (April/July 2008): 88. [This article has also been published in *Revisiting and Resignifying Methodology for Dalit Theology*, ed. James Massey and Indukur John Mohan Razu (Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies/ Bangalore: United Theological College, 2008), 93–115; *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research* 29, no. 13: 1 (Jan–June 2009): 75–83; David Emmanuel Singh and Bernard C. Farr, eds., *Christianity and Education: Shaping Christian Thinking in Context*, Regnum Studies in Global Christianity (Oxford: Regnum International, 2011), 263–275; and in *Archivio Teologico Torinese* 18, no. 2 (2012): 225–239.

<sup>38</sup> Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions*.

<sup>39</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 8.

## Nicaea and the Future of the Church

It is fascinating that even as we talk about Nicaea and its legacy, we are also bound by the reality that we as a people claim to be those who are gathered into believing communities as a consequence of the person and work of Christ and assert that our foundational documents are found in the Bible. It is in the same century that saw the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople that the books of the New Testament gradually come to gain ascendancy in various communities through complex processes, resulting in what is called the ‘canonization’ of Scripture. This has implications for Asian Christian theology and also for the ongoing process of Biblical studies and interpretation, a task in which Asian scholars have excelled. We would do well to take the admonition of R. S. Sugirtharajah seriously when he writes that the

often complacent claim of Asians and others that their interpretations are an ‘alternative discourse’ may send a wrong signal. Such an assertion takes for granted a persisting and undisturbed preeminence of Western interpretation without making a serious and significant dent in it. It makes more sense to speak of a ‘coterminous’ rather than merely an ‘alternative’ or ‘derivative’ discourse, with the same scope and range of meanings as the dominant Western scholarship.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to the Bible, we continue to wrestle with what Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon call «Bible blindspots». They invite us to «reassess how and what we read in the bible, as well as how and why we see the bible as authoritative».<sup>41</sup> The range of creative interpretative writings, including from Asia, brought together by these scholars, and also by Kwok Pui-lan and R. S. Sugirtharajah, are impressive and eye-opening. In one such collection that brings together «Third World and indigenous scholars and theologians», Kwok Pui-lan writes about how the collection «testifies to the strength of their Christian faith and the resilience of the human spirit. Their words and actions offer us a rare gift – hope abundant».<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Asia: From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 262–263.

<sup>41</sup> Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, “Spotlighting the Bible’s Blind(ing) Spots, in *Bible Blindspots: Dispersion and Othering*, eds., Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 14, where they also point out that in «response to the global events of Covid-19, climate change and #BLM, reading for dispersed and othered bodies is unfinished business».

<sup>42</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, “Introduction,” in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology* ed. Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 13.

## Nicaea and Life Together as Churches in Asia

In talking about the imperatives today for Asian Christians, Sugirtharajah pointedly states that the «crucial hermeneutical question is not what the historical Jesus looked like but what he means for Asia today».<sup>43</sup> As we pay attention to the ‘echoes of Nicaea’ the theological and ecclesial priorities for us today include allowing the convictions of that time to continue to permeate our life together even as we pursue the ecumenical dream of embracing unity. These priorities include:

1. recognizing how Nicaea named Mary in the creed and linked her with the Holy Spirit in terms of the incarnation of Jesus and asking ourselves how we have dealt with tokenization, mansplaining, leadership realities, not least in liturgical and ecclesial functions, the consequences of the feminization of poverty, family displacement and forcible separation, the impact of migration on women and girls, the use of mass media and social media to objectify women. Given that women are invisible in the Council itself in terms of participants and in the historical reports, how best can this fleeting mention of Mary serve today as a challenge and opportunity to those of us coming from a variety and range of churches, traditions and denominations, to magnify and affirm the parity of human beings in every aspect of our existence as religious beings? What does this mean in terms of recognizing Jesus, born of Mary as «the crucified people»<sup>44</sup> in Asian testimonies and affirmations and lamentations, faced as we are with the challenges of what Kuan-Hsing Chen points out in talking about «the formulation of Asia as method» also involving «an attempt to move forward on the tripartite problematic of decolonization, deimperialization, and de-cold war»?<sup>45</sup>
2. recognizing how Nicaea named Pontius Pilate in the creed and linked him to Jesus’ crucifixion and asking ourselves as to how we deal with the persistence of evil in our political, economic, social, cultural, interpretative, and ecclesial structures and systems? To what extent have we been conforming to the world and not seeking to actively transform it? What would

<sup>43</sup> In his “Prologue and Perspective” to *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: SCM Press, 1993), x.

<sup>44</sup> C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 212.

transformation look like when it comes to realities like status, position, prestige, pomp, power, and the attribution of value? How do we understand the words in the creed about suffering and being buried and rising and coming again? Have we been faithful to how all these are interconnected? Who is the one whom we await if not the suffering and dying one, the one who «sits on the right hand of the Father», the one who will «come again in glory», glory that bears within it the horror of the cross and the evil intentions of those who would seek to crush the one who «came down from heaven» for us and for «our salvation»?

3. recognizing how Nicaea affirms God's creation as including things «visible and invisible» asking ourselves about our place in the immensity of the macro and the invisibility of the micro. If anything, the Covid 19 pandemic<sup>46</sup> has forced us to confront the unexpected but always present reality of death, which is characterized as «the most absolute of absolutes» which «is, in fact, a relative balance between the forces of decay and rejuvenation».<sup>47</sup> How do we practice a theology of humility given that the God of all creation is also the one who «for us and for our salvation came down from the heavens»? Have we affirmed an anthropology of human-centric triumphalism, and if so, what does it take to recognize the challenge of the creed to «put us in place» so to speak within the world of nature and all that God has made?
4. recognizing how Nicaea affirms God's reign as not having an «end» (τέλος) what then are we commemorating now? Not 1700 years as having an end in the churches, denominations, and traditions that we embody and represent, but a dynamic end calling us to revisit and reenergize and revitalize the Nicæan creed, a creed that offers us a vision of enduring and dynamic faith and of unity that can be embraced. Together we can use our histories, theologies, liturgies, ecclesial structures, human ingenuity, as well as the faith-commitments of the religions and religious

<sup>46</sup> See my «The Twenty Seventh M. A. Thomas Memorial Lecture (2020): Ecumenism and the Pandemic: Seven Challenges and Seven Opportunities Today,” in *Rev. Dr. M. A. Thomas' Memorial Lectures – Twenty Seven Years of Lectures on the Founder of the Ecumenical Christian Centre, 1993–2020*, ed. Mathew Chandrankunnel, (Bangalore: Ecumenical Christian Centre Publications, 2021), 381–394. Also published with a different Introduction as “The Promise of the Single Contralto,” in *Quilling our Visions, Weaving our Dreams: A Festschrift to Rini Ralte*, ed. Vinod Victor (Delhi: ISPCK, 2021), 16–27.

<sup>47</sup> Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Song of The Cell: An Exploration of Medicine and the New Human* (New York: Scribner, 2022), 348.

quests of our neighbours, whether they be antagonistic or affirming of our own faith-journeys, all fragments gathered up and offered as our ecumenical response to the perfect completeness of God, who draws us into the life of the world to come.

# Creed and Empire: Christian Empires Persecuting Christians

*Kathleen M. Griffin*

Christians have persecuted Christians since the fourth century. These violent persecutions were the outcome of significant historical events in church history namely, the Council of Nicaea, the Reformations of the sixteenth century, and the European ‘Christian’ imperial expansion since the late fifteenth century. Christians persecuting Christians continues even today. Religious violence within Christianity was normalized and needs to become denaturalized. John Calvin himself, and the Geneva over which he ministered, was not exempt from this religious violence. The editorial team of this present volume suggested that we use Calvin’s ‘test’ for determining the authority of the decisions of councils. In this essay, I will argue that Calvin’s ‘test’ did not consider the violence of the outcomes of a council’s decisions:

Whenever the decree of a council is produced, the first thing I would wish to be done is to examine at what time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it: next I would bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture. And this I would do in such a way that the decision of the council should have its weight and be regarded in the light of a prior judgment, yet not to prevent the application of the test which I have mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

By using Calvin’s own ‘test’, the purpose of this contribution is to suggest that, the martyrdom of Miguel Servet at the stake in Geneva in AD 1553 was the consequence of Calvin not being able to observe his own methodology in considering the decrees, especially the Canons of the Council of Nicaea.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, trans. Ford L. Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.9.8.



This essay will incorporate two historical moments: First the context of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, and second, the «standard of Scripture» in western Europe at the time of Calvin's reformation work. First we will examine the «time [the Council of Nicaea] was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it». This includes a study of the political, legal, and religious conditions that gave shape to the Symbol of Faith and the Canons that were adopted by the Council and the Emperor Constantine's own application of imperial religious laws to the various Christian groups in the Empire. We will offer a brief discussion of how Canon Law, based on the Theodosian and Justinian Codes which included many of Constantine's own policies, influenced western Europe even to the Renaissance and Reformation period, and especially in the newly established Hispanic Empire in the late fifteenth century. Then we will «bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture» through Servet's reading of Scripture in his *Restitución del Cristianismo*.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, we will challenge the absolute authority of the decrees of the Council of Nicaea, something that Calvin was not able to do despite his own declared standard for measuring a council's authority. Many Christians, in the Radical Reformation challenged the Council of Nicaea, including Servet himself, and were executed as a result.<sup>3</sup> It is a shameful historical fact that Christians persecuted Christians.

## The Emperor Constantine

Constantine's religious policies were aimed at unifying Christianity as a symbolic means of unifying the Empire's subjects and territories in those regions where Christianity had grown the most in previous centuries. The imperial policies were aimed primarily at eradicating dissent rather than to assert doctrinal orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Constantine himself was philosophically more attracted to the Arian understanding of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> However he was willing to accept the Council's decision as long as it unified and homogenized Christianity within the confines

<sup>2</sup> Miguel Servet, *La Restitución del cristianismo*, vol. 5 of *Obras Completas*, trans. Angel Alcalá (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The classic and encyclopedic study of the Radical Reformation that still holds weight is George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> Mar Marcos, "Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano (s. IV y V)," *Iluminada. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones Anejos XI* (2004): 51–68, accessed via Dialnet.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Maraval, "La religion de Constantin," *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 22 (2013): 17–36, accessed via Academia.edu.

of the Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup> In this section, first we will examine Constantine's political motivations in convoking the Council at Nicaea, in implementing the Profession of Faith as imperial religious policy, and then reverting the Council's theological decision while maintaining the points of order defined in the Canons produced at the Council. Then we will examine Constantine's own religious and philosophical inclinations. We will also examine the development of Canon Law, which began with Constantine and then was first codified by Theodosius II and a century later, by Justinian, based on the legal developments made by Constantine and Theodosius I. These three explorations will help us to understand the imperial intentions behind the calling of the Council at Nicaea was called and the ways in which its decisions impacted the Roman Empire in the short-term and in the long-term in western Europe and beyond.

## Constantine's Political Motivations

Constantine rose to the imperial purple through devious, treacherous, and illegal means. Imperial law, as promulgated by the Emperor Dioclecian, had divided the Empire into a Tetrarchy with two senior Augusti and two junior Caesars. According to Dioclecian's law, when one of the Augusti died or retired from public service, his Caesar was elevated to the status of Augustus, then a new Caesar was nominated whose nomination had to be ratified by the senate. Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, was Caesar under the Augustus Maximinian. When Constantius Chlorus died, the soldiers in his army immediately declared that Constantine be Augustus of the west. Constantine accepted his soldiers' acclaim and, as an expert military general, led his army to defeat other imperial armies. In less than twenty years, he made and broke treaties with the other members of the Tetrarchy, waged war against them, and even resorted to murder to eliminate the competition.<sup>7</sup>

Constantine desired total control and authority over the Empire, and had the support of a powerful army, but had to devise new means to promote unity

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<sup>6</sup> I have discussed many of these ideas in Kathleen M. Griffin, "Creed, Sword and Empire: Why did the Emperor Constantine Convoke the Council of Nicaea?," keynote presentation at *Towards Nicaea: Exploring the Council's Ecumenical Significance Today*. Ecumenical Institute at the Château Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland, November 5, 2024. Publication forthcoming by the World Council of Churches.

<sup>7</sup> See Hans A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *Lancaster Pamphlets in Ancient History* (New York: Routledge, 2004), especially chap. 3, "Constantine's Rise to Power," 13–21.

and security in the vast, diverse, and unstable empire. Despite the depiction of a pious Constantine in the Christian eulogies written by Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius, Constantine was a ruthless, despotic, and totalitarian ruler. It is important to understand the political motivations of the authors of these eulogies, and the totalitarian demands of the emperor.<sup>8</sup> The political theology of Eusebius of Caesarea has been amply studied and his views of the person and religious policies of Constantine have been questioned.<sup>9</sup>

## Roman Religious Policy

Religion had always been a means of symbolic control and unity since the earliest days of the City of Rome. In this, Constantine only varied slightly in his policies.<sup>10</sup> There had always been an official Roman religion that had helped bind the Roman peoples together in an alliance. As the city expanded and became a Republic, and later an Empire, the religious policy tended to be that the peoples who were incorporated into or conquered by Rome were free to practice their traditional religions, as long as they *also* observed the worship of the Roman pantheon, and prayed and sacrificed to their own gods and goddesses for the well-being of the City/Republic/Empire and her leaders. As such, slowly, the Roman pantheon grew and expanded.<sup>11</sup> Mar Marcos explains that for the Romans and their conquered peoples, religion was a part of public policy: «Religious rites constitute an essential part of public life, while at the same time, all political activity has a religious dimension».<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Esteban Moreno Resano, “El elogio del emperador Constantino en la literatura cristiana de su época,” *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 22 (2013): 83–109, accessed via Academia.edu.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Moreno Resano, “El elogio del emperador Constantino,” see also: Francisco Javier Cortés, “La legitimación cristiana de la dinastía constantiniana: la teología política de Eusebio de Cesárea” *Palabra y Razón* 14 (December 2018): 83–99; Almudena Alba López, “Historiografía sobre el Concilio de Nicea: El Concilio de Nicea a la luz de sus historiadores” *Anuario Historia de la Iglesia* 32 (2023): 19–48; and others. In English, see the comparative study of Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* and Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii* in Averil Cameron, “Form and Meaning: the *Vita Constantini* and the *Vita Antonii*” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, eds. Tomas Hägg, Philip Rousseau and Christian Høgel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> See my discussion in Griffin, “Creed, Sword and Empire” and also Marcos, “Ley y Religión.”

<sup>11</sup> John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003); and Rüpke, Jörg. *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano,” 52. Translation by the author.

The peace of the Empire and its leaders and populations depended on the *pax deorum*, that is, the peace the gods would grant to the Empire in exchange for the public devotion rendered to them. The author continues to argue that this idea of public religion and the religiosity of public policy remained constant during the transition from a polytheistic empire to a Christian empire. The correct public devotion rendered to the Christ-God was necessary to ensure the peace that this god would grant to the Empire.

The path towards monotheism in the Roman Empire was not immediate. According to Halsberghe, in the mid-third century, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius adopted and adapted the Persian worship of Mithra to the worship of Apollos, making the Roman *Sol Invictus* a required, monotheistic, empire-wide cult. The emperor was this divinity's son, earthly representative, and *Pontifex Maximus*, and had to be worshipped as such. The *Sol Invictus* was not exclusively monotheistic, as the various sects of Judaism and Christianity were at that time. Although the Roman armies now, obligatorily, had to observe the worship of the *Sol Invictus*, many also worshipped Jupiter, Mars, or other traditional deities. The worship of the *Sol Invictus* continued to be an important part of the Roman religious systems at least until the end of the fourth or early fifth centuries, especially in the western empire, even though this cult was proscribed as an imperial cult by Theodosius I in AD 380 in his Edict of Thessalonica.<sup>13</sup>

In the eastern empire, also in the mid-third century, Plotinus developed a new monotheistic religious philosophy which incorporated a diversity of philosophical strains into what is known as neoplatonism. Plotinus studied in Alexandria and then set up his own school in the City of Rome.<sup>14</sup> This monotheistic neoplatonic philosophy also became a very popular theosophic system by the end of the third century amongst the intellectual elites of the Empire and attracted Constantine in the early fourth century, as we shall see below.<sup>15</sup>

By the time Constantine had eliminated his competition for the imperial throne and had become the sole emperor, he had received the influences of at least three monotheistic religious systems: the *Sol Invictus*, neoplatonic philosophical

<sup>13</sup> Gaston Halsberghe. *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Eric D. Perl, "Introduction" in *PLOTINUS Ennead V.1: On the Three Primary Levels of Reality* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> On the popularity of neoplatonism, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography* 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), see chapters 9 and 10, "The Platonists" and "Philosophy". Brown suggests that Plotinus' system is the first monotheistic systematic theology.

monotheism, and Christianity. Part of the genius of his religious policies lay in creating space for the free worship and practicing of all three religions, so that the ‘Supreme God’ could be worshipped properly, according to each belief system, and thus ensure the *pax deus*.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the Eusebian emphasis on the piety of Constantine’s father,<sup>17</sup> Constantius Chlorus, was a faithful adept of the cult of the *Sol Invictus*. His mother, Helena, was a Christian. In his earliest years, Constantine was exposed to both religious systems. As his experience in the Roman military grew, so also his understanding of the cult of the *Sol Invictus* and its importance in maintaining the cohesion of the army.<sup>18</sup>

According to Hans Pohlsander, Constantine had experience with the eastern armies in the wars against the Persian Empire, and even more experience in his father’s armies in their battles along the northern frontier. The area where he had the least military experience was in Africa.<sup>19</sup> In both Greek and Latin Africa, Christianity had grown and diversified greatly, and had become a resistance movement to imperial occupation amongst the local Coptic and Berber populations.<sup>20</sup>

As an astute and despotic statesman, Constantine wanted to gain and maintain totalitarian control over the entire empire, in all its diversity: cultural, linguistic, social, and more. As such, to maintain the veneration of his armies and subjects in Britania, Gaul, and Hispania, he needed to prove that he was a descendant of the *Sol Invictus* and had a rightful claim to the throne, and he needed to maintain his role as *Pontifex Maximus*. To acquire the respect of the intellectual elites of the eastern Empire, he began to study neoplatonism and became exposed to this philosophical theology. Constantine and Licinius signed the Edict of Milan to gain the trust of the persecuted Christians, thus guaranteeing the freedom of worship of the “Supreme Deity” by “*Christianis et omnibus*.”<sup>21</sup> Constantine promulgated official and legal recognition of Christians, as equals to all other worshippers of the “Supreme Deity.”

<sup>16</sup> Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano.”

<sup>17</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*. I.XII.XIII. trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall. (Oxford: Clarendon Press/ New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), accessed via EBSCOhost.

<sup>18</sup> Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*.

<sup>19</sup> Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*.

<sup>20</sup> See Diana Rocco Tedesco, “Monacato e iglesias étnicas: la expresión religiosa de la división del Imperio,” *Cuadernos de Teología* 23 (2004): 79–88; and “Bajo Imperio: Identidad y religiosidad popular en África del Norte,” *Claroscuro* no. 3 (2003): 45–72.

<sup>21</sup> Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 48.2.4. cited in Marcos, “Ley y religión en el imperio cristiano.”

Pierre Maraval argues that this language about the ‘Supreme Deity’ is vague and multi-vocal in order to include both Christians and neoplatonists.<sup>22</sup> This author argues that Constantine was more inclined towards neoplatonic thought than towards Christianity, and in fact, personally, was more in agreement with Arius’ presentation of the Logos as a lesser god than with the Athanasian insistence on the eternal divinity of the Logos and the Son of God within the Christian Godhead.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar way, Moreno Resano discusses how Constantine’s *epistoli* directed towards the provincial governors of the west, insisted on his continued relationship with the cult of the *Sol Invictus*, although relegating the traditional polytheistic pantheon to a lesser religious order and eliminating the practice of blood sacrifices. On the other hand, his *epistoli* directed towards the provincial governors of the east acclaimed the preeminence of the ‘Supreme Deity’ and required the restoration of Christian places of worship that were destroyed in the persecutions and their return to the Christian communities.<sup>24</sup>

This presentation of the multi-vocality of Constantinian monotheism leads us to ask why he convoked the Council of Nicaea, if he was trying to legislate religious practices and beliefs in such a way as to allow for all to practice peacefully and to guarantee the *pax deus*. His problem in general had to do with those sectors of the Empire’s populations that continued to resist the imperial presence in their territories, those groups who were rebelling against the public order, and public religion, and refused to seek the *pax deus* for the Empire. His primary concern in convoking an empire-wide council of Christian bishops had to do with reining in the influence of schismatic Christian groups: the purist or *cathari* movements around the Empire such as the Donatists, the Melitists, and the Novatians.<sup>25</sup> He was not as concerned about the theological quibbles about the *Logos Dei* that concerned Arius, Pope Alexander of Alexandria, and later, Athanasius, as he was about the general political discord among many Christian groups. This concern is highlighted by the fact that two years after the Council in Nicaea, Arius and the bishops who supported him (especially Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea)

<sup>22</sup> Maraval, “La Religion de Constantin,” *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 22 (2013): 17–36, accessed via Academia.edu.

<sup>23</sup> Maraval, Pierre. “La religion de Constantin.” See also Agustín López Kindler, “El Emperador Constantino y el arianismo,” *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 22 (2013): 37–64.

<sup>24</sup> Esteban Moreno Resano, *Los cultos tradicionales en la política legislativa de Constantino* (Madrid: Dykinson, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, in Richard Miles, ed. *The Donatist Schism: Controversy and Contexts* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

were reinstated, whereas Athanasius, Gregory of Nysa, and other supporters of the Nicene doctrine were sent into exile.<sup>26</sup> The Profession of Faith of Nicaea with its anathema did not remain a part of imperial religious policy.

However, the Canons produced by the Council did remain a part of imperial canonical law and were conserved and included in the Theodosian Code.<sup>27</sup> The majority of the Canons of Nicaea were directed specifically against the *cathari* movements and schismatic bishops and groups who continued to resist imperial demands, even in times of peace.<sup>28</sup>

The insistence of the Christian faith both in persevering against imperial rule and breaking away from imperial Christianity, were resistance movements against the Roman imperial presence in many of the Roman provinces. Thus, with the legalization of Christianity as an imperial religion, the Constantinian Empire sought to receive ‘orthodox’ and ‘catholic’ Christianity and reject ‘unorthodox’ and ‘schismatic’ forms of Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

It must be made clear that the Roman Empire did not become a Nicene Christian Empire under Constantine, as he continued to officiate as the *Pontifex Maximus* in the cult of the *Sol Invictus* and also fomented the philosophical monotheism of neoplatonism. He was baptized by the Arian Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. Constantine’s heirs, Constans, Constantine II, and Constantius II all supported Christianity over other religions, although they did not proscribe other religious expressions, except for those that were schismatic, or anti-imperial. Constans and Constantine II supported Nicene Christianity and Constantius II, who lived the longest and reunited the Empire under his sole command, was Arian or Homoian Christian.<sup>30</sup> All three maintained the same understanding that religion

<sup>26</sup> López Kindler, “El Emperador Constantino y el arianismo.”

<sup>27</sup> Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano.”

<sup>28</sup> The Canons of the Council of Nicaea can be found in William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). On the continued activity of Christian resistance to the Empire at the time of Constantine, see for example, Diana Rocco Tedesco, “Monacato e iglesias étnicas: la expresión religiosa de la división del Imperio.” *Cuadernos de Teología* 23 (2004): 79–88; and Rocco Tedesco, “Bajo Imperio: Identidad y religiosidad popular en África del Norte.” *Claroscuro* no. 3 (2003): 45–72.

<sup>29</sup> See my discussion in Griffin, “Creed, Sword and Empire.”

<sup>30</sup> Homoianism is related to Arianism, but not necessarily the same. The term refers to the variety of christological theologies that postulate that the Logos is *similar* in nature to God, but not the *same* nature, as the Nicene Creed insists. See Cédrik Michel, “Homoian Christianity amongst Visigoths, Also Known as ‘Arianism in the Visigothic Kingdom’, ‘Homoianism amongst Visigoths,’” *Database of Religious History (DRH)*, last modified March 19, 2023, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubccommunityandpartnerspublicati/52387/items/1.0438219>.

was a public concern and that all public concerns had a religious dimension.<sup>31</sup> After AD 361, with the death of both of the Nicene emperors, Constantius II began to persecute the Nicene Christians. Before the deaths of his brothers, all three continued to persecute schismatic Christian groups, such as the Donatists, the Novatians, and the Melitists. Constantius II did not, however, outlaw the traditional Roman pantheon nor the cult of the *Sol Invictus*. His successor, Theodosius I, in AD 380, outlawed all religious expressions that were not Nicene Christian. After Theodosius, all the emperors and their wives in the Byzantine Empire confessed one kind of Christianity or another, with the well-known exception of Julian, known by Christians as ‘the Apostate’. The western Roman Empire dissolved rapidly under the massive migrations of the mostly Homoian Christian Germanic Tribes after AD 405 during the reign of Honorius.

## The Development of Canon Law

One of the effects of the Theodosian Empire, in addition to the proscription of all religious groups other than the Nicene Christians, was the establishment of Canon Law throughout the Empire. The general, imperial laws established by Constantine, including the Canons of the Council of Nicaea, were incorporated into the Theodosian legal system and then codified by Theodosius II in AD 429 as the Theodosian Code (ThC). These fourteen volumes are based primarily on the general imperial laws established by Constantine and Theodosius I.<sup>32</sup>

Mar Marcos observes that the ThC concludes its volumes with a final volume on religious law. He refers to the argument of J. Matthews, *Laying Down the Law. A Study of the Theodosian Code*, indicating that the final volume “was conceived as the culmination of the Code, the moment in which the ideology and heritage of Constantine's Christian Empire were laid out for all to contemplate.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Marcos observes that the Justinian Code, which is the Roman Legal Code that was most commonly disseminated during the construction of Europe in the sixth

<sup>31</sup> Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano.”

<sup>32</sup> Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano.”

<sup>33</sup> J. Matthews, *Laying Down the Law. A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Cited in Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano” 58. We have already argued that the Empire did not actually become Christian under Constantine. However, the Theodosian Code was compiled when the Empire was officially and solely Christian.



through twelfth centuries, the order of the volumes is reversed. The first volume of the legal codes assembled by the Emperor Justinian in AD 529 includes the imperial policies and laws concerning religion. Again, referring to Matthews, Marcos insists that in “the JC, there is no doubt about the ideological significance of this change in the organization of the text: the authority of God is placed before that of the emperors. In the ThC, however, the sources and the authority of law come first because they, and not religion, were still the most important.”<sup>34</sup> Imperial law now supported a homogeneous Christianity and outlawed all forms of heterodox beliefs to ensure divine approval of and care for the Empire.

The result of this early legislation referring to the implementation of Christianity in the late Empire, starting with the Canons of the Council of Nicaea and the presence of anathemae in the Profession of Faith produced by this council, led to increased prejudice and persecution amongst the diverse expressions of Christianity in the Roman Empire. María Victoria Escribano Paño argues that Constantine’s ‘Edict against the heretics’ in AD 313 (against the Donatists) was the first imperial normative that attempted to create a legal definition of heresy.<sup>35</sup> In this normative, the Donatists were characterized as immoral, deranged, and dangerous. This was a provincial normative, and not an empire-wide policy. The Council of Nicaea was determinant in the configuration of general imperial religious law, and is based on the previous normative against the Donatists. Elsewhere, the same author discusses the effects of the legislative discourse of Theodosius, which produced terror, regret, and denunciation amongst the followers of heterodox and illicit religious groups.<sup>36</sup> Again, we can see how the *pax deus* continued to be an important part of imperial religious policy. Divine approval of the Empire’s policies and laws and the granting of divine peace through these, was more important than personal faith, according to the imperial religious legislation that can be studied. The case of the legal and military violence against the Donatists has been amply studied.<sup>37</sup> The

<sup>34</sup> Marcos, “Ley y Religión en el Imperio Cristiano,” 59. Translation by the author.

<sup>35</sup> María Victoria Escribano Paño, “El edicto de Constantino contra los heréticos: la desviación religiosa como categoría legal” in *Constantino, ¿el primer emperador cristiano? Religión y política en el siglo IV*, ed. Josep Vilella Masana (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2012), 377–392.

<sup>36</sup> María Victoria Escribano Paño, “La intolerancia religiosa en el discurso legislativo de Teodosio I y sus efectos: terror, arrepentimiento y delación” in *Tolleranza religiosa in età tardoantica (IV-V secolo): Atti delle Giornate di studio sull’età tardoantica, Roma, 26–27 maggio 2013*, ed. Arnoldo Marcone, Umberto Roberto and Ignazio Tantillo (Cassino: Università di Cassino, 2014), 97–134.

<sup>37</sup> See, as only one example amongst many, the collection of essays in Richard Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism. Controversy and Contexts*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

violent persecution against the Donatist Christians increased during the time of Augustine of Hippo and the Emperors Theodosius and Honorius.<sup>38</sup>

Some concluding observations in this first part of the essay suggest that the inclusion of Christianity, in one form or another, as an imperial religion, and then eventually as *the* imperial religion indicate that the theological positions that the emperors officially supported varied substantially from emperor to emperor. The imperial interest in Christianity was the consecration of the *pax deus*, divine approval, and protection of the Empire. The theologies came and went, but Canon Law remained and continued in the same vein. The increasing emphasis on Canon Law and its codification created social tension and even violence amongst Christians of various faith and political persuasions. The persecution of illicit Christian groups by licit Christian groups increased. Whether the emperors themselves became serious followers of Jesus of Nazareth is questionable. They were certainly interested in eliminating Christian and other religious movements that resisted imperial control. The short-term impact of the Council of Nicaea was legal rather than theological and led to the persecution of Christians (and others) by Christians.

## Canon Law in the Construction of Europe

This legal emphasis in the Christian religion contrasts markedly with the precepts advanced by the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers and their emphasis on faith over works. This essay seeks to understand how the Canons of Nicaea and Canon Law in general as codified by Theodosius II and Justinian informed the formation of western European Christianity, thus leading to the same consequence of the persecution of Christians by Christians, even in Calvin's Geneva, as the case of Miguel Servet shows.

In spite of his humanist training and the emphasis he apparently placed on understanding the historical context of the creeds, Calvin was more clearly influenced by the need to defend the supposed theological truth of the Creed. Servet also trained in biblical humanism, on the other hand, was able to provide arguments from Scripture to counter the theology of the 'sophists' presented in the

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<sup>38</sup> Noel Linsky, "Imperial Legislation and the Donatist Controversy: From Constantine to Honorius," in *The Donatist Controversy. Controversy and Contexts*, ed. Richard Miles (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 166–219.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.<sup>39</sup> His theological arguments made him an enemy of Calvin and led to his death at the stake in Geneva.

The early benedictine monasteries that expanded throughout western Europe did not only dedicate the work of their *scriptorium* to the copying of biblical texts and theological treatises. They also conserved, multiplied, and disseminated copies of the Theodosian and Justinian Codes.<sup>40</sup> One of the reasons the Frankish kingdom under Clovis (c. AD 466–511) became so powerful was the great degree of internal organization promoted by his consort, Clotilde of Burgundy (c. AD 474–545). Soon after arriving at the court of Clovis, she contacted the Nicene Bishop of Rheims. Through the bishop, she was able to study Canon Law and thus provide a stronger legal and institutional organization of the kingdom. Gregory of Tours claims that the King converted to Nicene Christianity because of the «wisdom» of his wife.<sup>41</sup> She was an able stateswoman, maintaining the peace at court, creating an educational system, and fomenting learning and order in general, according to the Theodosian sense of putting the law to the service of religion. Later under Charlemagne of the Franks in 800, with the religious backing of the Bishop of Rome, and the legal expansion of Nicene Christianity as the religion of the new Holy Roman Germanic Empire, the same idea of religion as a public concern by which all policy was directed towards the procurement of divine approval, salvation, and the *pax deus*, became a part of the warp and woof of western Europe.

The office of the Inquisition was established in AD 1171. Thereafter, the Roman Catholic religious hierarchies and the royal and noble temporal hierarchies combined efforts to ensure the “orthodoxy” of the various religious groups that came and went. This was also to ensure the continued procurement – ideally – of the *pax deus*, or the salvation of the peoples, in spite of the increased squabbling and wars amongst the

<sup>39</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*. Servet constantly refers to the “sofistas” in his polemic against Nicene and Hellenist Christianity in this work. He decries Athanasius and other early defendants of the Nicene Creed as tritheists, 58–59.

<sup>40</sup> See for example in Edgar Bodenheimer, “The Influence of Roman Law on Early Medieval Culture,” *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review* 3 (1979): 9, [https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings\\_international\\_comparative\\_law\\_review/vol3/iss1/2](https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_international_comparative_law_review/vol3/iss1/2); Franz Wieacker, “The Importance of Roman Law for Western Civilization and Western Legal Thought,” *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review* 4 (1981): 257–281, <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/iclr/vol4/iss2/2>; and more recently, Emanuele Conte, “Roman Public Law in the Twelfth Century: Politics, Jurisprudence, and the Reverence for Antiquity,” in *Empire and Legal Thought. Ideas and Institutions from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Edward Cavanagh (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 189–212.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory of Tours, *A history of the Franks in Tradition and Diversity: Christianity in a World Context to 1500*, comp. Karen Louise Jolly (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 192.

kingdoms and between kings and popes. The monasteries and the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy were responsible for praying for the salvation of all, administering the grace of God to all, and educating the temporal hierarchies in the correct understanding of Canon Law – understood now in the Justinian sense as God’s law. In the early sixteenth century, Charles V of the Holy Roman Germanic Empire – also Charles I of Spain – produced a new edition of the Justinian Code, which included an ancient law of Theodosius I that indicated the priestly and imperial duty to execute heretics to keep the holy religion uncontaminated.<sup>42</sup>

## The Exception of the Iberian Peninsula

In the general history of western Europe, there are many regions that provide exceptions to the general historical rule. The Iberian Peninsula is one of these. During the period of the construction of western Europe between the fifth and twelfth centuries, the Iberian Peninsula was *not* a region where the influence of Nicene Christianity and Canon Law were prominent. The visigothic kingdoms from the early fifth century were Homoian Christians. Even after the conversion of Reccared I, King of Toledo, to Nicene Christianity in AD 587, many regions under visigothic control continued to profess Homoian Christianity.<sup>43</sup> The wars between the various visigothic kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula made the Arab Muslim conquest of the peninsula in AD 711 much easier.

From the early eighth century under Arab Muslim rule, in Al-Andalús, the religious interchange amongst peoples “of the Book” was generally peaceful, culturally influential, and highly positive.<sup>44</sup> Hebrew, Greek and Arab letters and philosophy were studied in depth, conversed upon, and debated in a variety of intellectual centers. The study of Latin letters grew with the advance of northern European Christianity and the expansion of the Benedictine monasteries in the mid and late eleventh century along the road to Santiago de Compostela.

With the increased northern European Christian presence in the peninsula, the Arab Muslim influence in Spain decreased.<sup>45</sup> These Andalusian Muslims

<sup>42</sup> Ángel Alcalá, “Introducción,” in *Estudios sobre Miguel Servet (I)* ed. I.E.S. Miguel Servet (Zaragoza: I.E.S. Miguel Servet, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Cédrik Michel, “Homoian Christianity amongst Visigoths.”

<sup>44</sup> Early Islam recognized Christians and Jews as “Peoples of the Book,” monotheists who referred to a book of Holy Scriptures, antecedents to Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.

<sup>45</sup> Manuel Alejandro Rodríguez de la Peña, “Monacato, Caballería y Reconquista: Cluny y la

sought help from Berber Muslims, first, the Almoravid dynasty in AD 1085, and then the Almohad Caliphate in AD 1147.<sup>46</sup> According to Justo González, the Berber Muslims were more concerned with the purity of the observance of the koranic teachings, and less interested in commercial, cultural, theological, and philosophical exchanges with other peoples “of the Book.”<sup>47</sup> The wars between Christians and Muslims increased. With the development of Christian military orders during the Crusades, northern European Christians became more invested in defending the Benedictines and promoting the expansion of the monastic centers in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>48</sup> During this entire period, between the visigothic conquests of AD 405 and the Arab and Berber Muslim Califates, Roman Canon Law was not the rule in the Iberian Peninsula.

Spain became a unified Roman Catholic kingdom under the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel of Castilla and León and Fernando of Aragon, in AD 1592, just a few months before they hired Christopher Columbus to seek a western, maritime route to India. After Columbus first returned from the Island of ‘Hispaniola’ (as he baptized the island), Spanish explorations and conquests of Abya Yala<sup>49</sup> increased, making the Hispanic Empire, under Habsburg rule, the largest Empire in Europe. It was also the empire that used the bloodiest techniques of persecution and torture of any but confirmed, Nicene Christians.

It is important to understand that the process of creating this new Roman Catholic Empire was strongly influenced by Roman Canon Law and the idea of procuring the *pax deus* and the salvation of the peoples under Spanish rule. The Inquisition in Spain has a notorious history. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the persecution of religious non-conformists was brutal and included new Christian movements like the so-called ‘false’ converts from Islam and Judaism, and those groups of Abya Yala who refused to submit to the religion of their imperial conquerors. Those Christians who attempted to rediscover the biblical stories of Jesus of Nazareth and live according to their own understanding of the biblical texts were

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narrativa benedictina de la guerra santa” *Anales de la Universidad de Alicante. Historia Medieval* no. 17 (2011): 183–224.

<sup>46</sup> Justo González, *La Historia del Cristianismo*, 1<sup>st</sup> electronic ed, (Miami: Unilit, 1994), accessed via Academia.edu.

<sup>47</sup> González, *La Historia del Cristianismo*.

<sup>48</sup> Rodríguez de la Peña, “Monacato, Caballería y Reconquista.”

<sup>49</sup> “Abya Yala” is a term that has been adopted from the Guna people of Panama and northern Columbia to refer to what many westerners know as Central and South America. It is a term that resists the notion of empire and colonialism and insists on the dignity of the original peoples who have inhabited these lands for millennia.

persecuted. Freedom of conscience was out of the question.<sup>50</sup> The subjugation to Roman Catholicism under the ‘Catholic Monarchs’ was totalitarian and, in many cases, violent. The contrast in the freedom of religious interchange and respect for general human rights between Muslim Al-Andalus and Roman Catholic Spain is categorical.

## Miguel Servet

The terrors of the role and work of the Spanish Inquisition both in Iberia and in Abya Yala in the sixteenth century has been amply studied. What interests us in this essay is how this formed Miguel Servet. Servet was born in a small town in the mountainous region of northern Aragon in AD 1511. His father was a nobleman in the town and his mother was from a converted Jewish family. Through his mother’s family, Servet learned Hebrew and studied the Hebrew Scriptures. Through his father’s family, he was introduced to Latin letters. His intellectual and emotional intelligence was notable from a very early age.<sup>51</sup> When he was fourteen, his father hired him out as a page and secretary to fray Juan de Quintana, an official of the Spanish Inquisition and primary inquisitor against the Alumbrados.<sup>52</sup> Through his work as secretary, he grew in his understanding of the Latin and Greek languages and in church politics. He also witnessed first-hand the diversity of religious thought in Spain and the violent oppression of the same. Many of the Alumbrados were Christians of Jewish or Muslim origins. Servet’s contact with their teachings through his work as secretary for an official of the inquisition had a deep influence on his later thought. Fray de Quintana was influential in the condemnation and imprisonment of leaders in this group of Alumbrados.

Servet continued this work for three years, after which his father sent him to Toulouse to study law. However, in AD 1530, he was in Basel studying theology under Erasmus and theologians who were close to Lutheranism.<sup>53</sup> One of his first

<sup>50</sup> Laura Adrián Lara, “Miguel Servet y los alumbrados: libertad religiosa e impotencia política” *Hispania Sacra* 70, no. 141 (2018):19–27. <https://doi.org/10.3989/hs.2018.002>.

<sup>51</sup> Ángel Alcalá, “Al encuentro del sabio,” in Miguel Servet. *Los valores de un hereje. Un aragonés universal, que luchó y murió por la libertad de conciencia*, ed. Rafael Bardají Pérez (Zaragoza: Heraldo de Aragón, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Adrián Lara, “Miguel Servet y los alumbrados.”

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Moreno Moreno, “Miguel Servet. Teólogo iluminado” in *Dossier: Miguel Servet, humanista, anatomista y teólogo en tiempos de Reforma*, ed. Eliseo Serrano Martín (Zaragoza: Jerónimo Zurita, 2017), 43–54.

publications, at the age of 20, was a highly controversial questioning of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, *Sobre los errores acerca de la Trinidad*. This publication immediately cost him the enmity of the magisterial reformation. According to Moreno Moreno, «the Protestants did not want the Catholics to think that they approved of a book that questioned the Trinity. Thus, they rushed to condemn and prohibit the book».<sup>54</sup> Since the author announced himself as a native of Aragon, the Spanish Inquisition quickly condemned the book and attacked Servet's family as crypto Jews. When Servet sought refuge in Strasbourg, Calvin confronted him personally and denounced him before the French Inquisition, thus forcing Servet to change his name. At this point, Miguel Servet, now Michel de Villeneuve, decided to leave the study of letters and theology and studied medicine in Paris. He thrived as a medical doctor in France, but his primary interest was always theology. He did not dare to return to his native Aragon, even as a medical doctor, because of the infamy of his early treatise on the Trinity. He finally reworked this first theological treatise into his *Restitución del Cristianismo*, which he published in AD 1553.

The reaction to Servet's mature theological reflection was immediate and virulent. Braving the hatred that Calvin had expressed towards him, Servet chose to seek refuge in Geneva. There were other pastors in Geneva, especially Sébastien Castellio, and the pastors of the churches of Italian and Spanish exiles in Geneva who supported his ideas on the freedom of conscience.<sup>55</sup> Calvin, on the other hand, was warned by Roman Catholic bishops to maintain a strict adherence to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Studies on Miguel Servet indicate that Calvin succumbed to political and legal pressure to adhere as closely as possible to Canon Law, in spite of his theological differences with Roman Catholicism and the role of law in theology.<sup>56</sup> He was, after all, a magistrate and Protestant pastor in a city that was still struggling to gain its independence from the Duchy of Savoie. The need to establish order was categorical. The legal codes that were predominantly available in the sixteenth century were still tied to ancient imperial Canon Law. Therefore, religious deviation in any particular region could not be tolerated. Even though Calvin proposed that religion be defined locally, religious 'Truth' was a necessary condition for social order, even for John Calvin. 'Heresy' and heretics needed to be

<sup>54</sup> Moreno Moreno, "Miguel Servet. Teólogo iluminado" 44. Translation by the author.

<sup>55</sup> On Castellio, see Ferdinand Buisson, *Sébastien Castellion, Sa Vie et Son Oeuvre, 1515-1563: Étude Sur Les Origines Du Protestantisme Libéral Français* (Paris: Hachette, 1892). See also *Sébastien Castellio, De haereticis an sint persequendi* (1554), written as a frontal attack on Calvin and the Genevans after the death of Servet.

<sup>56</sup> Moreno Moreno, "Miguel Servet. Teólogo iluminado."

examined, and if they remained firm in their beliefs, needed to be executed. The same canonical law that the Empire tried to enforce against Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms was applied to Servet in Protestant Geneva.

## Servet on the Trinity

Many authors have considered Servet to be not only an early advocate for the freedom of conscience and the freedom of religious expression, but also one of the founders of Unitarianism. However, a closer reading of the *Restitución del Cristianismo* shows that he was not anti-Trinitarian, even though he was anti-Nicene. The rapid reading that Protestant and Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century made of Servet's theological works led them to make a misinformed accusation of anti-trinitarianism against him.

Servet divides his work into five books. The first three are dedicated to Christology, the fourth to the names and essence of God, and the final to the holy spirit.<sup>57</sup> Servet himself announces the primary argument of this work as such: «On the Divine Trinity. On how in it there is not this illusion of three invisible entities, but rather in the word, the true manifestation of the substance of God and in spirit, God's communication».<sup>58</sup> He rejects as tritheism the traditional teachings about the existence of three, invisible, metaphysical entities that form the Trinity. He insists that «The manifestation of God through the word and his communication through the spirit, both substantially in Christ alone, can only be clearly discerned in him, so that in him, as man, the full divinity of the word and the spirit can be recognized».<sup>59</sup> There is a divine Trinity present in Jesus, as we shall see in what follows.

Servet starts his first book positing three arguments: first, against the 'pharisees', that the man, Jesus, is the Christ; second, against the 'sophists', that this man, who is called the Christ, is the Son of God, a naturally born son, not a metaphysical entity; and third, against the scholastics, only this man, Jesus, the Christ, is God, true God, substantially God.

<sup>57</sup> Servet does not use capital letters to name the holy spirit. I am following his usage.

<sup>58</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 3 of *Obras completas*, trans. Ángel Alcalá (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2006) Translations by the author.

<sup>59</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 5.



In the first place, Servet points out that all of Jesus' contemporaries understood that he was a man. The question that was debated was whether he was the Christ or not. Jesus' disciples insisted that he was, whereas many of the other Jews denied this. No one even considered debating whether Jesus was anything other than a man. In the second place, the 'sophists' insist that this Jesus, the Christ, was eternally the Son of God. Servet argues that God engendered Jesus naturally in Mary, in time. The shadow of God, or the spirit of God enshrouded her and inseminated her naturally, as a human father would inseminate with semen. Servet also argues that God spoke his eternal manifestation to be revealed in the infant that Mary carried in her womb. Thus, the man Jesus is truly and naturally the Son of God and also the son of Mary. As the natural Son of God, he is called God. He is the manifestation of God through God's eternal speech. «He is called God for his power just as he is called man for his flesh».<sup>60</sup> Servet argues that God's word was eternally a part of God, and became man in time. Against the scholastics, Servet argues that God's spirit was eternally with God, and throughout time, inspired humans. Although God anointed many with his spirit, Jesus, the 'anointed'<sup>61</sup> (Christ) was especially anointed with the substance of God through God's spirit, since he was the naturally born Son of God through the spirit and the word of God. No one or thing could be the manifestation of God and the communication of God except for this man, Jesus. Thus, a form of Trinitarian thought emerges: God as the father of Jesus, and in Jesus the manifestation of God's eternal word and the communication of God's eternal spirit. One eternal God who is manifest to and communicates with creation and especially and substantially to and with the man, Jesus.

Throughout this work, Servet insists that there is only one divinity. He insists that «we do not dissect God, nor divide him into parts, as the sophists divide and dissect him. Let us also note that this does not imply any plurality in the Godhead, as appears in the case of the three incorporeal and distinct entities of the Trinitarians».<sup>62</sup> He continually denies «the existence of separate incorporeal entities in God».<sup>63</sup> He claims that, in order to defend their idea of these three distinct, incorporeal entities in God, the sophists base their arguments entirely on that which is connotative, which «is in contradiction with their own principles, that a single idea

<sup>60</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 29.

<sup>61</sup> Servet suggests, especially in his arguments against the scholastics, that they use the term "anointed" instead of "christ" to describe Jesus in order to understand the biblical teachings better. See pages 29-32.

<sup>62</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 34.

<sup>63</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 46.

can connotatively mean three things, when three other ideas could not absolutely mean those three entities either. Every connotative meaning presupposes another absolute meaning».<sup>64</sup>

Servet's arguments are based, first on Scripture, then on reason, and finally on the wisdom of other 'religions of the Book'. He provides arguments from the Hebrew Scriptures and ancient rabbinic writings, and from the Koran that insist on the unity of God, even while recognizing the presence of God's word and God's spirit. In his arguments from the Koran, Servet emphasizes the deep respect that the Prophet Mohamed showed for the Christ. One can also see how his understanding of Muslim Christology influenced his own thought. He resumes some of the koranic teachings as:

the Christ was the greatest of the prophets, word of God, spirit of God, strength of God, the very soul of God, word born from the perpetual Virgen by the breath of God, by the breath of the holy spirit, and against whom the Jews behaved so evilly. It says, furthermore, that the first disciples of the Christ were excellent and simple men who wrote the truth, but who did not teach the Trinity, rather, their later followers introduced it, corruptors of the holy teaching.<sup>65</sup>

In the second book of *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, Servet develops a careful exegesis of twenty Old and New Testament texts, in their original languages, to support his own understanding of the unity of God, communicated eternally through God's word and spirit, and substantially and temporally in the man Jesus, God's naturally born and anointed son. His exegesis also continues to decry the Trinitarian errors of the sophists and scholastics. Here, his insistence on a close reading and understanding of the biblical texts is fundamental to his arguments. He actively exercises what Calvin indicates is necessary: he brings «the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture».<sup>66</sup> The exegetical tools provided by the biblical humanism of the scholars at Basel require a disciplined understanding of philology and semantics. These are tools that Calvin himself used in his readings of early Christian literature in Greek and Latin. However, Calvin was more deeply influenced by early *Christian* literature – especially Augustin of Hippo – whereas Servet was more deeply influenced by the Arabic and Hebrew literature that had circulated freely in the Iberian Peninsula for so many centuries. He came into

<sup>64</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 66. It is important to note that, although Servet had a basic understanding of Arabic, he read the Koran in a Latin translation. See *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, vol. 65, note 160.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* IV.9.8.

contact with the Arabic literature through his service as a secretary to Juan de Quintana.

There is not enough space here to go into further details of Servet's teachings on the Trinity. He does not deny a Trinitarian understanding of God, but understood it as one God who revealed his divinity, especially through his word and spirit. God granted his divinity especially and substantially to Jesus, his naturally born son, and through the resurrection, his son in time became his son for eternity. This divine status of being God's children is also granted to those who are reborn in the Christ through baptism and so resurrected into a regeneration as divine children of God.<sup>67</sup> His arguments rest on his deep philological and semantic knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin letters, his appreciation for the religious history of Spain, and his rejection of the Council of Nicaea in doctrine and in law. The fifth book of the first part of *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, on the holy spirit, shows his medical genius combined with his theological fascination. Servet was the first person in western medicine to describe the minor circulation of the blood and of the oxygenation of the human body through the cardiopulmonary system.<sup>68</sup> This important medical discovery is presented in a theological treatise as a defense of his understanding of how the spirit of God, the breath of God, inspires the human person, based on Genesis 2:7.

According to Moreno Moreno,<sup>69</sup> it was Servet's virulent language against the 'Trinitarians' that led his first superficial readers to declare him an anti-trinitarian and thus a heretic.<sup>70</sup> Calvin himself, who was devoted to a close reading of Scripture, was neither able to discern the depth of Servet's biblical support for his arguments, nor comprehend Servet's Hispanic turn in the reading of Sacred Literature.

Servet's emotional sensitivity, the fact that he was the son of a converted Jew, and born only recently after the expulsion from or forced conversion of Muslims

<sup>67</sup> See Servet's arguments on baptism in, for example, Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del Cristianismo*, Part I, Book 2, chapter 3 in Servet's exegesis of Psalm 2:7; also in Part II, Dialogue II, on Divinization.

<sup>68</sup> Francisco José Reyes, "La circulación pulmonar en Servet," in *Estudios sobre Miguel Servet (I)*, Instituto de Estudios Sijenses Miguel Servet (Zaragoza: I.E.S. Miguel Servet, 2004), 95–110.

<sup>69</sup> Moreno Moreno, "Miguel Servet. Teólogo iluminado."

<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Servet indicates that "Athanasius himself, prince of the trinitarians, invents two sons in his *Dialogues*, since, he speaks indeed of two born and two engendered sons. In the book, *On the Arian Confession and the Catholic Confession*, he teaches that by "son of man" it must be understood as the human person that was appropriated, not the very son of God, and he says that the son of man is filled with the Son of God. Servet and Alcalá, *La Restitución del cristianismo*, 71.

and Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, exposed him sympathetically to the theologies of other Iberian monotheisms. What he learned in his youth as a secretary to Fray de Quintana in this official's investigations of the faith of Jewish and Muslim converts, in the case against the Alumbrados,<sup>71</sup> and in other cases as well, not only aroused Servet's deep sympathy, but also informed his natural intellectual curiosity. The persecutions executed by the Nicene Spanish Empire and the renewed insistence on the use of the Justinian Code, lead him to advocate for the freedom of conscience and dialogue, rather than for persecution, even when living north of the Pyrenees. Adrián Lara emphasizes the political and military powerlessness of both the Alumbrados and Servet. They did not seek armed resistance, nor any kind of political power, but only the freedom to believe in peace, according to their conscience and their reading of Sacred Scriptures.<sup>72</sup> They thwarted the ancient imperial canonical laws indicating that heretics must be executed, or as canon 5 of the Council of Nicea reads:

Concerning those who have been excommunicated, either clergy or laity, by the bishops in each province, let the judgment prevail according to the canon, declaring that those cast out by some bishops are not to be admitted by others.<sup>73</sup>

Servet was cast out by all, and executed as a heretic, according to Canon Law.

## Conclusion

We come back, now, to Calvin's definition in his *Institutes* IV.9.8 of how a council's decisions should be weighed. First, he would consider the «time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it», then he would «bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture». His understanding of how a council's decision should be weighed have led us to examine both questions: the historical context of the Council of Nicaea and the standard of Scripture in Calvin's own time. In the case of Miguel Servet, we have found that Calvin differed

<sup>71</sup> Servet's participation in the inquisition against the Alumbrados and the effect on his thought on the freedom of conscience has been studied in Adrián Lara, "Miguel Servet y los alumbrados." One can imagine that with further explorations and investigations, that evidence can be shown of Servet's services as a secretary to Fray de Quintana in other cases of inquisition.

<sup>72</sup> Adrián Lara, "Miguel Servet y los alumbrados."

<sup>73</sup> William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Kindle ed.), 44.

from Servet on how to read Scripture, and preferred to uphold Canon Law, without recognizing the violence which had always accompanied this legal code.

In this essay, we have placed emphasis on the political and legal context of the Council of Nicaea and the historical trajectory of Canon Law as it was first expressed during the Constantinian Empire and then codified and perpetuated in the Theodosian Code and the Justinian Code. The long-term influence of the Council of Nicaea was as much legal as it was theological. The legal influence led to the persecution of Christians by Christians. The repercussions of both the theological and legal rigidity of this Council in European societies in the sixteenth century continued this tradition of the persecution of Christians by Christians, even in societies, like that of Reformation Geneva, that deviated from Roman Catholicism.

Servet proposed new, particularly Iberian ways of reading biblical texts that deviated from the Nicene version of the Trinity. He insisted on comparing the declarations of the councils, especially the Council of Nicaea, to the standard of Scripture, as Calvin himself taught. But he came to conclusions that Calvin did not agree with. They read the same Hebrew and Christian Scriptures through different lenses – Calvin through the trinitarian Church Fathers, and Servet through the other peoples of the Book of the Iberian Peninsula. Calvin shows himself to be faithful to Canon Law, and Servet challenges Canon Law. The result led Calvin to respond to the servetian ‘heresy’ according to Canon Law. As Adrián Lara observes, Servet never had the political power and authority to promote freedom of conscience. Calvin did have this political power and authority in Geneva, but succumbed to the ancient usage of Canon Law.

The author of this essay lives in Argentina, in the Southern Cone of South America. Canon Law was in force here as the general code of law until late in the nineteenth century. This prolonged influence of Roman Catholicism in doctrine and in law shaped Argentine culture and society for sixty-five years after the country’s independence from Spain. The dictatorships of the twentieth century were supported by the Roman Catholic Church and proposed returns to Canon Law to justify the persecution of Argentine citizens who resisted totalitarian rule. Even today, there are sectors of Argentine society that continue to think of religious diversity, cultural diversity, and social diversity in terms of Roman Catholic Canon Law. This has an adverse effect on minority groups in general, not just on religious minority groups, such as the churches that belong to AIPRAL (Alianza de Iglesias Presbiterianas y Reformadas en América Latina) and the WCR. Many of the conservative evangelical groups (many with Reformed theological backgrounds)

have accommodated themselves to the religious, political, and economic powers and have adopted a perspective similar to that of Calvin in the sixteenth century. Some of the *Christians* that suffer the most from these power alliances are part of the LGBTQI+ community. These are Christians who often find themselves exiled or ostracized by their families and their churches. Sometimes they are subjected to examination and ‘reconversion’ therapies that can lead to suicide, and sometimes they are forced out of their homes and into the streets where they often face abuse, torture and murder due to homophobia and transphobia. This continues to be the persecution of Christians by Christians.

So, I ask, is it more important for Reformed theology today to continue to maintain a rigid posture in questions of law and doctrine and to advocate for the persecution of Christians (or anyone) by Christians? Or is it more necessary to seek new, contextualized ways of understanding Scripture in order to help Reformed Churches to continually reform their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus of Nazareth? Is law and doctrine more important than human rights and social justice in churches and amongst Christians of the Reformed tradition?



# Towards a Reforming Nicene Ecclesiology: Navigating Reformed Catholicity, the Legacy of Nicaea, and Imperial Power

Henry S. Kuo

Nothing empire touches remains itself.  
Nothing touched by empire stays clean...

— Arkady Martine, *A Memory Called Empire*<sup>1</sup>

There is an ironic English curse that is oftentimes wrongly attributed to the ancient Chinese: «May you live in interesting times.» Unfortunately, as this chapter is entering press, the global situation certainly seems to be interesting. In this highly uncertain and destabilizing period, many are witnessing various forms of chaos, including a resurgence of authoritarian strongmen who promise order and stability while meting cruelty to minority and marginalized peoples, the dismissal of law and order, and elevated militarization and rumours of greater wars. Some of these figures were buoyed into power by various Christian groups that were fearlessly identifying themselves as ‘Christian Nationalists.’<sup>2</sup> Yet, these interesting times coincide with the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea (hereafter ‘Nicaea’) and the Creed that emerged from it, providing an opportunity for critical reflection on the different ways that the Council and the Creed have shaped Christianity, particularly the Reformed branch of the Chris-

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<sup>1</sup> Arkady Martine, *A Memory Called Empire* (New York: Tor Books, 2019), 421, 437.

<sup>2</sup> The author prefers the term ‘Evangelical Nationalists.’



tian family, and how it can be a resource for Christians living in these interesting times.

Nicaea and the Nicene Creed were paradigmatic. Called by the emperor to address a theological disagreement that began as a local dispute but grew enough to threaten to unravel his newly-united empire, the Council provided a preferred model for churches to resolve disagreements and come to unity. Nicaea was also rather unique in that it was one of a comparatively few church councils that was called by and presided over by the emperor (or political leader). But most importantly perhaps, the Nicene Creed that the Council produced became the first *universal* Creed and, nearer to the end of the fourth century, it would be required of all churches throughout the empire to assent to it. As this chapter will deconstruct, these attributes behind Nicaea and the Creed not only set the tone for much of Christendom, but was also influential for how ecclesial unity would be understood, namely, in the form of conditioning unity on *ortho-doxas* – ‘right speech’ – beyond which dissenters would be anathematized.

But our reflections in this chapter are not merely about Nicaea but about a Reformed consideration and reflection on the Council, the resulting Creed, and its relevance today. On the surface, this is an odd combination. Reformed Christianity emerged in the sixteenth-century Reformation as a movement that was critical of an imperial ecclesiology in which church was closely allied with political powers – be it the Holy Roman Emperor, the Pope, or even Prince-electors sympathetic to the Protestant cause. Thus, Roman Catholic Christianity at the time was in a state of exception that was unaccountable to God’s people, whom the church was supposed to serve. This, however, does not mean that Reformed ecclesiology is free from its closeness to power. Hence, the second argument of this chapter is that Reformed ecclesiology has to contend with a different, imported sort of hegemony – a hegemony of the local in which small theological differences contribute to the polarization of differences – consequently leading to an extremely brittle sense of unity that shatters with every theological disagreement. The chapter then moves into a constructive voice by imagining the possibility of a Reformed ecclesiology, specifically reflecting on the mark of catholicity, that both resists Empire and embodies the fulsome wisdom from the Nicene Creed.

## The Council of Nicaea and the Roman Empire

The Council of Nicaea was convened the year after all Roman territories were finally united under one *Imperator*. This initiative arose when the *Caesar* – the ‘junior emperor’ – of one of the four regions of the Roman Empire during the tenuous tetrarchy, Flavius Valerius Constantinus, launched an unexpected but ultimately successful campaign from the northwestern provinces of the empire to defeat the other emperors of the four imperial regions. The final battle against the last surviving rival, the *Augustus* (‘senior’ emperor) Licinius, was waged in AD 324 in Chrysopolis only eight months before the Council of Nicaea. Considering the time it would take to organize such an unprecedentedly large council, the decision for Constantine to call the Council would have been made shortly after the battle. Clearly, something had erupted that made calling the Council a matter of urgency.

That something, in short, was the Arian controversy. But short and clean histories obscure much. The Arian controversy was not the first or only theological dispute in the early church. Early Christianity was theologically diverse just as the different voices in the New Testament and Hebrew Bible presented different theological perspectives. Aside from the Gnostics, Marcionites, and many others, there were also groups such as the Melitians, Novatians, and the Donatists who theologically concurred with the wider church, but broke away from them for other disagreements. Additionally, with regard to some of these theological differences, a few councils have been convened, albeit not under the aegis of a *Caesar* or *Augustus*. Why the diversity of theological perspectives persisted was not only because Christianity’s persecuted status inhibited churches’ communications between each other, but also because of imperial infrastructure. As Peter Heather describes, the slowness and expense associated with travel

meant that contact between far-flung Christian communities [...] tended to be far from continuous. Up to about AD 200, there seem to have been few if any councils, even regional ones. Rather, these communities exchanged periodic letters and received occasional travelers [...] to maintain contact. This was a context that naturally generated small, self-directing congregations, spread out over the vast expanse of Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Theological diversity and disagreement characterized the early church, and these diversities did not disappear after Nicaea. But Nicaea seemed to inaugurate a new

<sup>3</sup> Peter Heather, *Christendom: The Triumph of a Religion, AD 300-1300* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2024), 28.

pattern that would increasingly become administratively normal for Christendom: an increasing trend towards doctrinal regulation and conformity, aided no doubt by the imperial machinery that it enjoyed access to, thanks to the Emperor Constantine.

Among the few innovations of Nicaea was the involvement of the emperor, who informed the assembled delegates that he would «be present as a spectator and participator in those things which will be done».<sup>4</sup> That the emperor became personally involved was not too surprising for two reasons. First, as Paula Fredriksen reminds us, Constantine's conversion to Christianity was also an acceptance of the emperor's patronage of the religion, which he took seriously.<sup>5</sup> Like the Roman *pontifex maximus*, Constantine needed to ensure right *religio* for the security of the empire, even though he was rather cagey about his true beliefs. Speaking of which, it must be noted that the Arian controversy flared in the Eastern half of the original tetrarchy, erupting from Egypt – Arius and his Bishop Alexander served in Alexandria – but the Arian position was supported by eminent church leaders such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, both of whom hailed from that same general region. This was a controversy that, if left unchecked, could make the unity of the church and the newly-reconstructed Roman Empire more difficult.

Constantine's involvement with Nicaea added to the Council's importance. With more than 200 bishops from various parts of the empire in attendance, it was certainly an unprecedented assembly, giving the decisions of the Council some universal heft. The previous council of note, the Council of Arles in AD 314, was much less attended; even Constantine, who called the Council, did not attend its proceedings. The Council was called to address the Donatist Controversy but how the Council proceeded and how the Controversy was resolved displeased Constantine. As H.A. Drake notes, the emperor «had in mind a more informal procedure, something more akin to an arbitration process than a court trial».<sup>6</sup> For a strategic general and politician like Constantine, reconciliation was much more preferred than judgments that could potentially create disunity in an empire that was at the time still fragmented. With a very newly reunified empire, and with

<sup>4</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 214.

<sup>5</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 122.

<sup>6</sup> H.A. Drake, 'The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 114.

the stakes as high as it was, Nicaea had to go smoothly. To that end, Constantine did attend Nicaea's proceedings and, even in an important juncture, introduced the non-scriptural term, *homoousios* (likely with the advice of his theological advisor, the Bishop Hosius of Corduba) to describe the same-substantiality of the Father and the Son.

Two important dynamics need to be observed. First, the emperor's presence and involvement in the Council introduced a hegemonic model into managing disagreements in the church that places its trust in the emperor or, more abstractly, in the unaccountable power of a (fallible) human being. This had two results. The exercise of hegemonic power not only enabled the Council's leaders to move debates in certain directions, but it also attached a cost to resisting orthodoxy. The Creed's deployment of homoousian language was not an honest theological attempt. Lewis Ayres described that, based on the available records of Nicaea, there were other less controversial descriptions of the Son's relationship to the Father, but *homoousios* was chosen as it would prove unacceptable to Arius or those aligned to his theology in the Council.<sup>7</sup> Reconciliation between the homoousian party and the homoiousian party was not a possibility on the agenda; this was an exercise of hegemonic power by the homoousians who had influence during the Council. When Arius and two episcopal supporters refused to assent to the Nicene Creed, they suffered the punishment of being exiled from their sees. This dynamic was not lost on John Calvin. In his commentary on Nicaea in his *Institutes*, he acknowledged its eminent place in church history while also lifting up the dissensions within. He suggested that the doctrinal stakes were high enough for the delegates to take their gloves off. But then,

despite this, heedless of such great dangers, forgetful of gravity, modesty, and all civility, they let slip the battle that was in their hands, as if they had purposely come there to do Arius a favour. They began to revile one another with internal dissensions, and to turn against one another the pen which ought to have been wielded against Arius.<sup>8</sup>

This was a Council filled with power plays with the aim for one party to dominate the other, possibly because the stakes were so high and because of Constantine's presence.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), IV.9.10.

Second, the exercise of hegemonic power in the Council had its limitations. For one, the *homoiousian* articulation of theology or non-trinitarian theology did not disappear. One reason for this is, as Rowan Williams has importantly demonstrated, there was no monolithic ‘Arianism.’<sup>9</sup> If anything, what united those who disagreed with the Nicene Creed was not a unified, competing theological system but the fact that they disagreed with the Creed or Nicaea.<sup>10</sup> As this chapter will elaborate later, Arianisms of all sorts enjoyed a long shelf life that today’s Christians are still contending with. But back to the Council, it should also be noted that Constantine’s exercise (and withholding) of punishment was not based on doctrinal orthodoxy. Arius and his supporters may have been exiled but Arius did petition for forgiveness in a way that did not imply a recanting of his teachings. As an emperor who certainly preferred peaceable reconciliation to acrimonious division in a newly reunified empire, Constantine compelled the bishop Athanasius of Alexandria to welcome Arius back into his diocese against his desires. When Athanasius persisted in his resistance, *he* ended up being exiled. Eusebius of Nicomedia did superficially assent to the Creed, but was nonetheless exiled for allegedly remaining friendly and keeping contact with Arius and other Arians. As Anthony Kaldellis summarizes, in truth, ‘the reason was likely political. Eusebios of Nikomedeia had been a powerful member of Licinius’ court.’<sup>11</sup> (Recall that Licinius was Constantine’s rival *Augustus* whose defeat in Chrysopolis enabled Constantine to be *Imperator*.) But then only after a few years, he was able to reclaim favor with Constantine and would baptize him as he neared death. The currency of hegemonic power is not theological orthodoxy but imperial loyalty.

## Imperiality and Catholicity

Our discussion of Nicaea and the Creed was not intended to discredit their influence or authority by airing out the Council or Creed’s dirty laundry. These historical realities, which were not always remembered by Christians today and are often buried beneath popular narratives of Nicaea’s unquenchable and universal influ-

<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 233.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 84.

ence, constitute dangerous memories. This, of course, was Johann Baptist Metz's concept. As he defines it:

These are memories in which earlier experiences flare up and unleash new dangerous insights for the present. For brief moments they illuminate, harshly and piercingly, the problematic character of things we made our peace with a long time ago and the banality of what we take to be 'realism.' They break through the canon of the ruling plausibility structures and take on a virtually subversive character. Memories of this sort are like dangerous and uncalculable visitations from the past. They are memories that one has to take into account, memories that have a future content, so to speak.<sup>12</sup>

Applied to our critical engagement with Nicaea and the Creed, what we are aiming for is a historical-theological 'flare up.' The wager is for those memories to problematize what was assumed or taken for granted, especially in our interpretations of Nicaea and its Creed.

One part in the Creed where definitions of important theological concepts are often assumed is the ecclesiological statement in which the four Nicene marks of the church were presented: oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. This, of course, is a reference to the AD 381 version of the Creed, which has sometimes been referred to as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The AD 325 version, however, did not have a statement on ecclesiology.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, in its final 'article' or paragraph where the Council explicitly anathematizes the Arians without naming them, the Creed notes that 'the *catholic* church anathematizes'; them, indicating catholicity as an already accepted mark of the church. Hence, this chapter will focus on it and its relation to Nicaea and empire.

Catholicity has usually been understood as the universality of the church but the Greek *kat'holon* suggests a more complex definition. Here, Cyril of Jerusalem

<sup>12</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007), 105.

<sup>13</sup> The earliest version available to us came from Eusebius of Caesarea. The text is: 'We believe in one God, Father, all-ruler, making of all things seen and unseen, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *monogenes*, God from God, light from light, through whom all came to be, both things in the heavens and those on earth; the one who on account of us humans and our salvation came down and took flesh, becoming man, suffering and rising again on the third day and going up to the heavens, and who is coming again to judge the living and dead. But those who say "there was when he was not," and "before he was begotten he was not," and "he came to be from what is not," or assert that the Son of God is from another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or alterable and changeable, these the church catholic anathematizes.' See Mark J. Edwards, 'The Creed,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 144–145.

assists us by integrating many different definitions of catholicity circulating around in his context when he taught that the church [...]

[...] is called catholic, then, because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to people's knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of humankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts.<sup>14</sup>

In short, catholicity speaks not only to the universality of the church's presence throughout the world but also the depth to which Christian truths and values penetrate society by seasoning and enlightening it. Catholicity testifies to the church's mission to make society more whole, which is why the content of the church's teachings and mission are as important to its global reach. Anti-Christian doctrines or practices that fly in the face of Jesus's life and teachings, which certainly do not contribute to human flourishing and may indeed militate against it, fall outside the boundaries of the church's catholic identity. Catholicity is what makes church *church*.

But even so, it remains difficult to disentangle these ecclesiological concepts from empire. For catholicity, the mark of the church that grounds unity and orthodoxy synchronically, orthodoxy and conformity cannot be separated. Christian *oikoumene* was also *Romanitas* (Roman universalism). Indeed, as Susanna Elm has argued, the Roman imperial system provided the ideological and ecclesiastical infrastructure that would give Christian universality its dynamism.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this was not a challengingly-inclusive vision of catholicity but one conditioned on orthodox conformity. Nicene catholicity was not about inclusion or wholeness. Wolfram Kinzig reminds us that the phrasing in the Creed was intentional and:

was meant to conquer and defend a certain discursive space and to display the hegemony of one group of bishops, supported by the emperor, over dissenting views. The anathemas of Nicaea thus served to increase the normativity of the Creed even further. From then on, the Creed was used to test episcopal orthodoxy; dissent was sanctioned in the anathemas.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 18.23. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 140.

<sup>15</sup> Susanna Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Wolfram Kinzig, 'The Creed of Nicaea: Old Questions, New Answers,' *The Ecumenical Review* 75, no. 2 (April 2023): 232. DOI: 10.1111/erev.12782

Dissent was punished because non-conformity was dangerous to Nicene catholicity *and* dangerous to the unity of the Roman Empire. Orthodoxy, here, was not merely theological but imperial!

## The Lure of Imperializing Reformed Nicene Theology

The question, however, is whether Reformed sensibilities could effectively decenter catholicity from its imperial roots. On the surface, that seems possible. Reformed ecclesiology presented a critique of imperial ecclesiology, or at least that was its intention. It recognized that the hegemony of the universal can stifle, dehumanize, and eliminate conscientious and prophetic criticisms of the church and empire. Additionally, a hegemonic universality can present a powerful elite class that is unaccountable to the people. Hence, Calvin made it clear that all ministers of the church are to be considered apostles by virtue of being sent by God to be God's messengers, and that elders chosen from the assembly were to uphold the community's morality and discipline alongside the bishops.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the presbyterian polity is such that every office in the church is accountable to each other and, more importantly, to Christ who heads the church and to God's people whom the church is supposed to serve. This presents a promising start to resisting an imperial, hierarchical ecclesiology that Nicaea presents.

However, this does not evade the problem of hegemony in church. In fact, more broadly, decentering societies from a central power or frame of reference can result in what P. Kerim Friedman calls a 'hegemony of the local' in which localization movements paradoxically end up reinforcing overarching hegemonies. In his study of indigenous Taiwanese politics, Friedman examined the unintended effects of former President Lee Teng-hui's policy of place-based multiculturalism that sought to decenter Taiwanese identity away from China while also lifting up the diversity of Taiwanese ethnicities.<sup>18</sup> This was done partly to head off the nascent opposition party, the Taiwan-nativist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), in the context of Taiwan's 1987 transition to a full democracy. It was also done to broaden the voting base of the ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT), which was Lee Teng-hui's

<sup>17</sup> *Institutes* IV.3.5 and *Institutes* IV.3.8.

<sup>18</sup> P. Kerim Friedman, 'The Hegemony of the Local: Taiwanese Multiculturalism and Indigenous Identity Politics,' *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 45, no. 3 (August 2018): 84–90.



party affiliation. The policy was incidentally also supported by the DPP because it would emphasize Taiwan's unique identity relative to mainland China's, thereby justifying Taiwan's independence and questioning the diplomatic and ambiguous One-China policy. At first it would seem that this policy would be beneficial for indigenous communities who have long been on the margins of Taiwan's politics, culture, and burgeoning economy relative to the Han Chinese peoples.

However, as it turns out, the decentering of national identity to give recognition to major indigenous communities actually reduced the agency of these groups in several ways while reifying the power of the Han Chinese majority. First, which groups should be legally recognized and whether some groups were subgroups of larger ethnic groups were contentious. For example, Friedman brings up the Sakizaya people who speak a dialect of the Amis tribe, but creating a different orthography for the Sakizaya was contentious due to concerns that it would undermine Amis cohesion.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Sakizaya subjectivity was suppressed in the interest of reifying the broader Amis identity. Second, while such concerns might be important for local communities, it deflects attention on the reality that they did not have any political agency, preventing them from engaging in any meaningful solidarity across other allies while also maintaining the political hegemony of either the KMT or the DPP, both of which are dominated by non-indigenous Han Chinese and their descendants. Decentering local identities from Sinocentrism may have given these communities political recognition but it did not give them any agency because the multicultural project aimed to support those in power and not necessarily to empower those without power. Paradoxically, at least politically speaking, the more things change, the more things stay the same.

This has important parallels with church. Reformed polities have indeed decentralized authority from a central power – the papacy and the Roman Curia – that was not accountable to the people or to the Word of God.<sup>20</sup> But that does not mean that they were incapable of replicating imperial habits. Hegemony did not disappear with the advent of the Protestant reformation movements. If anything, the hegemony became localized into different theological groups. As we have discussed earlier in the chapter, an imperial catholicity introduced orthodoxy as an assent

<sup>19</sup> Friedman, 'The Hegemony of the Local,' 95.

<sup>20</sup> Certainly, I am not suggesting that all Roman Catholic priests and bishops cared little for the church or the Word of God. However, it was certainly the case in the medieval and early modern periods that popes, bishops, and priests were not held to high moral standards, nor were they necessarily theologically and biblically trained, and there were little consequences for the lack of qualifications or standards.

to static and legal doctrinal formulations (such as a creed approved by the emperor). Certainly, over the centuries, the decisions of other ecumenical councils and the pronouncements of popes and bishops have also taken on an imperial status requiring assent and conformity. The profound contribution of Reformed polity to the ecclesiological landscape is the emphasis away from a ‘top-down’ ecclesiology in which truth is pontificated and conformity is expected, to one where truth is discerned collegially and cooperatively among all God’s people.<sup>21</sup>

But this collegiality and cooperative spirit asks much of God’s people. Members of the church need to be responsible agents in ensuring that church is continually reforming progressively towards a more just and righteous body that worships God with their being. In another study, I’ve made the argument that a collegial polity, which is practiced in theory by Reformed bodies but is also an emphasis in Pope Francis’ synodal vision for the Roman Catholic Church, requires the exercise of two virtues in order for it to work well: epistemological humility and a sensibility of non-domination.<sup>22</sup> However, these are virtues that require cultivation. For churches that have been habituated to colonialism and coloniality – that is, habituated to power and domination – it takes practice and discipline to rethink their self-understanding and embody powerlessness and mutual humility.

Without those virtues, it becomes too easy for theologically-likeminded groups to undermine collegiality and cooperativity, transforming a church from a community into an agglomeration of interest groups that exercise their own hegemonies by regarding the theological ‘Others’ as being heretical. In other words, in place of the emperor, we create our own emperors, thereby creating a hegemony of the local churches that reify orthodoxy in terms of enforcement and conformity. This is a temptation of Reformed churches. Reformed polity aims to make church belong not just to the clergy and episcopate but to all God’s people. But this can make particular doctrines and practices very personal to peoples. Michael Jinkins expresses this conflicting sentiment very well when he writes that, «rationality clashes with passion. Theology conflicts with bitter experience. Respect for the sovereign providence, the eternal wisdom and judgment of God rages against the all-too-human need to know, to judge between true and false, righteous and

<sup>21</sup> Of course, I hasten to note that the Roman Catholic Church today, particularly and notably under the papal administration of the late Pope Francis, sought to make doctrinal discernments less ‘top-down’ and more collegial, at least among the bishops of the Church, as part of the vision of synodality.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Kuo, ‘Walking Together Under Heaven: Traversing between Reformed Catholicity, Synodality, and Tianxia Philosophy,’ *Journal of World Christianity* 13, no. 2 (2023): 154–155.

unrighteous, good and evil».<sup>23</sup> If certain theologies or practices become personal to individuals or certain groups, their evolutions can be threatening because it threatens their identities as Christians, even if that understanding was also partly or even wholly shaped by empire and privilege. The reason for this response is emotional. Laurie Garrett-Cobbina, in her chapter on emotional competency for organizations, challenges the Cartesianesque dualist assumption in spiritual care that assumes theologies, epistemologies, or contexts are abstract concepts, arguing that far from being merely abstract, these concepts concretely affect the minds and bodies of every person. Hence, she argues with regard to social injustices,

[...] at their core, racism, sexism, and classism are complex, interconnected systems that function as ubiquitous forces of the heart that support the maintenance of primarily affluent white male, heteronormative power structures. Therefore, they persist as psycho-social-emotional constructs – not because they are logical (they are completely illogical) but because they are emotional forces of the heart that shape responses in the brain and body.<sup>24</sup>

What Garrett-Cobbina argued applies to ecclesiological hegemonies of the local. Theologies are not merely cognitive or intellectual but deeply personal; they move peoples' hearts and souls, making any theological evolution or reinterpretation controversial. Even if we acknowledge the imperial logics and sentiments circulating under the surface of Christian theology and history, these theologies enjoy, as Garrett-Cobbina phrases it, «'covenantal reverence' such that it 'feels like an existential threat when challenged – it quite literally feels like dying for a person of privilege when attachment to the precepts and practices [...] are dismantled'».<sup>25</sup> That is to say, theological differences or changes can be emotionally triggering, which makes anathematizing the theologically-different 'Other' and invoking one's privilege to exercise theological hegemony all too easy because the stakes are high for the individual Self. For this reason, Eddy Van der Borgh rightlly laments that the lack of a *sensus unitatis* in the Reformed ecclesiastical landscape presents a seemingly insurmountable challenge.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Jinkins, *The Church Transforming: What's Next for the Reformed Project?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 60–61.

<sup>24</sup> Laurie Garrett-Cobbina, 'The Emotional Undercurrents of Organizations,' in *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 244–245.

<sup>25</sup> Garrett-Cobbina, 'The Emotional Undercurrents,' 245.

<sup>26</sup> Eduardus Van der Borgh, 'The Unity of the Church and the Reformed Tradition – An Introduction,' in *The Unity of the Church: A Theological State of the Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardus Van der Borgh (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1.

We, therefore, arrive at the problem. Although Nicaea and the Creed enjoys a distinguished reverence today, it has inaugurated habits of imperial catholicity in which hegemony becomes the way of doing doctrinal business and anathematization the way of exacting costs on non-conformity to doctrines blessed by the power of empire. These *habiti* have become ingrained into how church is done, and simply being Reformed does not shake these habits off. But the Reformed performance of imperial catholicity is not quite the carbon copy of that of Roman Catholicism. Hence, one can use Homi Bhabha's term, colonial mimicry, to describe this dynamic. As Bhabha defines, «colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*».<sup>27</sup> Like the imperial catholicity introduced by Nicaea, Reformed imperial catholicity mimics the theological hegemonies, but doesn't quite replicate it. However, this does not necessarily mean that catholicity should be rejected. Indeed, as Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry suggests, the imperial framing of catholicity could be played with in order to construct a way to resist the frame and renew catholicity for our present interesting contexts.<sup>28</sup> This is possible because dangerous memories – in our case, the memory of catholicity's imperality – disrupt existing frames of thinking and being, which therefore opens up possibilities for renewal and re-formation. It is that possibility that presents a constructive opportunity for us in recovering a Reformed Nicene ecclesiology that pushes back against imperial tendencies, against tendencies to exercise domination and power over each other.

## Towards a Reforming Nicene Ecclesiology

The wager behind recovering a Reformed Nicene ecclesiology is that a Reformed-catholic vision that resists empire does not need to throw Nicaea and its Creed out the window with imperial bathwater. Nicaea and the Nicene Creed can still speak constructively. My conviction is that by examining the early history of catholicity, we can recover a more dynamic and challenging catholic vision that can be a resource for Reformed witness in the world today. To begin, we must turn to the first instance the word 'catholic' was theologically lexicalized: Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Smyrnaean church.

<sup>27</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 122.

<sup>28</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122–123.

Ignatius's letter was written roughly 150 years before Constantine's birth when he was enroute to Rome to be martyred. We know this because a third of the way into the letter, he discloses to the Smyrnaeans:

Why then have I handed myself over to death, to fire, to the sword, to wild beasts? But to be near the sword is to be near God, to be in the presence of the wild beasts is to be in the presence of God [...] I am enduring all things in order to suffer along with him.<sup>29</sup>

This disclosure was important because Ignatius was in the middle of warning the Smyrnaeans about the Docetists, for whom Jesus was not corporeally real; he only *seemed* real. For Ignatius and many other martyrs in church history, Christology and suffering were inseparable. One cannot speak of Jesus and salvation without his bodily suffering. Docetic Christology would, essentially, suggest that Jesus only *seemed* to suffer; his suffering was not real, leaving in serious doubt the efficacy of God's salvation in Christ, as well as Jesus's bodily resurrection. Therefore, Ignatius counsels the Smyrnaeans against division, by which he meant leaving the church to follow Docetic teachers.<sup>30</sup> And then, in the critical passage in his letter, he analogizes catholicity. «All of you should follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father [...] Let no one do anything involving the church without the bishop [...] Let the congregation be wherever the bishop is; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there also is the [catholic] church».<sup>31</sup>

Here, catholicity can indicate universality (albeit not in a Constantinian sense) but it can also indicate authenticity. Ignatius was concerned that the Smyrnaeans would be tempted by the siren songs of Docetic teachings. One possible reason, as Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested, was the charisma of those teachers.<sup>32</sup> While engaging and persuasive, these teachers were not bishops who were entrusted with preaching truth and with the authority to baptize or serve the Eucharist appropriately. Authenticity matters because in a pre-Constantine Roman Empire, being a Christian was an exercise in what Bonhoeffer famously calls 'costly grace.' Indeed, as he discusses shortly, Christian expansion and the establishment of

<sup>29</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans* 4.2, trans. Bart D. Ehrman in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> *To the Smyrnaeans* 7.2.

<sup>31</sup> *To the Smyrnaeans* 8.1–2.

<sup>32</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York: Viking, 2013), 55. I note the parallel with peoples' attractions to contemporary charismatic politicians whose policies may not benefit them.

Christendom 'caused the awareness of costly grace to be gradually lost.'<sup>33</sup> In any case, a *seeming*-Jesus would've been highly problematic. First, people were suffering and dying for their faith in Jesus; it mattered that their faith was not misplaced and the martyrs had believed unto death.<sup>34</sup> But secondly, a phantasmic Jesus did not embody love, justice, compassion, and other virtues, raising questions about incarnational and embodied theologies. What, then, was the point of loving, doing works of justice or liberation?<sup>35</sup> Catholicity was important, not only because churches were geographically dispersed, but they all took love, compassion, and justice seriously; catholicity was about the church's integrity in being church in and for the world. This is critical to Reformed witness. The Accra Confession, for example, makes it clear that Reformed Christians believe in a God of justice, which behooves solidarity with people who are victims of injustice.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, perfect justice, love, and compassion is impossible at least on this side of the Resurrection. Human sin and other limitations mean that we will always have blind spots in witnessing to God's love, justice, and compassion in a broken and hurting world. Part of the genius of the Reformed tradition is its progressive nature, which is encapsulated in the motto, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. The Reformed Church is always reforming towards deeper understanding and faithfulness to God, and towards deeper love and justice to all creation. The theme of reforming is key to how Letty Russell understood catholicity. Utilizing a feminist method to interpret Reformed ecclesiology, she broadens catholicity to include connection to all God's creation.<sup>37</sup> This connection should behoove churches to connect to each other across the world, being aware of their needs and exercising responsibility to care for them. That, however, requires a critical reading of the different ecclesial contexts alongside the witness of God throughout the Scriptures. Ignacio Ellacuría calls this process propheticism (*profetismo*), which he defines as a «critical contrasting of the proclamation of the fullness of the reign of God with a specific historical situation».<sup>38</sup> This is critical so that catholicity does not become

<sup>33</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4, of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 45–46.

<sup>34</sup> *To the Smyrnaeans* 5.1. Hence, Ignatius accuses the Docetists of being 'public advocates of death.'

<sup>35</sup> *To the Smyrnaeans* 6.2.

<sup>36</sup> Accra Confession 24, 26, accessed July 8, 2025, World Communion of Reformed Churches, <https://wcrc.eu/about/accra-confession/about/>

<sup>37</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 133–134.

<sup>38</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Utopia and Propheticism from Latin America,' in *A Grammar of Justice:*

a form of neo-coloniality in which Western ways of understanding and addressing human needs take precedence over local, non-Western approaches.

So far, we have made initial moves towards imagining a Reforming vision of catholicity that takes the continual and progressive engagements of contexts to deepen the church's work in justice and mission globally. This leaves why Nicaea matters theologically. Again, while the method of settling the debate was questionable and certainly problematic, the doctrinal disagreements are not trivial. At the center of the theological controversy was the nature of Jesus' identity vis-à-vis God. Here, Rowan Williams' argument in his book on Arius is particularly important. In our post-Nicene world that is sharply polarized along theological and moral lines, it is all too tempting to repeat the habits of imperial catholicity by determining an essentializable 'orthodox', 'traditional,' or 'conservative' party and to pit it against an equally essentialized 'heretical,' 'innovating,' or 'liberal' party. Williams rightly suggested that not only were both Arius and Athanasius theological innovators, with disagreements on how to innovate theology given the diversity of theologies circulating in their times, but between them, it was actually Arius who would be broadly considered the more 'conservative' one; the Nicene bishops were the ones who introduced the innovation of bringing a non-biblical concept – *homoousios* – to articulate a theological idea.<sup>39</sup>

But, lest the reader misunderstand, this chapter's line of argument does not suggest that the theological controversy surrounding Nicaea was not important, or that the doctrine of God in the Nicene Creed should be rejected because of politicality of the Council and Creed. Arius' argument has important implications for Reformed catholicity and Reformed witness. At the heart of Arius' theology is the question of, Who is God? And how does this God relate to the Christ who saves? Williams traces the argument between Arius and Athanasius very well, and this chapter will not retrace it.<sup>40</sup> But a critical takeaway from that debate is that the answers to those questions determine whether the God Christians worship is a God who acts in history, who truly saves. As Williams notes, critical to the Christian faith is the notion of how Christ has made humanity a 'new creation' by reconciling all creation to God.<sup>41</sup> But for Jesus to truly redeem and reconcile, he must not be

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*The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, eds. J. Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, and Rodolfo Cardenal (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>40</sup> See Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 238–242.

<sup>41</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 240.

merely close to God but *is* God, literally *Emmanuel* – God with us. Arius’ doctrine of God makes this closeness impossible.

This has tremendous implications for Reformed witness. Jesus’ reconciliation of all creation to God is what allows for hope. Christians are not trapped in endless cycles of truthlessness, corruption, fear, racisms/casteisms, and the myriad injustices dealing suffering and death to many around the world now. Indeed, in these interesting and chaotic times a quarter-ways into the twenty-first century, the message that is necessary is one of audacious hope, that truth, integrity, courage, love, and justice will triumph over evil. Christian hope is rooted in how we are not reconciled to the death-dealing, world-destroying ways and systems of our fearful and confused societies, but are reconciled to the God who so *loved* us and elects the way of salvation over the way of condemnation for us and for the world. In the early church, before its Constantinization, this hope that was concretized by local churches made grassroots Christianity attractive. As Ada María Isasi-Díaz describes, «the [early] church knew that it could not preach what it did not live so it had to be a reconciling church, offering reconciliation freely, placing no conditions on it».<sup>42</sup> The church does not aim to be reconciled to God – it is a living testament to its reconciled status, even as it strives to embody the fullness of that status. This living out of its reconciled-ness, as Isasi-Díaz reminds us, is critical for forging solidarity towards building a humane future where nobody is excluded.<sup>43</sup> Reconciliation matters for justice, especially when justice cannot be achieved if differences between humanity and all God’s creatures cannot be reconciled. Thus, however much empire has suffused Christian existence in a post-Nicaea world, the theological controversies surrounding Nicaea and other councils regarding the nature of Christ are still important for work today. Therefore, a Reforming Christian witness cannot dispense with the need for it to also be both Nicene and catholic.

## Anathematizing Empire for the Next 1700 Years

Every December, memes surface throughout social media about St. Nicholas punching Arius at Nicaea. The historical validity of this action is highly questionable, and it may

<sup>42</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, ‘Reconciliation: An Intrinsic Element of Justice,’ in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, eds. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (London: Routledge, 2016), 76.

<sup>43</sup> Isasi-Díaz, ‘Reconciliation,’ 72–73



well be that the popularity of such memes is a more accurate reflection of the world we live in – a world in which violence backed by power presents an acceptable or even desirable solution to resolving intractable disagreements. This perhaps is another unexpected legacy of Nicaea. In tracing this legacy, with all its twists and turns, the historical-theological landscape we have traversed is variegated. On the surface, Nicaea was an assembly of bishops from across the Roman Empire, convoked by the Emperor Constantine with the intention of resolving a simmering theological controversy that threatened to unravel an empire which was only recently stitched together. Charity and generosity were not the virtues demonstrated. Nicaea's history tells a story of the homoiousian party that, with Constantine's support, tried to dominate and beat the homoiousian party into submission. Church history – including Reformed church history – unfortunately contains rhymes of domination and beating out-of-line theologians and movements into submission or beating the life out of them. The wages of empire are suffering and death. Drawing on a variety of voices, the chapter provides introductory ventures into the construction of a Reforming Nicene ecclesiology that deepens catholicity – the only ecclesial mark mentioned in the AD 325 version of the Creed – beyond just universality (which is oftentimes connected to imperial expansion), to include connection with others and justice work. These tentative ventures begin a long process of renouncing empire and its associated injustices, as difficult as that may be given the church's cooperation with empire for 1,700 years.

As a way of conclusion, it is perhaps best to ask ourselves what it means to be both Reforming and to be catholic at the end of our peregrination on Nicaea's legacy. To be absolutely clear, the critiques of Nicaea and its Creed both in this chapter and in this volume do not necessarily mean that the Nicene Creed is somehow 'wrong' or should be jettisoned. Nicene faith still matters in a world where neo-Arianisms keep arising and where empire still persists. As this volume is printed, the world is increasingly out of joint, with fearful citizenry electing right-wing strongmen who project themselves as being chosen by God and promise salvation, but only deepen empire's tendrils and produce suffering and death, by allowing wars and genocides to proliferate, by enabling the selfish and wealthiest to find novel and legally dubious ways to amass more resources and wealth to the detriment of the poor, and by making it easier to destroy fragile ecosystems, among other evils. That some of these neo-Arian movements are rebranding themselves as 'Christian' nationalist makes them attractive to Christians who are unaware of the church's theological histories and the dangers they pose to Christian life and witness, not to mention the lives of those on the margins of society.

One of the earliest Christian martyrs was Speratus who, in one of his final testaments before his martyrdom, declared: «I do not acknowledge the empire [*imperium*] of this world. But rather I serve the God whom no man has seen nor can see with these eyes».<sup>44</sup> This is the aspiration of a Reforming Nicene ecclesiology: a church that serves God and not empire and, therefore, speaks truth in an atmosphere of truthlessness and truthiness, and therefore is hope for a world that is now reeling in confusion and despair. It is a hope that has its foundation in how the Christ who saved the world is one with the God who lovingly created it. It is this hope that allows us to choose courage over fear, embrace over exclusion, peace over violence, and love over hate. Certainly, for 1,700 years, the church in alliance with empire has oftentimes fallen embarrassingly and heart-wrenchingly short of this hope, and there is no evidence that in the near-term, this shortcoming will be ameliorated or even reversed. Indeed, it has oftentimes anathematized its prophets who have called the church to embody the justice, mercy, and love that it has often preached. Hence, this chapter ends with the hope that in the din of moral darkness, God may move churches to reclaim its catholicity by remembering the best of its reforming and Nicene traditions.

The year 2025 was not only a year of chaos but the depression was heightened by the departure of prophets and teachers of the church. Pope Francis was certainly one such prophetic teacher. In the Reformed orbit, one scholar and preacher who completed his baptism, one who often called the church to have a ‘prophetic imagination,’ was Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann was an alumnus of Eden Theological Seminary, and would return for a few decades to be Evangelical Professor of Biblical Interpretation and academic dean. In one of his lectures on the Scripture’s testament to an alternative narrative of the economy (as opposed to the scarcity narrative of empire), he declared that, «The gospel is fiction when judged by the empire, but the empire is fiction when judged by the gospel».<sup>45</sup> The siren song of empire and the anxiety for sufficiency, the fear of losing out, and the lust of power that promises material salvation is always loud and tempting. The Christian hope is that God has the better story, one of hope, faith, and love. May it be that in the next 1,700 years, churches may find the courage and verve to hear the gospel of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, to listen to the prophets in its midst calling truth to power, and to join the dispossessed and powerless and anathematize empire.

<sup>44</sup> *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum: A Literary Commentary*, ed. Vincent Hunink (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2021), 66.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Brueggemann, ‘Seduced by our Abundance,’ (lecture, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA, Jan. 18, 2012).



# The Heresy of Nicaea and the Jesus of Colony

*John Flett and Jason Goroncy*

## Introduction: The Jesus that Came to Australia

«How is it that Aboriginal people can conclude that Christianity is a greater enemy than introduced diseases, a greater enemy than infant mortality, than all the other things that have been introduced into this country?»<sup>1</sup> So asked Uncle Graham Paulson, a Walpiri theologian and the first Indigenous minister to be ordained by the Baptist church. While shocking, no contemporary theologian should be surprised by such a question; it corresponds to an oft-repeated lament from Indigenous peoples throughout the world touched by Christianity. This essay interrogates the *possibility* of that *reality*: How was and is Christianity experienced as the greatest of all enemies for local peoples – local *Christian* peoples?

One familiar answer locates the possibility within the liaison between Western culture and embodied forms of the Christian faith, based on the «assumption that Christianity is inextricable from its Western cultural frameworks». This identity between the faith and a dominant cultural framework «undermines the integrity of Aboriginal identity and cultural expression» both in itself and in the possibility of an Aboriginal embodiment of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

To offer two illustrations of this reality: first, there is the denigration of Indigenous Australians, exemplified by an 1819 statement by Anglican clergyman and missionary, Samuel Marsden, an instrumental figure in the dissemination and

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Paulson, “The Legacy of Mission: Australian Aboriginal Christians Searching for a Contextualised Theology,” *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology,” *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006): 310.

institutional establishment of Christianity in the antipodean colonies: «The Aborigines are the most degraded of the human race. [...] [T]ime is not yet arrived for them to receive the great blessings of civilization and the knowledge of Christianity».<sup>3</sup> Evident here is the immediate relationship between narratives of inferiority and a normative hubris regarding Western culture, and the Christian faith that underlies both evaluations.

It follows, second, that the «foundational violence»<sup>4</sup> (physical, cultural, religious, white supremacy) permitted by that sentiment produced an account of salvation occupied with «turning the occupants of *terra nullius* from their heathen and barbarous ways».<sup>5</sup> This, in the words of Patrick Dodson, Jacinta Elston, and Brian McCoy, resulted in such «pressure to assimilate from the churches»<sup>6</sup> that Aboriginal people who entered into the life of Christian communities felt «compelled to leave their culture ‘at the door’».<sup>7</sup> The very embodied forms of the faith, the norms of institution, order, and symbol, precluded Aboriginal peoples from entering the church as Aborigines, and often even as ‘fully human’.

However, even with this explanatory framework of culture and the ‘geopolitics of empire’, and with a coordinated accounting of theological failure based in complicity with Empire, the safeguarding of the imagined ‘acultural’ and ‘ahistorical’

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Ray Minniecon, “Indigenous Theology: The Australian Experience – Where is the Starting Point?” *Journal of NAHITS* 14 (2016): 24. On the ongoing proliferation of this view, see Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (London: William Collins, 2023). Also, Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia, Critically Appraised From an Aboriginal Historico-Theological Viewpoint* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998); Toulia Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins* (Melbourne: re.press, 2014); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Wooltorton, Lauren Stephenson, Kathie Ardzejewska, and Len Collard, “Kaartdijin Bidi (Learning Journey): Place-based Cultural Regeneration at University,” *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* (2025): 8. Cf. David Hume, “Of National Characters,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 360n120.

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Hume, “Delivering the Word the Aboriginal Way: The Genesis of an Australian Aboriginal Theology,” *Colloquium* 25, no. 2 (1994): 86.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick L. Dodson, Jacinta K. Elston, and Brian F. McCoy, “Leaving Culture at the Door: Aboriginal Perspectives on Christian Belief and Practice,” *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006): 255.

<sup>7</sup> Dodson, Elston, and McCoy, “Leaving Culture at the Door,” 250. See also The Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Toward an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Adelaide: ATF, 2012), 61–62; Matt Cairns, “‘Black Nobbie Neville’: A Case Study into How the Early Salvation Army in Australia Regarded First Nations Peoples,” *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024): 421–35.

forms of the faith remains intact.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Jesus of Nicaea, the Jesus of orthodoxy, continues to exist at some distance from the historic and ongoing experiences of genocide. The problem is that the ‘distance’ does not accord with stated experience: the Jesus Christ developed within ecumenical Christian orthodoxies, the Jesus Christ of the creeds and confessions, was and is experienced as the Jesus of colonisation – Jesus as enemy. This colonial Jesus appears as «the ‘One’, the axiomatic norm that defines racial ‘differences’, which maintains the status of a ‘superior’ race and yet, paradoxically, as unraced, human as such».<sup>9</sup> This Jesus naturalises «the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices».<sup>10</sup> In Australia, this is about ‘whiteness’: «the discursive practices that [...] privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and European worldviews»,<sup>11</sup> a scheme that «deploys strategic rhetoric to reinvent, re-secure, and reposition itself»<sup>12</sup> – one in which «differences are calculated and organized»<sup>13</sup> to maintain privilege or normalcy and leave undisturbed existing power relations.

One should not mistake this reference to critical whiteness studies as introducing a framework inherently opposed to Christian orthodoxy. To cite a voice from a neighbouring context, the Tongan-born Fijian and former Anglican Archbishop, Winston Halapua, questions:

<sup>8</sup> As an example, see the Namibia Statement jointly issued by the Council of Churches of Namibia, the All Africa Conference of Churches, the Council for World Mission, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches at the 2024 Global Consultation on Empire and Genocides. “We Charge Genocide – Again! Cry of the Earth’s Peoples Against the Geopolitics of Empire,” World Communion of Reformed Churches, accessed May 17, 2025, <https://wcrc-webserver.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Empire-and-Genocide-Statement.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> George Yancy, “When Heaven and Earth Are Shaken to Their Foundations,” in *Unveiling Whiteness in the Twenty-First Century: Global Manifestations, Transdisciplinary Interventions*, ed. Veronica Watson, Deirdre Howard-Wagner, and Lisa Spanierman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 197.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54.

<sup>11</sup> Raka Shome, “Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections,” in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 108. See Phillip Falk and Gary Martin, “Misconstruing Indigenous Sovereignty: Maintaining the Fabric of Australian Law,” in *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 33–46.

<sup>12</sup> Dreama G. Moon and Thomas K. Nakayama, “Strategic Social Identities and Judgments: A Murder in Appalachia,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 2 (2005): 91.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 297.

Does theological orthodoxy maintain to some degree a resemblance of imperialism? [...] How much of what we label theological orthodoxy is a form of mask for the inability of one part of the world to understand another way of life? [...] Are we in the Pacific participating in a process of doing theology which embodies dehumanisation of our own people?<sup>14</sup>

Halapua poses these as questions to defray the startling nature of the accusation: the processes aligned with theological orthodoxy lead to the dehumanisation and deracination of peoples deemed to be outside the history of that production, and who embody different values in the deployment of theology itself.

To recognise this complaint is to recognise the vast array of counter-narratives and theologies already produced by Indigenous theologians who «cannot waste time answering other people's questions».<sup>15</sup> Yet, the question of a primary christological violence remains. In considering this reality, the following sections argue that this experience of the Jesus of colony is an inevitable consequence of the *in nuce* mode of theological production initiated at the first ecumenical council of Nicaea and formalised at Chalcedon, and underlies the so-called 'ecumenical winter' of the contemporary period and the ongoing dehumanisation of Christians beyond the West. Beyond the challenges posed by the metaphysics,<sup>16</sup> the modes of production determined by «the threat of cultural difference» and the exclusion of

<sup>14</sup> Winston Halapua, "Fakakakato: Symbols in a Pacific Context," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 2, no. 20 (1998): 22.

<sup>15</sup> Terry Djiniyini, "Aboriginal Christianity: Based on Indigenous Theology," *Nelen Yubu* 18 (1984): 34. See also National Commission for Justice and Peace, *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern, Social Justice Sunday, 1978* (Surry Hills: E. J. Dwyer, 1978), 22; Martin J. Wilson, *New, Old and Timeless: Pointers Towards an Aboriginal Theology* (Moorabbin: Chevalier, 1979); Djiniyini Gondarra, *Let My People Go: Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology* (Darwin: Bethel Presbytery, 1986); George Rosendale, "Reflections on the Gospel and Aboriginal Spirituality," *The Occasional Bulletin* (Nungalinga College, Darwin) 42 (1989): 1–7; George Rosendale, "Aboriginal Myths and Customs: Matrix for Gospel Preaching," in *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray (Blackburn: Harper Collins Religious, 1996), 100, 106; Gideon C. Goosen, "Christian and Aboriginal Interface in Australia," *Theological Studies* 60, no. 1 (1999): 72–94; Patricia R. Derrington, *The Serpent of Good and Evil: A Reconciliation in the Life and Art of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann* (Flemington: Hyland House, 2000); Vassilis Adrahtas, "Perceptions of Land in Indigenous Australian Christian Texts," *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 2 (2005): 200–14; Evelyn Parkin, "The Sources and Resources of Our Indigenous Theology: An Australian Aboriginal Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 4 (2010): 390–98; Garry W. Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawlolway Man Reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morning Star, 2018); Garry W. Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> See Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, "Confessing the One Faith in Many Tongues: A Decolonial Reading of the Nicene Creed," *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024): 341–54.

«marginal voices or minority discourse»<sup>17</sup> normalised the cultural homogenisation of Christian faith. The Jesus of colony cannot account for difference; difference is the enemy of Jesus, and so Jesus manifests as the enemy of difference.

## Formalising Othering as the Process of Theology 'Proper': From Nicaea (AD 325) to Chalcedon (AD 451) – and Beyond

Other chapters in this volume examine the constitution, theology, metaphysics, and reception of the Council of Nicaea, the resulting Creed, and the twenty-seven articles of canon law. The interest here lies in who was excluded from Nicaea and what and how persons and theologies were distinguished from its formulation of Christian 'orthodoxy'.

An obvious starting point is Arianism, the named theology to be overcome, and Athanasius' work in opposing Arius' position. Such a framing posture leads directly to the mode of argument: heresiology. As defined by J. Rebecca Lyman, «[h]eresiology was the combative theological genre for asserting true Christian doctrine through hostile definition and ecclesiastical exclusion».<sup>18</sup> This approach included various rhetorical techniques, «such as labelling or genealogies and literary genres such as cultural histories or intellectual catalogues», indicating «not only social or religious attempts at expulsion, but also theological negotiation with contemporary cultural problems of multiplicity and difference in Roman society».<sup>19</sup> When mapping the consequences of this approach, four points might be noted.

First, upon Arius' death in AD 336, Athanasius attached Arius' name to any group that rejected Nicaea, regardless of their actual theological concerns: they became part of Arius' theological genealogy.<sup>20</sup> The import of this form of historiography (historiography as genealogy) throughout Western Christianity, especially in relation to colonisation, has been well noted.<sup>21</sup> Second, labelling permits mis-

<sup>17</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 150.

<sup>18</sup> J. Rebecca Lyman, "The Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism'," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 2: Constantine to c. 600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 296.

<sup>19</sup> Lyman, "The Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism'," 297.

<sup>20</sup> Lyman, "The Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism'," 299.

<sup>21</sup> See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–64. For an excellent development of this position for Christian theology, see Renie Chow Choy,



characterisation, manipulation, and falsification. For Richard Hanson, Athanasius would have ‘*maliciously*’ misrepresented Arius, extending his words beyond their intended meaning.<sup>22</sup> In other words, rather than inviting discussion, this theological process relied on invective and dismissal. The potential of mischaracterisation to achieve theo-political ends became fully realised in the inevitable extension of Nicaea into Chalcedon, exemplified by the caricature of ‘monophysite’ to deride and dismiss the ‘miaphysite’ position. Third, this theological approach mapped onto Roman socio-cultural concerns regarding multiplicity and difference. Heresiology, as an approach of polemical definition and ecclesial exclusion, already represents a theological ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of difference. Fourth, Averil Cameron states that «one cost of the struggle to define orthodoxy was the *technologising* of the issue, which in the course of centuries of struggle made a narrowing of definitions inevitable».<sup>23</sup> It is not accidental that Christian communities under colonial rule and their associated critiques regarding ‘missionary support’ have long lamented the dominance of technocracy in the West’s approach. In Cameron’s example, participation in the tradition demands an increasingly finite skill set grounded in history, linguistics, theological method, rhetoric, and argument. Reflecting on the forms of Western Christian export, Emerito Nacpil notes that when Filipinos «see an expert, the symbol of Western technology and gadgetry», they see «a master, the mirror of their own servitude».<sup>24</sup>

A key component of Athanasius’ anti-Arian polemic consisted of identifying Arius’ position with that of ‘the Jews’.<sup>25</sup> It was an expedient option given the further debate held at Nicaea regarding the liturgical calendar. Before Nicaea, there existed an emerging trend to cluster the Jews with «the Greeks and the pagans», including a prohibition instituted at the Synod of Elvira (c. AD 306) that no Christian may

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“‘Religious Ancestry’: The Postcolonial Critique of Christian Historiography,” in *Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage* (London: SCM, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Richard P. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 10, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Averil Cameron, “The Cost of Orthodoxy,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 93, no. 3 (2013): 349. *Italics added*.

<sup>24</sup> Emerito P. Nacpil, “Mission but Not Missionaries,” *International Review of Mission* 60, no. 239 (1971): 359. See also R. F. Kuang, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution* (Sydney: Harper Voyager, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Athanasius, “Epistle of Athanasius in Defence of the Nicene Definition of the Homousion,” in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius, Volume 1: In Controversy With the Arians* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), 13, 48 (1.3; 6); Athanasius, “Three Discourses of Athanasius Against the Arians,” in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius, Volume 1: In Controversy With the Arians* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), 391–93, 424 (27.264–65, 30.300).

eat with a Jew.<sup>26</sup> However, a formal position on the Jews and their relationship to Christianity was not yet codified. Nicaea would change this: what existed prior as a theological concern, which may have been developed in other ways, became ‘canon’ at Nicaea.

Nicaea’s concern with consolidating Christian identity, especially given its new political standing within the Roman Empire, included the desire to create liturgical unity by ratifying a fixed date for Easter. Drawing on the Gospel of John, the theological argument posits that the Last Supper took place a week after the Passover. With this, the established «practice of the Quartodecimani of observing Easter on the fourteenth day of Nisan, i.e., the day of the Jewish Passover, was declared heretical».<sup>27</sup> But the concern was not theological alone. In establishing a Christian identity, the Jews were viewed only as a clear ‘rival of Christianity’, with those gathered at Nicaea doubting the validity of Jewish conversion to Christianity and fearing their influence.<sup>28</sup> No distinction existed between Christian Jews and Jews; all Jews were the same and stood under the same charge. As Constantine wrote to «all those not present at the Council», the date change constituted a necessary departure from «the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin. [...] Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd [...] [due to] their parricidal guilt in slaying their Lord».<sup>29</sup> While we may not want to read a twentieth-century experience back into this language, «the Nicene legacy remains essentially one of clear distinction between the two separated ways of Judaism and Christianity»,<sup>30</sup> and this anti-Judaism, «anchored in Nicaea»,<sup>31</sup> gave ample justification for later antisemitism.

Alongside the mode of heresiology and the rejection of the Jews, Nicaea lacked clear representation from theological voices beyond the Greek-speaking

<sup>26</sup> Canon 50 of the Council of Elvira: «If any of the priests or believers eats his meal with a Jew, we decide that he does not participate in the communion so that he atones».

<sup>27</sup> Rina Talgam, “Constructing Identity through Art: Jewish Art as a Minority Culture in Byzantium,” in *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 450.

<sup>28</sup> Solomon Grayzel, “The Beginnings of Exclusion,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 61, no. 1 (1970): 19.

<sup>29</sup> See Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.18.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Ipgrave, “Nicaea and Christian–Jewish Relations,” *The Ecumenical Review* 75, no. 2 (2023): 236.

<sup>31</sup> Margriet Gosker, “Is There a Connection Between the Nicene Creed, Eusebius of Caesarea and Anti-Judaism?,” in *Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau: Proceedings of the 22nd Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica in Warsaw Poland (5–20 September 2024)* (Leipzig: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt, forthcoming).

East, specifically those living under the governance of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>32</sup> It is often stated that Christian persecution came to an end with the conversion of Constantine; but this is not entirely true. While it ended in Rome, Constantine's veiled warning to Shapur II resulted in the persecution of Christians throughout Persia.<sup>33</sup> This persecution, along with Christian infighting over who held theological authority, undoubtedly worked against the Persian Christian presence at Nicaea. However, even with these qualifications, the absence of the Persian voice was not needed for one of Nicaea's key objectives: Christianity had become a major social force within an empire that sought unification and stabilisation, controlled through a common theological framework. The bishops in attendance were from regions under Roman control, and those who dissented from the Nicene framework faced exile and the destruction of their works. Nicaea established an enforceable single 'orthodoxy,' marginalised diverse early Christian traditions and regional variations, and provided ecclesiastical and imperial authorities with a clear test of conformity. The Creed became a loyalty test for both religious and political authority. This shaped the legacy for later empires: the Byzantine Empire maintained Nicene orthodoxy as part of state identity; medieval European kingdoms used creeds to enforce religious uniformity; later colonial powers exported this model of religious standardisation.

This same mode of operation continued through the succeeding ecumenical councils, culminating in the great schism of Chalcedon in AD 451. Nicaea introduced a prioritisation and a subordination between Eastern and 'Oriental' Christians, those within and those beyond the control of the Roman Empire. With the Council of Ephesus (AD 431), this tension became overt; with the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), it became formalised. Again, though the reception of Chalcedon within the West reads its formulation primarily in theological terms and against the clear other of the 'monophysites', the 'Orientals' read Chalcedon as «less theological and more political-economic and sociocultural»: «it was not the Christological controversy that led to the post-Chalcedonian schism, as much as

<sup>32</sup> David M. Gwynn, "Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 93.

<sup>33</sup> There has been recent debate regarding the extent of such persecution, but for a balanced approach see Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sasanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5, no. 3 (2021): 361–402.

the revolt of Asia–Africa against a domineering Graeco–Roman civilisation».<sup>34</sup> Chalcedon constituted a precise moment of political and cultural colonisation, as Marcian, through the use of military force, «actively persecuted the Syrians and Egyptians and sought to impose Hellenism on them» by attempting to force the acceptance of the Chalcedon formula.<sup>35</sup> In short, the Orientals read Chalcedon as a prime example of ‘colonisation’, one propagated under the guise of normative theology and embodied in a murderous reality.

By employing the mode of heresiology, rejecting the Jews, and absenting theological voices beyond immediate Roman imperial control, Nicaea demonstrated the *possibility* of exclusion: the ‘we’ of the ‘we believe’ could produce a normative (i.e., orthodox) theological position via the constriction of voice. And, if Nicaea permitted the *possibility*, then Chalcedon embodied its *normalisation*. Exclusion became basic to producing theology ‘proper’, and its dissemination took form as colonial export via legislative (criminalisation, state-sanctioned oppression, murder, military force), cultural (Hellenism), and religious (anathema) violence.

Andrew Walls describes Chalcedon as the most fundamental schism in Christian history: At Chalcedon,

the rupture of the church took place along linguistic and cultural lines. The division has been permanent, with two long-term effects. One was that the Christians of Europe became cut off from the Christians of Asia and Africa. A second was that further divisions of the church along linguistic and cultural lines became easier and easier, until by our own times, they could be taken for granted.<sup>36</sup>

This represented a clear shift from the early church’s cohesiveness and sense of ‘mutual belonging’ alongside «its geographical range, its linguistic profusion, [and] its cultural diversity».<sup>37</sup> In short, the general theological judgments which regard the early church councils as constitutive movements of the church itself, definitive of Christian unity and the processes by which it is to be achieved, are correct: unity occurs through the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference and the identification with imperial forms of control and dissemination.

<sup>34</sup> Paulos Mar Gregorios, “Who Do You Say That I Am? Elements for an Ecumenical Christology Today,” in *Orthodox Identity in India: Essays in Honour of V. C. Samuel*, ed. M. K. Kuriakose (Bangalore: Rev. Dr. V. C. Samuel 75th Birthday Celebration Committee, 1988), 121.

<sup>35</sup> Mar Gregorios, “Who Do You Say That I Am?” 121.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “The Break-up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure,” *Studies in World Christianity* 28, no. 2 (2022): 166–67.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 18.

## Creating the 'Non-theological' as the Necessary Other to a 'Theology from Nowhere'

The imperial structures offered in support of the church never remained external to it – they nurtured both the processes by which 'orthodox' formulations were produced and distributed and established normative theological frameworks and postures. A couple of examples must here suffice.

The first concerns the creation of borderlands, spaces beyond the empire that exist only in opposition to it. This is the place of difference, the unknown, threat, pagan immorality, and cunning ritual. Such is the home of the 'barbarian'. In Peter Brown's estimation, before AD 400, no frontier, either in terms of mindset or material border, existed between the 'Romans' and the 'barbarians'.<sup>38</sup> But, due to the same forces of multiplicity and difference within Roman society which Nicaea played a part in addressing, it became necessary to «invent an absolute frontier where, in fact, no such frontier [...] existed. [The Romans] treated all societies outside the political frontier of Rome as 'barbarians'». <sup>39</sup> With a clear 'other' in place, the empire could present itself as the hero standing before the hordes and levy taxes as a consequence. Christianity could likewise construe itself as the beacon of truth besieged by the world of darkness on all sides. The later expansion of the Christian gospel across this barrier, into the barbarian hinterland, came to represent a great drama, an overcoming of the real enemy, and an indicator of the power and truth of the faith. The problem is, when viewed from the perspective of «the older, more deeply rooted Christian populations of North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia, what we call Western Christendom was out on a limb. It was the Christianity of a peripheral zone». <sup>40</sup> In other words, the power of the imaginary embedded within the Western tradition that the early church councils were themselves formational for the development of Europe as a 'Christian' civilisation remains a 'self-congratulatory myth', one grounded precisely in the imperial need for a defined enemy and executed through the processes of exclusion. <sup>41</sup> Nor need one read much Western mission theory to find identical patterns of othering practised against the 'pagans' of the newly 'discovered' lands,

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xiv.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xiv.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvi.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvi. The problem is far from benign. For a clear indicator of its impact, see Jason A. Goroncy, "Race and Christianity in Australia," *Post-Christendom Studies* 4 (2019): 43–48.

especially those found in New Holland (a historical European name for mainland Australia) and Aotearoa/New Zealand.<sup>42</sup>

This leads to a second concern: history. The history of the 'body of Christ' becomes identified with the passage of the Western church and the embodiment of its faith. The story told is of a contingent journey from Jerusalem to Rome, to the northern barbarians and the 'Holy Roman Empire', to the Reformation, to the rediscovery of the 'pagans' in the Americas, and, finally, to the blossoming of the faith through 'the rest of the world'.<sup>43</sup> The legacy of this historiography and its deployment of genealogy resides in the periodisation of Christianity – and the coordinated reformulation of 'mission' from the eschatological and the refusal of every premature closing of history to a flat movement from centre (Rome) to periphery (Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Pasifik). Mission reduces to a question of 'reception' and is «simultaneous with the act of enforced domination based on political, economic, technological, military or ideological superiority».<sup>44</sup> The 'history', in other words, necessitates processes of simplification and purification, stripping away the «imaginative and intellectual 'roughage'» necessary for theological production.<sup>45</sup> Or, this history refuses to grant the processes of cultural negotiation to peoples beyond the West because the now 'universalised' (read: purified) theological history cannot permit the ongoing validity of such processes – to do so is to relativise the 'contingent' embodied forms associated with the orthodox tradition (creeds, hierarchies, doctrines).<sup>46</sup> The resulting assumption, as Christo-

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, William Carey's use of James Cook's judgement concerning the Māori in Aotearoa. Carey affirmed with gusto the «great brutality and eagerness» with which «cannibals» fed «upon the flesh of their slain enemies», the truth of which was «ascertained, beyond a doubt, by the late eminent navigator, Cooke [sic], of the New Zealanders. [...] Human sacrifices are also very frequently offered, so that scarce a week elapses without instances of this kind. They are in general poor, barbarous, naked pagans, as destitute of civilization, as they are of true religion». William Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. In Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, Are Considered* (Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792), 63.

<sup>43</sup> See, as one example of this complaint, Justo L. González, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 7–32.

<sup>44</sup> Enrique Dussel, "Towards a History of the Church in the World Periphery: Some Hypotheses," in *Towards a History of the Church in the Third World: Papers and Report of a Consultation on "The Issue of Periodisation" Convened by the Working Commission on Church History of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (July 17–21, 1983, Geneva)*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1985), 112.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvii.

<sup>46</sup> See "On Intercultural Hermeneutics: Report of a WCC Consultation, Jerusalem, 5–12 December 1995," *International Review of Mission* 85 (1996): 241–52.

pher Duraisingh avers, is that only «European history [...] shares the same horizon as Christian history», and that the «plurality of cultures and traditions that make up the Christian faith have place only as they are amalgamated into a monolithic history or tradition».<sup>47</sup> This results in several fundamental problems concerning Christian mission as primarily a movement of territorial expansion (rather than an eschatological disruption) and the resulting denial of pre-Christian heritages (religious, cultural, legal) and histories. Alternatively, the ‘body of Christ’ becomes so identified with the arrangement between the faith and the invented course of ‘Western civilisation’ that becoming Christian necessitates either adopting imagined acultural and ahistorical (i.e., Western) forms of embodiment and the history within which these forms were sacralised, or theological moves such as detaching the ‘Spirit’ or the ‘Christ’ from Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>48</sup>

Nor has the contemporary ecumenical movement proven capable of shedding this mode of othering or its reliance on a ‘universal history’. Following a Tolkienesque citation from Brian Stanley which depicts Edinburgh 1910 as the preparation of «missionary armies to launch a concerted and final onslaught on the dark forces of heathendom that still ruled supreme beyond the frontiers of western Christendom», Raimundo Barreto regards that conference as «one of the final and decisive events of an era of western Christian expansionism».<sup>49</sup> Following in train with the Nicæan heresy, Barreto charges that the envisioned form of unity of the contemporary ecumenical movement is «culturally and epistemologically exclusionary, and [...] shaped by the Christendom ecumenical project».<sup>50</sup> So embedded are the processes of exclusion present *in nuce* at Nicaea for questions of Christian orthodoxy, tradition, and unity, that the Western cultural, linguistic, and epistemic

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Duraisingh, “Contextual and Catholic: Conditions for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics,” *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 4 (2000): 681–82. For an identical argument, see Dale T. Irvin, “From One Story to Many: An Ecumenical Reappraisal of Church History,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28, no. 4 (1991): 537–54.

<sup>48</sup> Any number of examples might be given, but see Choan-Seng Song, “From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap,” *Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 3 (1976): 252–65; Edmond Tang, “The Cosmic Christ – The Search for a Chinese Theology,” *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 2 (1995): 131–42; Steve Charleston, “The Old Testament of Native America,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies From the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 69–81; Gerald O. West, “African Culture as *Praeparatio Evangelica*: The Old Testament as Preparation of the African Post-Colonial,” in *Postcolonialism and the Hebrew Bible: The Next Step*, ed. Roland Boer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 193–220.

<sup>49</sup> Raimundo C. Barreto, “How World Christianity Saved the Ecumenical Movement,” *Protestantismo em Revista* 46, no. 2 (2020): 224.

<sup>50</sup> Barreto, “How World Christianity Saved the Ecumenical Movement,” 224.



project constitutes the necessary framing of ecumenical discourse. This inevitably results in the key problem driving the ‘ecumenical winter’ – treating difference as a threat and subject to expulsion.

Without question, the ecumenical movement has sought to address the complex issues of ‘context’ and ‘diversity’ in various ways. Whether one turns to the Faith and Order’s Montreal conference (1963) and its attempt to distinguish the Tradition with a capital ‘T’ (referring to the revelation of God in scripture) from traditions (cultural and conditioned forms of Christian embodiment), or to the 1977 WCC paper, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, which developed the idea of ‘translation’ before cautioning that it «may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life» (§27), or to the WCC’s official 1999 instrument for reflection on hermeneutics, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, wherein the Tradition is retained as the necessary authority over contextuality and catholicity, the identical problem remains: a tradition transcending time and place overrides every theology located in time and place.<sup>51</sup>

Such a binary is already evident in a 1937 Faith and Order statement titled ‘The Non-theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union’, which must be read as the original, decisive, and ongoing ecumenical position. It first defines theology as the «direct reflection upon immediate spiritual experience, and the formulation of these reflections as a system of thought, which interprets the prior experience and which elicits from the particular forms of that experience its universal truths».<sup>52</sup> Theology, so defined, relies on an ‘immediate’ (or, unmediated) ‘spiritual experience’, and essentialises ‘universal truths’ from that experience, irrespective of any historical or cultural location. The non-theological, by contrast, is the mediate and the local, a conglomerate of «factors which have their origin in the environing culture rather than within the direct Christian tradition».<sup>53</sup> This concerns the ‘interpretation’ of the theological via the ‘use of analogies’, ‘mental

<sup>51</sup> The singular (non-)definition of ‘diversity’ within WCC documentation resulted from Chung Kyung-Hyung’s dance at the WCC’s Seventh Assembly held in Canberra (1991). This reads: «Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8)». Michael Kinnamon, ed. *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7–20 February 1991* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 173.

<sup>52</sup> Commission on the Church’s Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union* (London: Harper, 1937), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Commission on the Church’s Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors*, 11.



apparatus' for the gospel's missionary communication to non-Christians (pagans).<sup>54</sup> The non-theological indicates «ideas and modes of thought originating in the first instance outside the direct Christian tradition, but eventually employed in the formal elaboration of Christian thought».<sup>55</sup> This is the fundamental pretence that originated at Nicaea and is perfected through the legacies of imperialism to the present day. Difference becomes enshrined within the communication of the faith (hence all complaints vis-à-vis mission as the 'mediating' reality, i.e., colonisation, contextual theologies, and interpretation), while truth is its purified opposite, an unmediated view from nowhere.

To bind these threads together in relation to colonisation, 'difference' is an enduring problem today because it is an enduring problem through pre-modern positions.<sup>56</sup> Space precludes an exhaustive treatment, but the work of Bibhuti Yadav proves instructive. To begin, «the uniqueness of Euro-Christian West is self-referential. It recognizes itself only in relation to the different».<sup>57</sup> Othering is constitutive of 'Euro-Christian subjectivity' because in discovering the other, the West «reiterates its uniqueness» and the «ontological autonomy» in which it «constitutes the boundary of thought».<sup>58</sup> This drive for a unique identity, ontological shuttering, the closure of history, and prescriptive boundary-making resides within fundamental theological commitments. The creation of the 'barbarian' is the necessary first step: located in «the West, is the Euro-Christian light and redemption», whereas in the East exists the embodiment of «dark and bloody superstitions».<sup>59</sup> As difference (monolithic othering) is constitutive of the West's liberative identity, so other (difference) exists only in contrast to this identity. On this site, the West is «to impose itself».<sup>60</sup> All difference is without «cognitive and ethical agency» and reduced to «a knowable object that can then be represented in discourse».<sup>61</sup> Difference is empty because it serves the «project of 'completion'».<sup>62</sup> This is the universal history promised by Jesus Christ. For Yadav, colonisation is

<sup>54</sup> Commission on the Church's Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Commission on the Church's Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> For a helpful summary, see Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 57–78.

<sup>57</sup> Bibhuti S. Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," *Sophia* 39, no. 1 (2000): 101.

<sup>58</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 78.

<sup>59</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 79.

<sup>60</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 79.

<sup>61</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 78.

<sup>62</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 101.

«as pre-modern as the theology of creation *ex nihilo*. The mission of this theology is twofold: a) to reduce history to a clean slate by erasing all signs of a pre-Christian past and non-Christian present from consciousness; and b) to remember salvation as a future that implies christological identity is universal in scope».<sup>63</sup> Or, to contend «with absolute difference» would be to «undermine the christological promise of history».<sup>64</sup> So formulated, Jesus Christ precludes all difference, resolving the faith within theological processes basic to Western civilisation and the mode of colonisation, the Jesus of colony, the Jesus experienced as enemy.

## The Contemporary Reality

No doubt, some readers will find the direct link drawn here between the processes of Nicaea and a christology of colonisation surprising and perhaps even preposterous – but it is not new. As one illustration, Duraisingh states that to identify Christianity with «the ancient and the medieval past of Latin and Greek Europe is not only to *deny the non-Western sociocultural realities* their proper and distinct place within the global communion of churches, [...] it is also to deny the possibility of *genuinely new insights of faith and witness* being brought into the stream of the *traditioning process* of the global Church».<sup>65</sup> These concerns also underlie Halapua's lament regarding the dehumanisation of fellow Christians, those 'late' to the historic tradition, through the recognition achieved by the reception of an imperialist orthodoxy and the absence of recognition of difference by that same tradition.

Or, to follow another neighbour in the Pasifik, while some might identify the etymological origins of 'colonisation' with such Latin forms as *colere* (to cultivate/till), *colonia* (a farm) and *colonus* (tiller of the soil/a farmer) leading to a general idea of 'inhabiting', Upolu Vaai, a Samoan-born theologian now serving as Principal of the Pasifika Communities University, Fiji, more rightly observes that colonisation «comes from the word *colon* meaning *to digest*. Theology in the Pacific has been a slave to this *colon narrative* where only one culture, one way, one dance, or one destination digests all others in the name of an ultimate truth».<sup>66</sup> He describes this as 'oneification': the imposition of a singular, uniform truth or approach, derived

<sup>63</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 79.

<sup>64</sup> Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 102.

<sup>65</sup> Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic" 682. *Italics added*.

<sup>66</sup> Upolu Lumā Vaai, "Relational Theologising: Why Pacific Islanders Think and Theologise Differently," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 58 (2020): 43.

from and controlled by dominant centres of knowledge and which marginalises, at best, Indigenous ways of thinking, living, and theologising:

Onefication is not about truth, but rather the control of truth. It is lazy energy. [...] It dismisses multiple stories and makes one story the only story. It strives to make visible the face of the one by making invisible the face of the many.<sup>67</sup>

The drive to oneness, the incapacity to recognise difference, is the excrement of empire.

Thus stated, the question of processes may sound more familiar, a repetition of the complaints about uniformity and homogeneity that have long been rejected by ecumenical discourse concerned with the nature of Christian unity.<sup>68</sup> But to reiterate the point, the issue lies not in abstract qualifications guiding the refinement of orthodoxy ('lazy energy'), but in the processes themselves, their hiddenness, their establishment of the necessary framework for discourse and recognition, and their slippery capacity – and propensity – to direct and reject difference.

One example must suffice.<sup>69</sup> *Nelen Yubu*, or the 'good way' in the Ngan'gikurunggurr language of the Daly River, was a Roman Catholic missions journal that ran from 1978 to 2002. From its inception, *Nelen Yubu* was committed to theological inculturation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of what is now known as Australia. It opposed the approach of 'assimilation' and was intentional in learning from previous missionary errors. This included support for Aboriginal self-determination because, to cite Laura Rademaker, «[w]hereas assimilation meant cultural destruction, self-determination was to be its opposite: cultural revival».<sup>70</sup> Without qualification, *Nelen Yubu* represented the most well-positioned authentic attempt by white missionaries to listen to, encourage, and promote Indigenous theological positions, along with a coordinated apparent willingness to translate these into the institutions and structures of the church.

Writing at the close of the journal, however, Martin Wilson MSC, the editor throughout *Nelen Yubu's* life, lamented its originating direction: «the program of <inculturation> is falsely conceived» – «there is no grand single super-culture into

<sup>67</sup> Vaai, "Relational Theologising," 43.

<sup>68</sup> As a classic example, see Sehon Goodridge, "Unity: Present and Future," *New Blackfriars* 62, no. 727 (1981): 38–44.

<sup>69</sup> What follows is indebted to Laura Rademaker, "'Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies': Inculturation, Self-Determination and the Authority of First Nations," *Journal of Religious History* 47, no. 4 (2023): 516–36.

<sup>70</sup> Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 524.

which Christian belief can be fitted».<sup>71</sup> Rademaker's summary judgement is worth citing in full:

Wilson came to recognise that the idea of a culture-less gospel was a vessel for a white supremacist gospel by which white missionaries alone held a view from nowhere. This meant that the idea that missionaries might transcend their culture and guide the inculturation of Aboriginal worship was more than ill conceived, it was a reimagined form of cultural imperialism. By this missiology Aboriginal people's intellectual authority was always culturally bound. They could be Aboriginal theologians, but not theologians. Their authority was limited to matters of cultural knowledge and always vulnerable to suggestions that their cultural expression might be inauthentic. More importantly, the question of sovereignty and of stolen Country was side-stepped altogether.<sup>72</sup>

Rademaker attributes this to a process of consolidation basic to Western knowledge forms: appropriating and commodifying Indigenous ways of viewing and participating in the world, resulting in a form of self-congratulatory validation, and using that to elide any challenge to the concerns and power structures resisted by Indigenous knowledge structures.<sup>73</sup> One might even go further: ignoring the key issues of sovereignty and stolen Country, establishing set parameters for forms of production, including a necessary 'assent to these ideas' for Aboriginal voices to be heard, is a contemporary manifestation of the exact same theological processes in place since Nicaea. Indigenous peoples' deep connection to and custodianship of the land are reduced to merely 'cultural' elements that can be selectively borrowed, or not. This creates a paradoxical situation where «Blackfullas are forced to embody an illusory double-consciousness between existing and non-existing, human and non-human, real and unreal, traditional and modern. It is more than a peculiar sensation; it is a dispossessing location».<sup>74</sup> It is the process of making visible the one faith by making invisible the faces of the many.

<sup>71</sup> Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 535–56, citing Martin Wilson, "Editorial," *Nelen Yubu* 80 (2002): 3.

<sup>72</sup> Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 536. For an example of how this same challenge persists in other contexts, see Emma Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 534, referring to Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwentinepineslik Stark, "Towards a Relational Paradigm – Four Points for Consideration: Knowledge, Gender, Land, and Modernity," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous–Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 180.

<sup>74</sup> Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2021), 46.

The example of *Nelen Yubu* illustrates how even the most generous attempts at theological construction using the processes of orthodoxy fail at the fundamental point – the processes cannot admit that local socio-cultural realities hold a proper and distinct place within the church ecumenical. They cannot grant further forms to the traditioning processes by which these embodied forms and insights belong to the Christian faith as such and not to some limited form of ‘cultural knowledge’. They cannot do so because the basic method of constructing ‘orthodoxy’ occurs through the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference, difference as such.

## Indigenising Traditioning Processes

Given this reality, a few nameable commitments must determine a revised traditioning process. In direct contravention of the Nicaean heresy, the first recognises cultural and linguistic differences as basic to the telling of who Jesus Christ is. It is antithetical for the Resurrected One to be consolidated within a single cultural or historical articulation. World Christianity reveals quite the opposite – the gospel is only ever embodied difference, and unity lies in the negotiation and reception of that difference. In other words, christology witnesses to a process of embodiment that rejects an assumed universal ‘empirical’ mode of culture – a way of perceiving reality according to a vision of a ‘universal human being’ and a program of educating people toward this (civilising) vision.<sup>75</sup> The opposite is the case: it belongs to Jesus Christ that «the interpretation of reality is plural, and that such plurality is true».<sup>76</sup> This is not to assert a relativism that denies truth; it is, instead, to understand truth not as «a condition or a situation, but as a process».<sup>77</sup> This commitment assumes that the fullness of Christ can only be revealed through the irreducible plurality of cultural and linguistic differences, including processes of theologising (i.e., witness), each illuminating aspects that others might obscure.

<sup>75</sup> Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro, “Toward a Feminist Intercultural Theology,” in *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, ed. Maria Pilar Aquino and Maria Jose Rosado-Nunes (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 249. See Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 32: «With respect to cultural chauvinism, pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but in respect of God pluralism is the cornerstone of the universal human family».

<sup>76</sup> Vélez Caro, “Toward a Feminist Intercultural Theology,” 250.

<sup>77</sup> Raúl Fornet Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural de la Filosofía: Ejercicios Teóricos y Prácticos de Filosofía Intercultural desde Latinoamérica en el Contexto de la Globalización* (Bilbao: Desclee de Brouwer, 2001), 48. Cited in Vélez Caro, “Toward a Feminist Intercultural Theology,” 251.

Second, the necessary reversal of the Nicaean heresy involves recognising relational and polyvalent frameworks as pre-existent divine gifts rather than recent cultural adaptations.<sup>78</sup> While the Western-located ecumenical movement struggles with the idea that World Christianity produces new insights of faith and witness that are also constitutive of the processes of traditioning, the local telling of the gospel demonstrates that «meanings are not rigid», that «a single story always has multiple meanings», and that «each receiver of the story must deal with the fact that all meanings and versions of the same story are truth-bearing».<sup>79</sup> An Indigenous Australian account of Country and of how one crosses Country illustrates the point. Drawing on his anthropological fieldwork with Aboriginal peoples in Central Australia, Sam Gill outlines a notion of territory as defined by ancestral pathways across the landscape. Rather than conceiving territory as demarcated boundaries, this understanding centres on an interconnected network of tracks linking locations visited by ancestors. As Gill notes: «For aborigines, identity is inseparable from territory and [...] ontology is strongly spatial, rather than temporal, in character».<sup>80</sup> This spatial understanding allows multiple track networks to coexist within the same physical space. These pathways serve not as boundaries of division but as connections to ancestral heritage – notably, these different routes can overlap without conflict.

Developing an Australian theological paradigm emancipated from the constraints of Nicaean methodological presuppositions promotes a fundamental re-conceptualisation of Christianity's historiographical narratives imposed upon the Australian context. Such a theology privileges geo-cultural particularity over abstract constructs of universalism, repositioning theological discourse within specific landscapes and cultural matrices, and opposes disembodied (transcendent) conceptual systems. This prioritises Country, which includes community, as the primary locus of theological meaning-making and recognises ancestral wisdom as an authoritative theological source. Critically, such theology valorises narrative traditions and oral transmission as proper modes of theological articulation, resisting the tendency to reduce theological complexity to propositional doctrinal

<sup>78</sup> See Vaai, "Relational Theologising," 40–56; Anne Pattel-Gray, "Australia's First Nations Theology," in *Emerging Theologies from the Global South*, ed. Mitri Raheb and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023), 384–94.

<sup>79</sup> Upolu Lumā Vaai, "A Theology of Talalasi: Challenging the 'One Truth' Ideology of the Empire," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 55 (2016): 53.

<sup>80</sup> Sam Gill, "Territory," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 299.

statements. This methodological shift recognises that theology embedded in story, ritual, and communal practice carries greater epistemological validity than ‘abstract’ dogmatic pronouncements that pretend to be disconnected from located lived experience and place-based knowledge, i.e., from Western embodied forms.

Third, theologians within the Western (normative) tradition must acknowledge and grapple with the political substrate that informs all theological production. During periods of sociopolitical precarity, the tendency toward theological retrenchment and tribal insularity represents an understandable, if problematic, response to existential uncertainty. However, such reactionary postures fail to apprehend the fundamental imbrication of imperial theological modalities with the sociopolitical and economic apparatuses of colonisation. As Nicaea also embodied political production, so the deconstruction of hegemonic modalities must incorporate substantive political dimensions – specifically, «the right of self-determination or political empowerment».<sup>81</sup>

A common temptation within Western (normative) discourse is to recognise (and so dismiss) such theologising as local, as something that occurs upon receipt of the Tradition. But this, again, relies on the theological/non-theological binary at the heart of the Nicaean heresy. In other words, the oft-heard call that Aboriginal peoples must construct theological frameworks that speak «within our own particular context for the sake of obedience that comes through faith and to the glory of God»<sup>82</sup> refers not simply to contextual framings of received theologies. The theological path beyond this heresy lies within and through the communities subjected to it; those with eyes to see. It means working through the realities of Indigenous liberation. The political call is not extraneous to theological inquiry – as embodied at Nicaea, it is constitutive of all ‘proper’ theological work. To again cite Paulson: «to the extent that we live in the spirit of Christ, the church will seek in every place to overcome the distortions of colonial power».<sup>83</sup> Nicaea’s inherited theological methodologies have functioned as intellectual frameworks *and* as regulatory mechanisms for colonial power relations, rendering their dismantling inherently political and necessary.

<sup>81</sup> Anne Pattel-Gray, “Methodology in an Aboriginal Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 278. But, again, heed Paulson’s warning: «One of the meanings of repentance in Australia must surely be a turning away from cultural superiority [...] not to mention the use of ‘self-determination’ to mean its opposite». Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology,” 311.

<sup>82</sup> Djinyini Gondarra, “Overcoming the Captivities of the Western Church Context,” *Nelen Yubu* 25 (1986): 12.

<sup>83</sup> Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology,” 317.

This political and theological reorientation aligns with exegetical commitments vis-à-vis God's character – «God shows no partiality» (Rom 2.11; cf. 2 Chr 19.7; Acts 10.34; Gal 3.28; Eph 6.9; *passim*). Indeed, those who «show partiality [...] are committing sin» (Jas 2.9). Theological modes that privilege collective empowerment over subordination more faithfully reflect this divine impartiality than do theological systems that have sanctioned hierarchical stratification or perpetuated the othering of those called by God. Theological renewal or reform requires a conceptual reconfiguration and political transformation, recognising that all theological work necessitates an interrogation of power relations embedded within hermeneutical traditions and institutional structures – along with deliberate, sustained, prayerful efforts to overcome them.

## Conclusion: Repenting the Imperial Unity Agreement

Writing as settler-theologians, we do not pretend that all might view this as a necessary *christological* task. Nor do we believe that there is a clear and straight way forward.<sup>84</sup> But the reform of theological processes lies in recognising/hearing the experience of dehumanisation in the production of theology, and in a corresponding attempt to address those processes via the negotiation of complex and polyvalent frameworks within communities of difference. As non-Indigenous, part of our theological responsibility includes developing the necessary sensitivity to know when we theologise with 'lazy energy' and slip back into Nicaean heresies. This means rejecting the possibility of conceiving the deracination of Indigenous peoples, and the application of dehumanising theological processes, as «insensitivity to Indigenous cultures».<sup>85</sup> Or, bracketing the acknowledgement of «the complicity of the Church in these genocides against Indigenous» with empty self-congratulatory commendations for our «repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius».<sup>86</sup> We must, in other words, develop critical guidelines to address the othering of Indigenous theological concerns and developments, and

<sup>84</sup> As a truly grotesque example, see Biggar, *Colonialism*.

<sup>85</sup> World Council of Churches, «Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding», accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/pb-14-religiousplurality.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup> See World Council of Churches, «Statement on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples», accessed May 8, 2025, <https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-reconciliation-with-indigenous-peoples>.



reject wholesale the categorisation of that ‘mediated’ work as ‘non-theological’. The concern, in other words, is the repeated, casual, unrecognised shift to theological processes that maintain a dominant body’s ‘integrity’, even as its express intention is toward ‘reconciliation’.

How ought we appraise a creed like that produced at Nicaea? If the creeds are judged to be the contingent work of the Spirit, then that same trust must be laid in the contemporary work of the Spirit across the difference of God’s creation. In 1966, the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared that the Reformed «cannot treat as absolute any of the structures and confessions which we inherit; in our very loyalty, we must be ready to go wherever the Spirit leads, even if it be through that death which leads to new life».<sup>87</sup> Based on this pneumatological commitment, Reformed confessions are, in principle, marked by regional and temporal particularity, limited in insight, revisable, and surpassable.<sup>88</sup> In other words, they aspire to be explicit about their own context and time, and about their role as interpreters of scripture as empowered by the Spirit in light of new learnings and challenges. Clearly, this has proven to be difficult for the Reformed, with many confessions mandated as static theological productions or ‘standards’. In other words, the development of such confessions has assumed and benefited from the processes established at Nicaea and has employed them to establish fixed identities through the mode of confessing. To again cite Paulson, this perpetuation of the Nicæan heresy has, in the case of Australia, and much farther afield, led to genocide and worse – ‘Christianity’.

In the spirit of confession: we reject the theological processes by which the Jesus of orthodoxy becomes embodied as the Jesus of colony, an enemy worse than imported disease and infant mortality, the bearer of genocide; we affirm that God shows no partiality, that our christologies must liberate and make whole, and that theology is known by its fruit (Gal 5.22–23; Col 3.12–13).

<sup>87</sup> Alan P. F. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology: The Contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1875–1982* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 78.

<sup>88</sup> For a more detailed exploration of this subject, see Jason A. Goroncy, “*Semper Reformanda* as a Confession of Crisis,” in *Always Being Reformed: Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David H. Jensen (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 43–73.

# Scriptural and Theological Hermeneutics of the Nicene Faith

## Introduction

Here, in a lively conversation with this ancient creed, diverse global Reformed voices from India, Switzerland, Germany, Samoa, and the USA engage critical questions and offer fresh and fruitful interpretations for our time. What was at stake theologically at Nicaea? What is the relation between the creedal affirmations and the testimony of Scripture? Both the Trinitarian theology and Christology found in the creed continue to shape Christian theology in decisive ways. Where do we see the impact of context on the original formulations as well as on our ongoing interpretations today? The chapters in this section engage with such questions.

**Margit Ernst-Habib** sets the stage for understanding Reformed tradition as an ‘open confessional tradition’. Instead of treating creeds and confessions as fixed and final doctrinal statements, the Reformed emphasize their provisional and contextual nature. All confessional expressions are grounded in the ongoing prophetic activity of the Holy Spirit – «the Lord and Giver of life, who has spoken through the prophets». The authority of confessional documents is derived from their faithfulness to the Spirit-inspired and Spirit-interpreted Scriptures. As the Spirit continues to move in the wider world, new theological, social, and ethical challenges arise. The church seeks to have the humility to receive the wisdom of the past and the boldness to speak anew when the spirit calls.

**Matthias Zeindler** takes up the problem of secularization as we encounter it especially in the northern hemisphere. Many in that context, question whether God exists. Zeindler makes a compelling case that the God they are rejecting is the God of classical theism and not the God of the Nicene faith. The God of classical theism is a God of absolute power, an almighty ruler and supreme lawgiver who

ordains the good and permits the evil. This is not the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ. If we reclaim the Nicene faith, we can see God through the lens of incarnation. It is in Jesus Christ that we see who God truly is – he is «true God from true God». Here we find a God who is loving, personal and relational; liberating rather than limiting human freedom; a God who suffers with us; a God who does not coerce but rather lures us toward the coming reign of God.

In a world fractured by the empire, exclusion, and divisive theological rigidity, **Rathnakara Sadananda** offers a post-colonial liberative reimagining of the ancient Nicene confession that the Son is «of one being with the Father» (*homoousios*). Rather than treating this term as a static metaphysical formula or a litmus test of orthodoxy, it is retrieved as a living expression of divine solidarity, kenotic communion, and cosmic justice. The vision is anchored in the Gospel of John where oneness is not sameness, but participatory, relational, and radically inclusive communion – a divine dance of love that refuses domination and embraces the wounded world.

Kenotic intimacy redefines glory through descent, mission, and mutual indwelling. The chapter also examines the Council of Nicaea's contested legacy – its theological insights and ambiguities; its liberative soteriology and political compromises. The constructive climax reinterprets *homoousios* as a theological summons to kenotic justice, ecclesial solidarity with the marginalized, and ecological kinship with all creation. This is no mere doctrinal refinement – it is a call to become a sacrament of resistance in a world of fractures. It invites readers into a vision where doctrine becomes dance, unity becomes justice, and the ancient confession becomes a liturgy of a liberating communion – poured out for the life of the world.

Through the centuries Christians have affirmed that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God's presence is seen in a distinctive and decisive way. Yet Christians have struggled to understand how and in what sense «God was in Christ». Some have settled for a 'low Christology' emphasizing humanity in which case little can be known of what God is like from the life of Jesus. Others have settled for a 'high Christology' emphasizing divinity in which case we might be moved to worship him, but we cannot be expected to *follow* him since we are 'only human' and not divine as he was. **Anna Case-Winters** advocates a reclaiming of the robust incarnational theology found in the creed – 'true God' and 'truly Human'. Next, the chapter draws out the implications of 'deep incarnation' – the divine embrace of embodiment and material reality as such – for social justice and ecological responsibility.

**Fraser Tauaivale and Brian Fui Kolia** explore the political utility of Christianity from the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) to contemporary Samoan politics. They

trace how religious rhetoric can be mobilized to consolidate power and shape public opinion. Emperor Constantine's strategic engagement with the early Christian community was a political maneuver aimed at unifying the empire and consolidating power. Drawing a parallel to modern Samoa, the authors examine the deployment of 'God-talk' by politicians as a form of Christian nationalism, wherein religious identity becomes inseparable from national belonging. This phenomenon, entrenched in Samoa's constitutional reference to Christian principles, has enabled political actors to exploit public religiosity to their advantage, notably during key elections and policy debates. The authors critique the static, colonial readings of Scripture that underpin this dynamic, and propose a Moana hermeneutic rooted in fluidity, complexity, and indigenous Pasifika knowledge systems. In place of the imperial Christ of Christian nationalism, they advocate for a 'complexified Son' who aligns with the marginalized and resists the consolidation of power. This approach offers a decolonial theological alternative for communities negotiating faith, identity, and political agency in the Church today.

**Shannon Craigo Snell** reads the Nicene Creed through the lens of Audre Lorde's famous statement: «the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house». Lorde – an African American scholar, author, and activist – offers this guidance for all who engage in justice-seeking actions. She characterizes the master's tools as views and practices that devalue difference. As a product of a council called by Constantine with the intent of homogenizing Christianity, the Nicene Creed is a tool of empire, one of «the master's tools». Yet the content of the creed gives witness to Jesus Christ, who opposed the Roman Empire and was executed for his resistance. It names him as «true God from true God». Furthermore, the theological affirmation that Jesus is «of one substance with the Father», recognizes difference within God. The Trinitarian theology developed out of this Christian theological innovation perceives the Divine life as a giving and receiving of love, which is only possible with the presence of difference. Thus, this theology affirms difference, which is completely contrary to the master's tools as Lorde describes them. The master's tools are here subverted.

The diverse global voices engaging with the Nicene creed in this section thus contextualize the original formulation, repurposing it for ongoing Reformed interpretations that seek to reclaim the Nicene faith as a hermeneutic tool to resist empiric tendencies in the world today and shape Christological and Trinitarian formulations that do not serve the 'master's tools'.



# Listening to the Holy Spirit with(in) Contemporary Reformed Confessions

*Margit Ernst-Habib*

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty [...]  
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God [...]  
And in the Holy Spirit.

(Nicene Creed, AD 325)

And in the Holy Spirit,  
The Lord and Giver of all life [...]  
Who has spoken through the prophets.

(Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, AD 381)

## The Prophetic Spirit and the Confessing Community

The Christian church journeys through history as a confessing community, called to bear witness to the living God amid ever-changing historical and cultural circumstances. At the heart of this calling lies the dynamic interplay between the Holy Spirit's prophetic voice and the church's ongoing responsibility to articulate its faith afresh. One of the most significant and enduring expressions of this confessional task is the Nicene Creed, which is for many Christian traditions a foundational and ecumenical statement of Christian belief. The original Nicene Creed, formulated at the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325, offered a concise affirmation of faith, especially in response to controversies about the divinity of Christ. However, it was at the First Council of Constantinople in AD 381 that the Nicene Creed was expanded to include a more comprehensive and explicit section on the Holy Spirit, responding to the need for greater clarity and emphasis regarding the

third person of the Trinity. This later version of the Creed, often referred to as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, affirms the Holy Spirit as «the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets». This expanded confession not only underscores the Spirit's full divinity and role within the Trinity but also highlights the Spirit's ongoing work in history. And, indeed, it is the work of this very Holy Spirit, confessed to with sparse words in the Nicene Creed, that leads to a more developed description of who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does in the later confession.

The phrase «who has spoken through the prophets» anchors the Spirit's function as the divine inspirer and interpreter of Scripture, affirming that it was the Spirit who moved the prophets and apostles to speak and write, and who guides the church in reading, understanding, and living according to the witness of Scripture. For the Reformed tradition, this affirmation is not only a statement about the past but also a living reality: the same Spirit who inspired the prophets continues to guide the church's witness, and shape its confessional life today.<sup>1</sup> When Reformed churches around the world, thus, join in celebrating the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nicene Creed, they do not view it as a final word, but rather as part of the church's ongoing, faithful response to the living call and work of the Holy Spirit. For them, the Nicene Creed is not merely a fixed confessional position but serves as one of the guiding lights for God's people on their journey of faith. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is not merely a distant inspirer of ancient texts within the Reformed tradition but the present Lord and Giver of life, actively illuminating Scripture, the interpreters of Scripture, and guiding the church's confessional statements. This understanding is central to the Reformed churches' character as an open confessional tradition,<sup>2</sup> which allows for the creation of new confessions in response to contemporary challenges and contexts. Such openness is not driven by a desire for

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Martha L. Moore-Keish, *Reformed Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 29–33, and Shannon Nicole Smythe, “Reformed Perspectives on the Holy Spirit,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Pneumatology*, ed. Daniel Castelo and Kenneth M. Loyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 207–214. For a dogmatic treatment of pneumatology from a Reformed perspective, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> For a fundamental discussion of this term, see Michael Weinrich, “The Openness and Worldliness of the Church,” in *Reformed and Ecumenical*, ed. Christine Lienemann-Perrin, Hendrik M. Vroom and Michael Weinrich (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1–23.

novelty but by a commitment to listen to and be obedient to the prophetic voice of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

This essay explores the dynamic relationship between the Holy Spirit's prophetic voice and Reformed confessing, drawing on the expanded version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed's affirmation of the Spirit «the Lord and Giver of all Life, who has spoken through the prophets». It argues that the Reformed tradition's open confessional identity is deeply shaped by the Holy Spirit's ongoing prophetic guidance, grounded in the holiness of God as the foundation of both individual and corporate Christian identity.<sup>4</sup>

## The Open Confessional Tradition: The Holy Spirit's Prophetic Voice and the Church's Faithful Responses

The Nicene Creed, formulated in AD 325 and expanded at the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), stands as an eminently influential confession of the Christian faith. When the phrases «the Lord and Giver of Life» and «who has spoken through the prophets» were added in AD 381, the revised version did not perceive itself as a 'new' confession, but rather as an elaboration of what the church believed about the work of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's relationship to revelation, Scripture, and the ongoing life of the church. Historically, the Creed's formulation was a response to theological controversies concerning the nature of the Trinity and the divinity of the Spirit,<sup>5</sup> but also to the experience of the presence of the Spirit in the church: «Long before the Spirit was a theme of doctrine, He was a fact in the experience of the community».<sup>6</sup> By affirming that the Spirit «has spoken through the prophets», the Creed connects the Spirit's work to the entire arc of salvation history – from the inspiration of the Hebrew prophets to the New Testament apostles and the life of

<sup>3</sup> For a contemporary postcolonial re-interpretation of Reformed pneumatology, see Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Reimagining Spirit: Wind, Breath, and Vibration* (Eugene: Cascade Book, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> This essay is, in part, based on my argument in Margit Ernst-Habib, *Reformierte Identität Weltweit. Eine Interpretation neuerer Bekenntnistexte aus der reformierten Tradition* [*Reformed Identity Worldwide. An Interpretation of Contemporary Reformed Confessions*] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 57–219, 313–337.

<sup>5</sup> As well as a response to political circumstances and imperial power issues; See also the articles in section 2 of this publication.

<sup>6</sup> Eduard Schweizer, "Pneuma," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol. 6, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 396.



the church. The Spirit is, thus, not a passive presence but the active agent of God's self-revelation, who brings the Word of God to bear in every generation.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) can confess this kind of trust and faith in the Holy Spirit in its *Brief Statement of Faith* (1991) by describing the work of the Holy Spirit with the following words:

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. [...] The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Theologically, this paragraph affirms both the continuity and the dynamic nature of the Spirit's work. The Spirit who spoke in the past continues to speak in the present, illuminating the Scriptures and guiding the church in truth. The Spirit has not ceased to speak to the church, and the church has to respond to this call by confessing its faith and trust in the Triune God, by written and lived out confessions. This understanding lays the groundwork for the Reformed tradition's openness to new confessions and its insistence that the church must always be attentive to the Spirit's prophetic voice.

While the Nicene Creed holds significant importance for numerous ecclesial traditions and for many (though not all)<sup>8</sup> Reformed churches, its authority lies not in being a definitive, sacrosanct written document of faith per se, but in serving as a faithful expression of the church's responsive witness to the Holy Spirit's ongoing call. When the Second Ecumenical Council convened in Constantinople in AD 381 determined that the Nicene Creed's affirmation of belief in the Holy Spirit («and in the Holy Spirit») required expansion with a fuller section, it exemplified both a faithful response to a recognized theological and ecclesial need and a profound trust in the Spirit's own guidance. The very content and logic of the Nicene Creed's faith not only permitted but indeed called for this addition: the inner coherence of confessing the Holy Spirit naturally led to the outward expansion of the Creed itself. It is this very movement – faithfully discerning and responding to the Spirit's guidance in light of emerging needs – that Reformed churches emulate when they

<sup>7</sup> *The Brief Statement of Faith* in *The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, <https://pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions>, accessed on June 1, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> After the so-called Apostles' Creed controversy in the nineteenth century, many cantonal Swiss Reformed churches, for example, moved away from requiring adherence to any particular creed, the Nicene Creed included.

formulate new confessional statements, seeking to address the unique challenges of their own times and contexts in the light of Scripture's witness and with the guidance of former confessional statement: the Spirit's work is not confined to the past but is an ongoing reality and it is this conviction that leads to the development of confessional documents – not as replacements for Scripture, but as faithful witnesses to the truth of the gospel in particular times and places. As the *New Confession* of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (1972) states in its preamble:

The truth of the Scriptures empowers us in all times through the *Holy Spirit*. We make it, however, our duty to articulate in a new way the truth of the gospel and thereby to seek new ways of obedience to Christ in that we face the ever changing usage of language, new insights, rapidly changing living situations, new challenges of the traditional and the newly emerging sectarian religions and the threats of various evils today.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, the Ghana Church Union Committee stated in its *Basis of Union* (1965) with even a direct reference to the Nicene Creed:

While the negotiating Churches have taken traditional statements of faith (The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds) as sufficient to serve as a basis of union, they are agreed the Church has a continuing responsibility to make its faith clear both to itself and to those outside, restating their faith in relation to the contemporary situation in which the Church stands and in relation to the beliefs, hopes and fears of the world around it.<sup>10</sup>

Both, the Korean and the Ghanaian confession, are models of a distinctive feature of the Reformed tradition: its 'open confessional character'. Unlike traditions that treat confessions as fixed and final, Reformed churches recognize the need for new confessions to address new challenges. This openness is rooted in the conviction that the Holy Spirit continues to speak, guiding the church into all truth (John 16.13). Reformed confessions are, therefore, situated in a «tertiary layer of authority», below Jesus Christ as the head of the church and below the Scriptures; their authority is derived from their faithfulness to the Spirit-inspired and Spirit-interpreted Scriptures. As such, confessions are always provisional, subject to revision in light of the Spirit's ongoing guidance. This approach allows the church

<sup>9</sup> Lukas Vischer, *Reformed Witness today. A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches* (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Ökumene Schweiz, 1982), 70. *Emphases added*

<sup>10</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 275..

to respond faithfully to new situations, trusting that the Spirit who inspired the prophets continues to speak, and trusting that the Spirit inspires the faithful reading, preaching, interpretation, and also scholarly exegesis of Scripture of the church. The church is no self-referential community, not even with reference to the most esteemed ecclesial creeds and confessions, but a God-centered, Christ-focused, Spirit-empowered people. This theocentric orientation is not merely an abstract principle but shapes every aspect of Reformed identity.

The openness is a result of the trust and faith in the Holy Spirit continuing to speak *prophetically* in every generation; this prophetic voice is not an invitation to arbitrary innovation but a call to faithful discernment and obedience. In recent decades, Reformed churches have produced new confessions in response to pressing theological, ethical, and social challenges. Two examples may be globally known: the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) arose in response to the crisis of National Socialism in Germany, affirming the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture against political idolatry; the *Belhar Confession* (1986) emerged from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, emphasizing unity, reconciliation, and justice as essential marks of the church. Just as the *Nicene Creed*, these confessions are not mere historical artifacts but living documents, crafted in response to the Spirit's leading in particular times and places. They testify to the church's ongoing responsibility to listen for the Spirit's voice and to bear witness to the gospel in word and deed. Leepo Modise elucidates this understanding with respect to the Belhar Confession in a concise manner:

The Confession [i.e., the Belhar Confession] is based on Scripture as the word of God and is a witness to the liberating acts of God in history and our own time, the lordship of Jesus Christ over all areas of life, and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of those who believe.<sup>11</sup>

The following sections will illustrate this understanding of the Reformed tradition as an open confessional tradition trusting in and responding to the voice of the Holy Spirit through several examples drawn from Reformed confessions and theological reflections.

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<sup>11</sup> Leepo Modise, "The Belhar Confession of Faith. A Spirituality Sense-Making Confession," in *Belhar Confession: The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, ed. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Leepo Modise (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2017), 201.

## “Relatively Bound and Relatively Free” – Reformed Confessions and the Work of the Holy Spirit<sup>12</sup>

The Spirit has spoken in the ancient creeds, and in the confessions of the Reformation.

*Our Song of Hope*, 1978 (Reformed Church of America)<sup>13</sup>

God's action is not limited to the past. [...] New tasks are constantly being set for human beings and new truths are being recognised. [...] She [the Church] must always be open to the work of the Holy Spirit and measure everything against the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

*The Statement of Christian Faith*, 1956 (Presbyterian Church of England)<sup>14</sup>

The Reformed tradition is marked by a distinctive understanding of the function and authority of confessional texts. Unlike traditions that ascribe absolute or unchanging authority to their creeds, Reformed churches have always held their confessions in a dynamic tension: They are binding, yet provisional; authoritative, yet subject to revision. From the outset, the Reformed tradition has produced a remarkable number of confessional documents, and this abundance is itself an indicator of the Reformed approach to confessional authority: Rather than seeing any single confession as final or exhaustive, Reformed churches understand confessions as responses to God's revelation in particular historical and cultural contexts. The renowned Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) formulated this particular Reformed understanding of confessions in 1929 in a concise and deeply theological description that has since become a widely used definition within Reformed theologies, and it will lead us into the following deliberations on Reformed perspectives on confessions and confessing:

A Reformed creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Theology*. rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 223.

<sup>14</sup> Lukas Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis Heute. Eine Sammlung Neuerer Bekenntnistexte aus der Reformierten Tradition* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 65 (*my translation*).

Holy Scriptures alone. [...] WE, HERE, NOW, confess faith in THIS! Certainly we are conscious of speaking in the name of the one Holy Church (*Una Sancta*), conscious of speaking the truth – but we, here, now speak.<sup>15</sup>

Reformed confessions possess a ‘relative authority’ – they are «relatively binding and relatively free», «provisionally binding and bindingly provisional».<sup>16</sup> This means that while confessions are taken seriously and have a binding character, they are never immune to critique, revision, or replacement in the light of new insights or circumstances.<sup>17</sup> A Reformed church that understands its confession as an «act of obedience» to the guidance of the Holy Spirit must necessarily ascribe to it a high level of authority, both in form and content. However, this authority is not self-derived. Confessions are not theological programs or mere self-definitions; they are responses to God’s revelation, grounded in the recognition that the truth confessed is a gift from the Spirit. The authority of a confession is thus ‘spiritual’, not merely legal or institutional: «The Spirit, not our confession is the sole Lord of Life».<sup>18</sup>

Historical examples abound: The Bern Synod (1532), for example, insisted that its acts be regularly read, explained, and renewed; other churches have required ministers and members to affirm certain confessions as a condition of ordination or membership.<sup>19</sup> Yet, these formal requirements are not the ultimate source of the authority of Reformed confessions. Rather, the binding character of confessions is understood as deriving from God’s action toward the confessing church. The confession is binding not for its own sake, but for the sake of the giver of the gift – God, the Holy Spirit. Reformed obedience to confessions is never blind; it is

<sup>15</sup> Karl Barth, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” in *Theology and the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 112–135 (112.116; emphases in the original).

<sup>16</sup> Hanna Reichel, *Theologie als Bekenntnis. Karl Barth’s kontextuelle Lektüre des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 269 (*my translation*).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Lukas Vischer, “Bekenntnis und Bekennen in der Reformierten Kirche,” in *Una Sancta. Zeitschrift für ökumenische Begegnung* 37 (1982): 111–116.

<sup>18</sup> David Jensen, “Reformed and Always Being Reformed. A Tradition of the Spirit?” in *Reformed and Always Being Reformed. Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David H. Jensen (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 17. Jensen continues: «Nearly every attempt to maintain a universally binding creed in the Reformed tradition has failed. And this failure is one strength of the tradition, as it stresses the ever-provisional, ever-recurring growth in the life of faith. Life in the Spirit is always incomplete, short of the eschaton. Faith is not captured in a creed but witnessed in a Spirit who seals us in the heart [...]. Faith is continually re-awakened and re-made by the One who is faith’s author».

<sup>19</sup> For further examples and discussion, see Ernst-Habib, *Reformierte Identität*, 151.

always paired with gratitude, rooted in God's gracious engagement with humanity. The willingness to be bound by the teachings of the church's spiritual ancestors is a response of thankful obedience. Yet, this reception of tradition is, at the same time, always discerning: «The Christian tradition is to be received humbly and gratefully, but with discernment, and always measured by the Spirit of Christ as revealed in Scripture»<sup>20</sup> (Presbyterian Church of England, 1956). In the Reformed view, therefore, confessional commitment is ultimately an *act of freedom*, made possible by the Holy Spirit. The United Church of Christ in Japan (KYODAN) resolved the tension between 'freedom of faith' and 'confessional authority' by declaring that its Confession of Faith (1954) binds only those who confess it voluntarily.<sup>21</sup> This freedom is itself a gift of the Spirit: The confessing community is able to turn to Christ and confess faith only because the Spirit enables it. Thus, the act of confession is both a response to God's call and an exercise of Spirit-given freedom. This dynamic prevents confessions from becoming instruments of coercion or mere relics of the past. Instead, they remain living documents, open to the Spirit's ongoing guidance and the church's discernment. The Reformed tradition's insistence on the provisional nature of confessions serves as a safeguard against the 'tyranny of the moment' and the arbitrary selectivity of the church. Confessions provide a measure of transcendence over time, reminding the church of theological truths that might otherwise be neglected or forgotten; at the same time, the provisional character of confessions prevents them from becoming timeless, ahistorical absolutes. And it is exactly this very understanding of creeds and confessions as witnesses to the gospel, and as *subordinate standards* that are bound back to the work of the Holy Spirit in Reformed confessions.

In his seminal work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559/60), Calvin reflects on the authority of the Nicene Creed and other councils and states:

"Whenever the decree of a council is produced, the first thing I would wish to be done is, to examine at what time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it; next I would *bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture*. And this I would do in such a way that the decision of the council should have its weight, and be regarded in the light of *a prior judgment*, yet not so as to prevent the application of the test which I have mentioned. [...] In this way, councils would be duly respected, and yet the *highest place would be given to Scripture, everything being brought to it as a test*. Thus those ancient Councils of Nice, Constantinople, the first of Ephesus, Chalcedon, and the like, which were held for refuting

<sup>20</sup> Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis*, (my translation).

<sup>21</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 60.

errors, *we willingly embrace, and reverence as sacred*, in so far as relates to doctrines of faith, for they contain nothing but the pure and genuine interpretation of Scripture, which the holy Fathers with spiritual prudence adopted to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen.”<sup>22</sup>

Calvin, and with him the Reformed tradition, willingly embraced and revered the Nicene Creed as sacred as a *praeiudicium* (prior judgement), only insofar as it contains «nothing but the pure and genuine interpretation of Scripture». A crucial aspect of Reformed confessional theology is, as can be seen here, the relationship between confessions and Scripture. Confessions are not to be read in place of the Bible; rather, they bear witness to the truth witnessed to in Scripture. Confessions function as hermeneutical lenses through which the diverse and ambiguous texts of the Old and New Testaments are read, interpreted, proclaimed, and believed; however, this occurs with the proviso that the primacy of Holy Scripture is maintained. In other words, confessions serve as interpretive aids only insofar as the church remains convinced of their proper interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, confessions seek to center the scope of the Good News – which underlies the confessions themselves – within contemporary Christian faith and life. Thus, as accompanying texts to the Bible, confessions aim to open up the gospel itself as the primary text for believers. The Holy Scriptures of the Old as well as the New Testament, thus, are understood as the «supreme and decisive standard of faith».<sup>23</sup>

The principle of *tota scriptura* – that all of Scripture is authoritative and necessary – that is expressed here, holds particular significance in Reformed theology, confessions, and tradition because it ensures that the entire Bible, including the Old Testament, forms the foundation for doctrine, faith, and practice. The Old Testament is not merely background or preparatory material; it is essential for understanding the identity of believers, the nature and character of God. The United Church of Canada confesses in its *Song of Faith* (2006):

The wholeness of scripture testifies to the oneness and faithfulness of God. The multiplicity of scripture testifies to its depth: two testaments, four gospels, contrasting points of view held in tension – all a faithful witness to the One and Triune God, the Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, IV.9.8. *Emphases added*.

<sup>23</sup> “Church of South India: Basis of Union” (1941) in Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 326.

<sup>24</sup> *A Song of Faith* (2006), The United Church of Canada, <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements/song-faith-2006>, accessed June 1, 2025.

The authority of confessions is, therefore, always conditional: they are binding only insofar as they agree with the biblical witness, but, as Gustav Bam notes, the church adheres,

to the confession not to the extent that but because we believe it is in harmony with the Word of God. But this «because» does not grant the creed an absolute finality in the life of the Church. [...] The confession is ever subject to the discipline and correction of the Word.<sup>25</sup>

The Reformed approach is clear: Confessions are subordinate to Scripture and serve the church only as long as they faithfully point to Christ as revealed in the Bible. The ‘relative authority’ of Reformed confessions is a hallmark of the tradition’s theological humility and openness. By holding confessions as binding yet provisional, the Reformed churches honor the gifts of the past without becoming captive to them. This approach fosters a living, discerning faith community, always seeking to respond obediently and gratefully to God’s ongoing revelation in Christ, through the Spirit, and in the witness of Scripture. In an age marked by both tradition-forgetting and tradition-idolizing tendencies, the Reformed understanding offers a liberating and faithful path: to be bound by the wisdom of the past, yet free to confess anew in each generation, always guided by the Spirit and tested by the Word of God.<sup>26</sup>

## **“We Also Believe and Therefore We Speak” (2 Cor 4.13) – The Holy Spirit in Contemporary Reformed Confessions**

Listening to the Spirit’s prophetic voice in contemporary contexts presents both challenges and opportunities. One challenge is the risk of subjectivism – mistaking personal or cultural preferences for the leading of the Spirit. Another is the temptation to innovate for its own sake, disconnecting new confessions from the authority of Scripture and the historic witness of the church. The Reformed tradition ad-

<sup>25</sup> Gustav Bam, “Concerning Confession in the Local Church,” in *A Moment of Truth. The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church* ed. G. Daan Cloete and Dirk J. Smit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1984), 106.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Douglas F. Ottati, *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 95: «This is the engine or dynamic that makes for a living confessional heritage from the New Testament and Nicaea to Heidelberg, Westminster, Belhar, and beyond».



dresses these challenges by insisting on the necessity of ecclesial discernment and accountability. New confessions must be evaluated in the light of Scripture, tested in the community of faith, and submitted to the judgment of the whole church. The Spirit's guidance is always discerned in relation to the Word and the community.

Following this principle, contemporary Reformed confessions<sup>27</sup> followed the lead of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, as described above, and confessed their understanding and experience of God, the Holy Spirit, with their own words and in their own context, covering a wide range of theological topoi.<sup>28</sup>

## The Holiness of the Holy Spirit

From the earliest days of Christianity, from the Nicene Creed onwards, the church has attributed the quality of holiness to the Holy Spirit. Yet, what does it mean to speak of the holiness of the Holy Spirit, and how is it to be recognized? According to contemporary Reformed confessions, the holiness of the Holy Spirit cannot be understood in contrast to, or as a mere supplement of, the holiness of God. Rather, the holiness of the Spirit is precisely the holiness of the Son, who is the Holy One of God. Thus, the holiness of the Spirit aligns exactly with that electing, reconciling, relational, cruciform, just, and loving holiness that is revealed in Christ. The highest and most comprehensive thing that can be said of the *Spirit's holiness* is to name the Spirit the Spirit of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> This means that the Spirit's holiness is always Christo-centric; it is not an abstract or isolated quality but is bound up with the person and work of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ and is inseparably bound to him; at the same time, the confessions emphasize that Jesus Christ was «so filled with the Holy Spirit that in him people experienced the presence of God among them».<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in classical Reformed confessions see, for example, Yuzo Adhinarta, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Major Reformed Confessions and Catechisms of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion including references and resources, see Ernst-Habib, *Reformierte Identität*, 313–337.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Volume 4.2* (T&T Clark International 1958), 322f.

<sup>30</sup> United Church of Canada, *Song of Faith*, 2006, accessed June 1, 2025 <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements/song-faith-2006>.

Everything the Spirit proclaims is taken from Christ and appropriated to believers, uniting them intimately with him; the Spirit never acts independently or in opposition to Christ or God the Father<sup>31</sup> – just as the Nicene Creed maintained. The confession that Jesus is the Christ is the criterion distinguishing the Spirit's work from all other spirits; the fruits of the Spirit bear witness to this reality, as confessed by the *New Confession* of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (1972).<sup>32</sup> Through the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ is present in His church *and* in the world:

God the Holy Spirit has been sent by God the Father and God the Son to apply God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ in our lives. In the Holy Spirit God is present and works in the midst of the world. He cares for, frees and governs this world in the framework of the realization of the Kingdom of God.<sup>33</sup> – (*Confession of the Church of Toraja, 1981*)

As this Korean church confesses with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Spirit proceeds from God the Father (and God the Son), and does so with a mission: connecting believers to Christ in an effective way and caring for the whole world. This sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit is fundamentally relational and reconciling, making the people of God what they already are in Christ: the people of the Holy One who are part of God's mission for all of creation. *A Declaration of Faith* of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (1976) confesses:

The Holy Spirit is God active in the world. By the Spirit God raised up leaders and prophets in Israel. By the Spirit Jesus was conceived, baptized, and empowered. By the Spirit the risen Christ is present with his church. [...] We affirm the Spirit's freedom. The Holy Spirit works in the church but not on our terms or under our control. The Holy Spirit works beyond the church even among those we suspect or scorn. [...] In his eternal being and in all his activity, the one God is always and at the same time the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Netherlands Reformed Church, *Foundations and Perspectives of Confessing the Faith* issued by the Netherlands Reformed Church in 1949 (*Fundamenten en Perspectieven van Belijde*), in *Lebendiges Bekenntnis. Die "Grundlagen und Perspektiven des Bekenntens" der Generalsynode der Niederländischen Reformierten Kirche von 1949, Bekennen und Bekenntnis* 7 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1959), 39. My translation: «The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ and is bound to him. Everything he proclaims to us, he takes from Christ in order to give us what we have in Christ and to unite us most intimately with him».

<sup>32</sup> See Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 80. «The confession that Jesus is Christ (1 John 4,3) is the criterion by which the work of the Holy Spirit is distinguished from that of the worldly spirits. The fruits of the Holy Spirit prove it».

<sup>33</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 244–248.

## The Holy Spirit as Witness and Teacher

A central aspect of the Spirit's work according to contemporary Reformed confessions is the ministry of bearing witness. Through and in the witness of the Spirit, God reveals Godself as the one who has chosen and reconciled God's creation in Christ from eternity. Only God can make Godself known, and it is the Holy Spirit who speaks as the *Spirit of Truth* in Scripture, confession, and beyond:

God's Spirit speaks in the world according to God's ultimate word in Christ. In every time and place, in ancient cities and distant lands, in technology and business, in art and education, God has not been left without a witness. The Word has entered where we have failed to go. [...] As citizens we acknowledge the Spirit's work in human government for the welfare of the people, for justice among the poor, for mercy towards the prisoner, against inhuman oppression of humanity. We must obey God above all rulers, waiting upon the Spirit, filled with the patience of Christ.<sup>35</sup> (*Our Song of Hope of the Reformed Church in America*, 1974)<sup>36</sup>

However, even «in the world», the Spirit does not add a new word to God's revelation but leads believers deeper into the truth already spoken in Jesus Christ and witnessed to in Scripture. The Spirit illuminates this scriptural witness and even judges the believers when they misuse the Bible in order to oppress, exclude or diminish others:

Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word passed on from generation to generation to guide and inspire, that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place from the human experiences and cultural assumptions of another era. God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

The Spirit breathes revelatory power into scripture, bestowing upon it a unique and normative place in the life of the community. The Spirit judges us critically when we abuse scripture by interpreting it narrow-mindedly, using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.<sup>37</sup> - (*Our Song of Faith of the United Church of Canada*, 2006)

«God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only» – and it is the work of the Holy Spirit as «the Lord, the Giver of all Life», especially of new life, that transforms and sanctifies believers.

<sup>35</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 224.

<sup>36</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 224.

<sup>37</sup> *A Song of Faith* (2006), United Church of Canada.

## The Holy Spirit, Sanctification, and the New Life

For the Reformed tradition, sanctification is a central aspect of the Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes God's people *holy* in the ongoing transformation of their life. Through the Spirit, believers are renewed and empowered for new life, however, the Spirit's sanctifying work is not limited to individual piety but extends to the entire community of faith. The church is holy because it is called into being by the Holy Spirit, set apart and called to be God's chosen people in and for the world. This sanctification is deeply relational: it is the Spirit who unites believers with Christ, with one another, and with all of creation; and this union is the result of the Spirit's sanctifying action in reconciliation, empowering believers to actions of reconciliation and change:

The life of mankind is out of balance, and this is especially clear in the distinction and difference of socio-economic position, which has been legalized in the various structures of society, both traditional and modern. The socio-economic structures which cause injustice need to be taken down and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit so that it may be in accordance with the will of God.<sup>38</sup> - (*Confession of the Church of Toraja, 1981*)

Contemporary Reformed confessions emphasize this work of the Holy Spirit, which leads the church to account for the hope in words and deeds, as the *Accra Confession* of the World Communion of Reformed Churches states: «Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world. [...] We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign».<sup>39</sup> This opening up to the realities of the world is confessed as the work of the Holy Spirit – not as turning into the world or following the *Zeitgeist*.

## The Holy Spirit and the World

As we have seen in the sections above, contemporary confessions understand the work of the Holy Spirit as not confined to the church but extending to the whole world and all of God's beloved creation. The Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life,

<sup>38</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth* (Geneva: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2004), accessed June 1, 2025, <https://wcrceu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AccraConfession-Introduction.pdf>.

everywhere, present and active in creation, sustaining and renewing all things, and the Spirit's presence in the world is a sign of God's ongoing commitment to creation and to the redemption of all things.

We affirm the Spirit's freedom. The Holy Spirit works in the church but not on our terms or under our control. The Holy Spirit works beyond the church even among those we suspect or scorn. [...] One God who is Creator and Sustainer, the Savior and Lord, the *Giver of life within, among, and beyond us*.<sup>40</sup> (*A Declaration of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1976*)

Some whom we encounter belong to other religions and already have a faith. Their lives often give evidence of devotion and reverence for life. We recognize that truth and goodness in them are the work of God's Spirit, the author of all truth. We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance implying that we are better than they. But rather, in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ.<sup>41</sup> (*Living Faith of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, 1984*)

The Spirit's work in the world is also a call to the church to participate in God's mission.<sup>42</sup> The church is called to be a witness to the presence and power of the Spirit in the world, to proclaim the gospel, and to work for justice, peace, and reconciliation. The Spirit empowers the church for this mission, equipping believers with gifts for service and witness. In all these ways, the Holy Spirit is the foundation, goal, and center of the identity of God's people, making the church a sign and instrument of God's kingdom in the world.

The church is marked by the Holy Spirit. Across the centuries since the church was founded, the Spirit has formed and identified it. We recognize the true church of Jesus Christ wherever the work of the Spirit is evident: in preaching and sacraments, in the new life and continuous growth of believers, in the sharing of spiritual gifts and material things, in mission and service to the world.<sup>43</sup> (*A Declaration of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1976*)

We believe that the Spirit summons us to active participation not only in the renewal of our own personality but also in the creation of a new society and a new history. He is the Spirit of the Kingdom of God who commands us to fight for social and political transformation.<sup>44</sup> (*Statement of Korean Christians, 1973*)

<sup>40</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 247 (emphases added).

<sup>41</sup> *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief* (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1984), accessed June 1, 2025, [https://presbyterian.ca/wp-content/uploads/gao\\_living\\_faith.pdf](https://presbyterian.ca/wp-content/uploads/gao_living_faith.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Nadia Marais, "... and Giver of Life," in *We Believe in the Holy Spirit* ed. Henco van der Westhuizen (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 89–107.

<sup>43</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 247 (emphases added).

<sup>44</sup> Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 88.

## Conclusion

In light of the Reformed tradition's and contemporary confessions' rich and dynamic engagement with the Holy Spirit, it becomes clear that from a Reformed perspective, confessional life is not a static inheritance but a living, responsive journey of faith. The church's identity as a confessing community is continually shaped and reshaped by the Spirit's ongoing prophetic voice, which calls believers to discernment, humility, and courage in every new age. Rather than anchoring its authority in the unchanging repetition of past formulations, the Reformed tradition embraces a posture of openness – recognizing that the Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles continues to guide, correct, and renew the church. This openness is not a license for arbitrary innovation, but a disciplined attentiveness to the Spirit's leading, measured always by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the witness of Scripture. The provisional and relative authority of confessions reflect both a deep gratitude for the faithfulness of those who have gone before and a readiness to respond to new challenges with fresh words and faithful action. In this way, the Reformed church remains a community «relatively bound and relatively free», rooted in tradition yet alive to the Spirit's movement. Such a stance demands both humility and boldness: humility to receive the wisdom of the past, and boldness to speak anew when the Spirit calls. Ultimately, this confessional openness is an act of trust in God's living presence and a refusal to domesticate the divine.

For contemporary Reformed confessions as for the Reformed tradition, the Spirit is not merely a distant inspirer of ancient texts, but the present Lord and Giver of life, who continually illuminates Scripture, guides the church's discernment, and empowers its confessional responses to new challenges. Throughout history, from the expansion of the Nicene Creed to the creation of contemporary confessions, the Spirit's prophetic voice has called the church to faithful obedience, courageous self-examination, and creative engagement with the world. This dynamic relationship ensures that confessions remain living documents – rooted in the past, yet open to renewal and revision in light of the Spirit's ongoing guidance. The authority of confessions, therefore, is never absolute or self-derived, but always provisional, grounded in gratitude and humility before God's gracious self-revelation. In this way, the Reformed tradition cherishes the wisdom of its spiritual ancestors while remaining ever attentive to the Spirit's new movements. Ultimately, this openness is not a license for arbitrary change, but an act of trust in the Spirit's power to lead the church into all truth and to renew its life for the sake of God's mission in the world.



# **“True God from True God”: Speaking Truthfully about God in a Secular Society**

*Matthias Zeindler*

## **Why a Council in Nicaea? Or: What Problem Needed to be Solved?**

Why were the bishops of the entire Christian world convened for the first time ever at a council in Nicaea in AD 325? And why was Emperor Constantine who called this council also present himself? At first glance, the reason for the Council of Nicaea was political: leading bishops of the church held differing opinions on central questions of Christian doctrine. The emperor was deeply concerned about the unity of the church, as the unity of worship was considered the foundation of the *salus publica*, the well-being of the empire and its inhabitants.

However, the historical significance of the Council of Nicaea lies elsewhere. This assembly succeeded in finding an answer to a theological problem that sooner or later *had* to be answered by the church, namely the divinity of Jesus. The issue at hand was the fundamental question of the Christian faith: Who is Jesus Christ?<sup>1</sup>

Christianity originated in Israel, and the first Christians came from the Jewish faith. The central tenet of Judaism concerning God was (and is) that God is one and that there is no other God besides him. At the same time, the New Testament states that Jesus is the Son of God. The Gospel of John begins with these words: «In the

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<sup>1</sup> For the correlation between theology and imperial politics in Nicaea cf. the contribution of John Flett and Jason Goroncy in this volume.



beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [...] The Word became flesh» (John 1.1,14). This presented a challenge of decisive importance for the Christian faith. On one hand, Christians unquestionably believed in the existence of only one true God; on the other hand, they also unquestionably believed that Jesus Christ, who redeemed the world through his death, was not merely a human but also divine. Did this mean that Christians believed in not just one but two gods? In the fourth century, the question arose: How could two central biblical statements be simultaneously true? The very truth of the Christian faith was at stake.

In the early fourth century, a priest named Arius in Alexandria preached that God is utterly unique, incomparable to any other being, and beyond human understanding. By emphasizing God's transcendence, Arius necessarily excluded the possibility of another being sharing in God's divine nature. Even if Christ was the Son of God, he could not be God in the same way as the Father but only in a subordinate sense. Opponents of Arius criticized this view, arguing against his contention that Christ was not truly divine. Arius asserted that Christ was not eternal like the Father, stating, «there was a time when he was not». Jesus, according to Arius, was an extraordinary being but remained a creation of the Father. In other words, Arius prioritized the uniqueness of God above all else. He believed that this uniqueness would be compromised if Jesus Christ were also worshipped as divine.

It is evident that this was not merely the private opinion of a single bishop:

In truth, the controversy was not primarily about Arius's teaching; it was the beginning of a sustained project to define and express a profound mystery, that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God had become a human being. Arius ignited a tiny spark that kindled a mighty fire.<sup>2</sup>

In the creed formulated by the Council, the majority of bishops rejected Arius' position. Regarding Jesus Christ, they wrote, among other things: «[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father».

This statement emphasized through multiple formulations that Jesus' divinity does not differ from the one of the Father. First, it was stated that Jesus is 'begotten,' 'only begotten,' 'not made,' meaning he was not created like all creatures. The

<sup>2</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 90.

phrase «of one substance with the Father» explained the meaning of ‘begotten,’ namely that Christ is eternal in the same way as God the Father. This rejected Arius’ view that there was a time when Christ did not exist. To eliminate any misunderstanding that Christ might not be fully divine, the bishops added that the Son of God is «true God from true God», affirming once more that he is God in the only true sense, just as the Father is.

Why, then, this great effort to clarify Jesus’ divinity? Why the zeal to avoid the interpretation that Jesus might be merely a human or an intermediate being between God and man? Again, the truth of the Christian faith was at stake. The New Testament clearly states that in Jesus Christ, God appeared in history, that in his preaching, we hear God, and in his healings, God is active. Above all, it declares that in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God acted for us. Or, in the words of Daniel Migliore: «God acts, suffers, and triumphs in and through Jesus. In Jesus Christ we do not have less than God’s very own presence in our humanity. In this person the eternal God suffers and acts for our salvation».<sup>3</sup> Only if Jesus is truly God is he our only hope.

## The Question Today: Who is God?

What is at stake today? At least in the Global North, we are living in a ‘secular age’.<sup>4</sup> For many people, it is an open question whether there is anything beyond the empirical world – transcendence, divinity, or God are all questioned. And a large portion of the population lives meaningful and fulfilling lives without any religious practice.

This does not mean that people are no longer religious. However, unlike in earlier centuries, religiosity has become one option among others for how one can understand the world and one’s life. This marks a fundamental change from the situation in Nicaea in the fourth century. Back then, the belief in transcendence – a higher power, a pantheon of gods, or a single God – was widely shared. What was

<sup>3</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For the question to what extent secularization is a global phenomenon cf. José Casanova, “Is Secularization Global?” Georgetown University, Berkley Center, last modified January 1, 2013, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/is-secularization-global>.

contested was the nature of this transcendence, and within this context arose the issue of how to understand Jesus as the Son of God.

Today, people seem to be asking a more fundamental question: Does God exist at all? Are we the creatures of a supreme being, or should the entire universe be interpreted purely naturalistically – as a chain of physically explainable causes and effects? Even religions appear explainable in purely immanent terms – as mental constructs developed to cope with the contingencies of life such as birth, illness, and death, but also to establish and maintain rules for harmonious coexistence. The answer to the question of whether there is a God has become radically uncertain in a secular age. As a result, many people consider it most reasonable under these circumstances to abstain from providing an answer. They therefore define themselves as agnostics.

However, we do not live in a secular age merely because God's existence has become uncertain. Over the past two centuries, many people have turned away from religion because they experienced it as a limitation of their freedom. Religious systems were often perceived as narrow moral corsets, as guardians of outdated traditions, or as obstacles to free thought. For many, religion stood in the way of the modern ideal of a rational, independent, and self-responsible human being. A central argument of modern criticism of religion has therefore been, «that human beings could only be free when religious belief has been superseded».<sup>5</sup>

And at this point, the question inevitably arises: Which God is actually being spoken of in such statements? Is the God from whom modern humanity seeks to liberate itself the same God the Bible speaks of? Is it the God of whom Paul writes to one of his congregations: «It is for freedom that Christ has set us free» (Gal 5.1)?

But the reverse question must also be asked: Have the churches always clearly proclaimed the liberating God of whom Paul speaks? Or was the modern protest against a church too strongly bound to tradition, in fact, justified? And the protest against a church that too often aligned itself with conservative social forces? Have churches, therefore, also contributed to the fact that today, in many parts of the formerly 'Christian' world, we are living in a secular age?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 332.

<sup>6</sup> Surveys show additional reasons why people distance themselves from Christian churches and often from faith in the God proclaimed in these churches: the church's perceived antagonism to science, evolution (associated with ignorance and superstition); the church's fear-based and risk-averse stance in the face of real-world problems; the

## Nicaea Today: The God of Jesus Christ

In a secular world, the question is often asked: Does God exist? In the following I want to bring forward the argument that this question is by no means more fundamental than the one the bishops in Nicaea were struggling with. As Christians, we must respond to the questioning of God's existence with a counter-question: Which God are we talking about? Because there can be no meaningful discussion about God without first clarifying what is actually meant by the word 'God.' This is true, first of all, for logical reasons: One can only argue about the existence or non-existence of something if both sides agree on what that something is. For example, people can only debate whether unicorns exist if they understand that the word 'unicorn' refers to a horse-like creature with a horn on its forehead.

Secondly, when it comes to the word 'God,' modern criticism of religion shows that the rejection of God often had to do with a concept of God that was seen as hostile to reason and freedom – and therefore regarded as outdated by history. In summary: One can only grapple with the question of God's *existence* if one has first spoken about the *nature* of God.

And this is where, for Christians, the Council of Nicaea comes into play again. The confession of the council goes to great lengths to unequivocally affirm the belief that Jesus Christ is of divine nature. Christ is no less God than God the Father and Creator. This also means: In Jesus, we see who God truly is. If we ask about the nature or essence of God, then – according to the New Testament – we must look to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When the Nicene Creed states that the Son of God is «true God from true God», it also means that in the Son of God we see the truth about God. The Bible and theology call this 'revelation.' In Jesus Christ, the Father has been revealed. God is manifested in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. This is who God is – and no other. Again, when we see Christ, we see God. And we have to add: *Only* when we see Christ, we see God.

Nicaea, therefore, teaches not only something essential about *Christ* as the Son of God. In doing so, it also establishes that Christ, the Son of God, is the standard for all Christian speech about *God*. Or, in the words of American theologian Robert Jensen:

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church's position on issues of gender and sexuality is perceived as narrow, judgmental, and outdated; the church's unfriendliness towards those who doubt.

Any pattern of thought that in any way abstracts God ‘himself’ from this person, from his death or his career or his birth or his family or his Jewishness [...] or his teaching or the particular intercession and rule he as risen now exercises, has, according to Nicaea, no place in the church.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Council of AD 325, theology has not only, but essentially been Christology. We come to know God by knowing Christ.

Was Arius’ concern, that Christology would call monotheistic faith into question, resolved by this decision? The answer is: Yes, because even the Nicene confession of Christ is deeply monotheistic. But it gives monotheism a new meaning – namely, that the one God is not a lonely God. Church historian Robert Louis Wilken puts it this way: «Although Christians were unreservedly and unequivocally monotheistic and believed, along with Jews, and later with Muslims, that there is one God, they understood that God was not a «solitary God», as one church father put it».<sup>8</sup> As Father and Son (and Holy Spirit), God has always been a communal God. A God who is love.

## Have We Learned the Lesson of Nicaea?

In AD 325, it had to be clarified whether Jesus Christ is God in the same way that the Father is God. And it was decided that this is indeed the case. Since that council, the churches have been united in affirming that Jesus, as the Son of God, is divine just like the Father. This did not end all Christological debates, but the foundational principle of Jesus’ divinity was established. One can therefore say: The church has learned this lesson from Nicaea and has not forgotten it to this day.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the second lesson of Nicaea – namely, the lesson that Jesus Christ is the standard by which we are to understand God. The churches took much longer to grasp this insight, and one can even doubt whether it has been fully understood everywhere today. For centuries, God was not thought of as the Father of Jesus – his Son, who «came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him» (John 1.11) – whom he lost on the cross and yet held on to by raising him from the dead.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. I: The Triune God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.

<sup>8</sup> Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 98.

Instead, for centuries, God was understood in ‘classical’ terms. Even the Reformation changed little in this regard. When it came to God, the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were in agreement. Only in the course of the nineteenth century did a clearer understanding of God emerge from Jesus Christ, and only in the twentieth century – especially in the work of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth – can we speak of a concept of God that is consistently shaped by Christ.

But what is meant by a ‘classical’ understanding of God? It is important to note that this understanding does not stem solely from the biblical witness but also includes elements from Greek and Roman philosophy – especially Stoicism. At the center of the classical conception of God is the idea that God, as the creator of the world, is its absolute, almighty ruler and supreme lawgiver. Through God’s providence, this God guides the course of the world according to his wisdom, ordains the good, and permits the evil. God’s absoluteness includes being independent from all creation, being unchangeable, and non-suffering. As the one who determines all things, God is also omniscient; everything that will happen in the future is present to God. Particularly in Reformed theology, it has always been important that everything that happens is determined solely by God. As far as God’s exclusive sovereignty is central to the classical conception, the Reformation tradition was for a long time especially classical!

This concept of God, as outlined here, is widespread, but it repeatedly leads to dead ends. I mention only two examples. First, *prayer*. Both the Old and New Testaments frequently call on people to pray to God and to ask for help and salvation. In the Old Testament, the Psalms form a dedicated collection of prayers to God. And in the Gospels, there are several promises that God will hear prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: «Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you» (Matt 7.7), and in the Gospel of John: «You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it» (John 14.14). These statements presuppose the clear biblical conviction that God hears prayer and can be moved by it.

But this very conviction creates problems for the ‘classical’ concept of God. It contradicts the idea of a sovereign God whose will and actions are not influenced by God’s creatures. God is only truly God, it is said, if God is unchangeable. The notion that God could be moved or influenced by prayer runs up against the traditional doctrine of God’s eternity and omniscience, according to which God foreknows and predetermines all that is and will be. God already knows all the needs of creatures.

So, what is the point of prayer within this framework? Surely we cannot inform an all-knowing God of something God does not already know.

Even in the theology of the Genevan Reformer John Calvin, we find the idea that God ultimately does not need our prayer. Although Scripture is of the highest importance for his theology, Calvin still remains shaped by the ‘classical’ understanding of God. For him, prayer is indispensable, but ‘only’ for anthropological reasons. He writes that God «did not so much appoint [prayer] for his sake as for ours».<sup>9</sup> It is humans who need prayer – so that they become aware of their dependence on God's goodness and may experience that God, in his goodness, truly responds to human need.

A second and even more difficult dead end of the ‘classical’ conception of God is the so-called problem of *theodicy*: How can so much suffering exist in a world governed by a good God? The classical understanding assumes that God is responsible for everything that happens – including suffering. Few would claim that God actively causes disease and war, but since God permits both, responsibility still lies with God.

The Czech theologian Jan Milič Lochman calls the question of suffering «the most burning problem facing the doctrine of providence».<sup>10</sup> The usual answer is that God has, in any case, ordered the world and history in a good way – though this goodness remains hidden from us. The goodness of creation is thus asserted, but against all evidence. God's faithfulness and mercy can only be believed blindly.

It is no surprise, then, that especially since the Enlightenment, the problem of theodicy has been one of the main reasons many people turn away from religion – particularly the Christian faith. This fact also shows that even those who reject belief in God still think of God within the framework of the ‘classical’ model. Put sharply: The God in whom most religious people believe and in whom atheists do not believe – is the same God.

## Bearing Witness to the ‘Nicene’ God

We have seen that many people in secular society reject a God who contradicts their notion of a free, self-determined life. And that they cannot accept an image of

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.20.3.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Milič Lochman, “Reconsidering the Doctrine of Providence,” in *Reformed Theology. Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 291.

God who is held responsible for the unspeakable suffering in the world. This seems to contradict the promise of a religion that proclaims a good and wise God.

The 'classical' image of God is not solely responsible for secularization. The great turning away from religion in the societies of the Global North also has many other causes – such as scientific and technological progress, the weakening authority of traditions, growing ideological pluralism, or increasingly individualized lifestyles. On the other hand, one underestimates the religious or theological dimension of secularization if one ignores the resistance to the 'classical' image of God when reconstructing the roots of secularization.

Therefore, my thesis is this: part of the church's mission in a secular society is to bear witness to God as the Bible testifies to God. And in doing so, to reveal a God who is not a supreme ruler, not a being with unlimited power, not a superhero, and also not a great moralist or supreme teacher. Instead, a God who wills humanity to be free and responsible beings. And this God is not a God in the 'classical' mold, but the 'Nicene' God. Only if the church takes seriously that Christ is «true God from true God» will it succeed in communicating the biblical message today as a message of hope and joy.

## **A Personal God**

When people speak of Jesus as he is described in the Gospels, it is rarely mentioned that he is a person who prays. And yet prayer is central to Jesus. His life was a life of prayer. He prayed before the feeding of the 5,000 or before the Last Supper, and he repeatedly sought solitude for prayer. Especially on his path of suffering, we see him praying intensely – first in the Garden of Gethsemane, finally on the cross. Whenever Jesus' prayers are quoted, the form of address is always the same: Father. It is this address that Jesus also teaches his disciples: 'Our Father'.

When Jesus addresses God as Father, he expresses deep trust. At the same time, this address – 'Father' – means that the God being addressed is a true counterpart. A counterpart who hears, who responds to prayer, and who speaks in return. We mean the same when we say that Jesus addresses the Father as a person – and, in doing so, shows that he himself is a person to the Father. What applies between God the Father and the Son also applies to our relationship with God. For us, too, this God is a listening, attentive, and speaking counterpart – a personal God. And conversely, we as human beings are true counterparts to this God, and therefore



persons. From Jesus, we learn that the relationship between God and humanity is a personal relationship.

If we understand God as standing in personal relationship with God's creatures, then a first boundary of the 'classical' understanding of God becomes clear. Central to that view is God's absolute sovereignty – the power to direct, determine, and foresee all things. But if God's relationship to humanity is personal, then it is also reciprocal. Prayer, in particular, reveals that God does not want to be God without the human being. In prayer, God not only listens to the human being – God also allows God's self to be moved by the prayer. Through prayer, the human being participates in God's action, and God – even this is not saying too much – in a sense, is dependent on God's creature. Or rather: God makes the human being God's partner.

## **A Suffering and Weak God**

The Apostle Paul never personally knew Jesus. He did not witness his healings or his preaching, nor his shared meals or condemnation. None of this appears in his letters. The reason is that, for Paul, something else stands at the center of Jesus' mission. The most important thing to say about Jesus, according to Paul, is 'the message of the cross' (1 Cor 2.15). That this man was executed in a cruel way makes him the central figure of the Christian faith.

The crucified Christ has been depicted countless times in art, and he still hangs as a crucifix in many churches around the world. These stylized portrayals often make us forget what the crucifixion of Jesus actually was – his complete political and religious failure. He was condemned by both the Roman and Jewish authorities, and the assembled people demanded the death sentence for him. Crucifixion on a wooden cross was not only extremely brutal, but also maximally shameful in its public nature. It was reserved only for non-Romans – Roman citizens were excluded. It was used for high treason and rebellion, and its goal was, above all, to serve as a deterrent. On the cross, Jesus was completely finished. His cry, «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?» (Mark 15.34) makes it unmistakably clear: he was abandoned not only by all people, but also by God.

Jesus – the one his disciples had hoped would free Israel – refused to use any form of political power or violence to reach his goal. His path was nonviolence. And he followed this path to the very end, even when violence was done to him, choosing not to retaliate with violence. Instead of demonstrating strength, he chose

utter weakness; instead of acting powerfully, he suffered death. And about this crucified man, a Roman officer beneath the cross said: «Surely this man was the Son of God» (Mark 15.39).

Three days later, God the Father raised the crucified one to new life, thereby confirming exactly what the officer had said: the crucified Jesus had not failed, but became the sign of who God truly is. Because in not giving up on his Son, but remaining faithful to him, God made clear that this very path of nonviolence is God's path. It is human beings who repeatedly turn to violence, and thus become lost in endless conflict. God, however, chooses the way of suffering, of weakness, of self-giving. Rather than perpetuating violence, God exposes God's self to violence in God's Son. Yet, in raising this violently executed one, God shows that violence will not have the final word.

Paul writes of the 'message of the cross', that it is «foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God» (1 Cor 1.18). And he explains: «God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him» (1 Cor 1.27–29). Through the cross of Jesus, God chose suffering, chose weakness – indeed, God became the suffering and the weak. And in doing so, God showed that the future belongs to suffering and to self-giving for the sake of others.

There is no greater contradiction to the 'classically' understood God than the suffering Christ. In the Christian churches, God has always been understood as the Father of the crucified Jesus – but that did not stop people from continuing to imagine God as the almighty ruler of the world. With a 'Nicene' God, however – as with Paul – it is different. If the Christian God is the God whose face we see in Christ, then this God is not almighty in the 'classical' sense. This God is weak. This God allows God's self to be wounded, to be hurt, and suffers with creation and for creation. Yet in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, God shows that this does not mean that the Creator God has been defeated by the violent forces of creation. On the contrary: God makes clear that true power lies in giving oneself for others, so that they may live.

## **A Liberating God**

As mentioned earlier, secularization has much to do with the modern project of freedom. Since the Enlightenment, religion and the church have often been seen

as parts of a tradition that hinder people from using their reason and living in freedom. For many, leaving religion behind was an important step on the path to human liberation.

When the New Testament speaks of Jesus, it very often speaks of liberation. Through his healings, Jesus overcomes social isolation; through his meals with outsiders, he transcends social and religious boundaries; through his death and resurrection, he ultimately frees from the final bondage – death. In all of this, he continues a tradition of liberation that is already central in the Old Testament. There, creation is portrayed as a release from primordial chaos; Israel's election as God's people is accomplished through deliverance from slavery; God's renewing action is seen in the return from Babylonian exile. Here too, God is revealed as a God who liberates from chaos, oppression, and alienation.

It is undeniable that churches have often sided with social preservation, even reaction. All the more urgent, then, is the need to continuously point out that the biblical God reveals God's true face in Jesus Christ. And this face shows a Son of God who tirelessly struggles that all people can experience the abundant gifts of God. The 'Nicene' God is a God of liberation.

Therefore, it is also incorrect to say that God 'allows' injustice, alienation, and suffering in creation. This wording presumes that God could intervene in the world at any moment but chooses not to. That is the image of a spectator-God, which does not align with the biblical witness. On the contrary, from beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of a God who intervenes in history and fights for the marginalized and disadvantaged – and who, in doing so, mobilizes people «for resistance to occurrences of evil and suffering».<sup>11</sup>

In dialogue with secular society, Christians can therefore confidently say: the God of the Bible is a liberating God. God is a free God who desires free human beings. God liberates people from their enslavement, and also frees them from the compulsion to enslave others. In light of the 'Nicene' God, it is one of the tragic errors of secular modernity to think that one must be without God in order to become a free person. The message of the Bible is quite the opposite: it is precisely in communion with this God that we become truly free. As John Webster writes: «We do not need to win freedom back from God, because God is its ground, not its denial».<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lochman, "Reconsidering the Doctrine of Providence," 292.

<sup>12</sup> John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Vol. I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 138.

## A Coming God

Paul ends his first letter to the Christian community in Corinth with the exclamation: 'Come, O Lord!' (1 Cor 16.22). And the seer John concludes his Apocalypse with the plea: «Amen. Come, Lord Jesus» (Rev 22.20). In many other parts of the New Testament, we encounter the expectation that the risen Jesus will return to bring about the full realization of God's reign. This is what Christians have been praying for over the past 2,000 years when they say in the Lord's Prayer: «Thy Kingdom come». That is also why the Nicene Creed includes the statement about Jesus Christ: «and [he] will come to judge the living and the dead».

When the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ, it does not only speak of the one who has come. Nor only of the Risen One, who is present with us through the Holy Spirit. The full picture of Jesus also includes the belief that he will come again. And when he comes, he will bring the complete and boundless freedom and justice of the Kingdom of God.

The message that God's love, freedom, and justice will ultimately prevail is unthinkable without the hope for God's kingdom. The apocalyptic images of the New Testament make it clear: the new coming of Christ transcends the current creation – with him comes «a new heaven and a new earth» (Rev 21.1). The kingdom of God lies beyond the possibilities of this creation. Our creation is finite, it is sinful, and it is in need of redemption. Complete love, freedom, and justice are only possible with God. But the hope for the coming Christ means that God will indeed realize this possibility.

The message of the coming Christ is probably the part of the biblical witness that secular modernity finds most difficult. The creed of the secular age proclaims that there is no 'beyond' to this age – and that, therefore, humanity is the sole master of the natural and historical world. The secular human knows no other hope than hope in themselves. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, even that hope has grown weak.

The secular human knows no other hope than hope in themselves – which also means: the secular human is alone with themselves. The message of the Bible is the exact opposite: the human being is not alone. They are not only responsible for themselves, and above all, they do not have to place all their hope in themselves

alone. The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel once wrote: «The Bible has shattered man's illusion of being alone».<sup>13</sup>

## A Loving God

The 'Nicene' God, as revealed in Jesus Christ: a personal God; a God who suffers, and who – in a world of violence – can even appear weak; a God who does not want to restrict people but to liberate them; a God whose will is not yet fulfilled, but who will complete it – all this can be summed up in one sentence: God is a loving God. And more than that: «God is love» (1 John 4.16).

«God is love»: The Christian churches have not always truly understood this sentence. And they have certainly failed to communicate it as the essence of the Christian faith. Yet this is the sentence that best and most deeply summarizes the message of the Nicene Creed.

«God is love»: Because God is love, God created the world. Because God is love, God wants to live in communion with human beings. Because God is love, God fights throughout history for the liberation of God's creatures. Because God is love, God does not achieve God's purposes through violence, but solely through the means of love: through persuasion, through patience, through God's love –which awakens love within us. And because God is love, God will one day gather all creation into a new communion within God's kingdom.

Christians cannot speak of God in any other way if they wish to remain faithful to the biblical witness. And if they speak of God in this way, secular people may perhaps discover that this God is different from the one they reject or without whom they assume to lead a better life. And perhaps they may even discover that life with such a God is richer, deeper, and more beautiful than life in the 'illusion of being alone'.

## Coda

The preceding paragraphs are important for the argument of this essay. Most secular people have not consciously decided against religious belief. God simply does not feature in their lives, and they do not feel that anything is missing. Recent

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<sup>13</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 238.

studies show that many people experience their lives as meaningful and fulfilled without transcendence. They do not fight against religion, nor do they argue about God – both are simply foreign to them. This means that the primary task of Christians is not to debate with secular people. Yes, they should bear witness to the biblical God and also make it clear that this God differs from the ‘classical’ understanding of God. But their testimony primarily consists in living as people who have experienced the liberating, loving God. And through their hope, their joy, and their solidarity, they may invite others to try this God for themselves.



# Reclaiming *Homoousios* as Kenotic Communion

*Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda*

## Introduction: Fractured World, Fractured Church – Reclaiming Oneness as Liberative Communion

We live in a world torn by fragmentation and violence – a world where the empire’s tectonic plates grind against the bones of the vulnerable, and the cries of the excluded echo through the concrete canyons of our cities.

The wounds of creation and community reveal how coloniality, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism have inscribed fractures upon the earth, our bodies, and our theologies. Yet amid this brokenness, the ancient confession of divine oneness – embodied in the Nicene claim that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father – emerges as both a site of struggle and a horizon of hope.

Since the Council of Nicaea declared that the Son is «of one substance with the Father», the term *homoousios* has often been weaponized – a boundary demarcating the faithful from the heretic, the colonizer from the colonized, the powerful from the powerless. Those same councils that defined divine unity often enshrined imperial unity, baptizing empire in the language of God. The question, then, is urgent: Can *homoousios* be redeemed from the shadows of empire? Can it become a liberative song rather than a doctrinal cage?

This essay insists that the confession of oneness is not a theological luxury but a matter of life and death for our fractured world and wounded church. For far too long, the language of unity has been co-opted to silence difference and domesticate the God who pitches a tent on this earth, among the margins. At its heart, however,



*homoousios* testifies to a God who refuses to remain aloof – a God who descends into flesh, who is with us in the hunger lines, the refugee camps, the protest marches, and the cries of the earth.

This essay unfolds in four movements: First, it explores the Johannine ‘oneness’ as a fluidic participatory communion rather than a metaphysical identity. Second, it situates *homoousios* in its historical and political context, critiquing its philosophical heritage while appreciating Athanasius’ soteriological concerns. Third, it contrasts Augustine and Victorinus on divine unity, retrieving strands of relational intimacy. Finally, it proposes a reimagined *homoousios* as kenotic justice and cosmic solidarity. Throughout, the heartbeat of this essay is clear: true divine oneness is not about sameness but about communion. It is not the orthodoxy of empire but the solidarity of the crucified Christ.

## Johannine Oneness as Fluidic Kenotic Communion

The Gospel of John offers a theological cosmos marked not by imperial fixity but by divine relationality. At its core is a vision of oneness that resists abstraction and prioritizes intimacy, vulnerability, and mutual indwelling. Johannine oneness is not sameness, but kenotic communion – a shared life that flows between the Father, Son, Spirit, and community. This oneness disrupts metaphysical hierarchies and reveals a God who chooses solidarity over sovereignty, descent over domination.

### The Kenotic Shape of Glory: Incarnation and Fragility

The theological gateway to Johannine oneness is John 1.14: «And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory». This verse embodies divine kenosis – a radical self-giving and self-emptying that shatters any illusion of a remote or immutable God. The Word’s becoming flesh «*ho logos sarx egeneto*» is not mere appearance but a constitutive act of divine self-revelation: «the incarnation is not an accommodation to human limitation, but the grammar of divine love».<sup>1</sup>

In Johannine theology, glory (*doxa*) is paradoxically located not in transcendence but in cruciform descent. The Word pitches tent among the fragile and the vulnerable, embodying a solidarity that redefines divine power: the Johannine Je-

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God: An Exploration into the Johannine Understanding of God* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2004), 201, 194–204.

sus chooses to be seen in the wounds, not in the throne room. This kenotic movement signals that divine oneness is not about ontological sameness but about relational vulnerability.<sup>2</sup>

The tension between divine visibility and mystery is captured in John 1.18 as it asserts, «No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known». The Johannine God is both hidden and revealed in the Word made flesh. The bosom (*kolpos*) of the Father becomes a symbol of mutual indwelling, intimacy, and shared being – a relational unity that transcends static ontology. Such language reflects a theology of participation rather than essence.<sup>3</sup>

### **Sending and Relational Fidelity: Oneness in Mission**

John 3.16–17 presents divine love not as decree but as sending: «For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son [...] not to condemn the world, but to save it». The fourth Gospel radicalizes God's gift-giving. God gives what is *monogenes* – the unique and incomparable – God's very self. This self-giving fills the cosmos and makes it a new creation.

This act of giving and sending (*apostellein*) enacts relational fidelity. The Son does not go forth apart from the Father but remains in dynamic unity through the very act of mission. This expresses the «missional perichoresis» of the Godhead: The Father and the Son are one not in static being but in shared purpose, mutual commitment, and world-embracing love.<sup>4</sup>

Again, for the fourth evangelist, oneness is not only pre-existence alone but co-labour. John 5.17–20 reveals this further: «My Father is still working, and I also am working». The Son sees and does what the Father does. This phenomenon may be called the Father's self-emptying in the Son. This is not a mechanical mimicry, but a living fidelity born out of mutual intimacy. The works of the Son – healing, forgiving, liberating, rising up, and life giving – are the works of the Father precisely because they emerge from relational communion. Johannine theology foregrounds an imitative co-agency grounded in self-emptying love, not essence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 239–240. Also M. Pamment, "The Meaning of Doxa in the Fourth Gospel," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 74 (1983):13.

<sup>3</sup> Michel René Barnes, "The Logic of Trinitarian Theology," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2001): 210.

<sup>4</sup> D. R. Sadananda, *Johannine Exegesis of God*, 227–229.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes, "The Logic of Trinitarian Theology," 215.

This interpretive lens destabilizes later ontological readings of unity. The controversial statement in John 10.30, «I and the Father are one», is often misread as a metaphysical claim. Instead, it is a declaration of missional solidarity. The shepherd who protects the sheep is in full unity with the God who desires life. This claim that two distinct (masculine) subjects, the Son and the Father are one thing (*hen*, neuter), is intended to express that they are one in action,<sup>6</sup> harmony, sharing, mutual coherence and likeness. It has been argued categorically that John 10.30 needs to be read with 10.18, where the Johannine Jesus speaks of self-giving and self-emptying, and that John 10.30 is closely related to and should be read together with John 3.16, and 5:17–30, emphasizing that the oneness of the Father and the Son is their oneness in self-emptying, for the liberation and the redemption of the cosmos. It finely balances among the claim that what has been given to the Son is greater than all else (John 10.29), the Son's dependence (John 14:10), and the Son as the perfect and complete expression of the Father (14.9)<sup>7</sup>

### The High Priestly Prayer: Participatory Oneness

John 17 brings the theme of oneness to its climactic articulation. Jesus prays, «That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you [...] so that the world may believe that you have sent me» (17.21). This is perhaps the most radical passage on divine-human communion in the Gospel. Jesus does not pray for uniformity but for relational unity, modelled on the divine mutuality of the Father and Son. This is an invitation to a *kenotic koinonia*: an indwelling that holds space for difference while affirming love. The Greek word for 'in' (*en*), used repeatedly in John 17, signals intimacy without absorption. The disciples are not to become indistinguishable from God, but they enter into a participatory communion that mirrors divine hospitality.

This oneness is not a dormant attribute but a dynamic, creative attitude. It is a network of relationships based on the principle of self-giving and mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son. Therefore, oneness is both a soteriological and eschatological reality: it is *shalom* – peace at the core of being and identity.<sup>8</sup> Importantly,

<sup>6</sup> T. E. Pollard, "The Exegesis of John X.30 in the Early Trinitarian Controversies," *New Testament Studies* 3 (1956–57), 334–349 also see M. F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960) 112–147.

<sup>7</sup> D. R. Sadananda, *Johannine Exegesis*, 130–131.

<sup>8</sup> D. R. Sadananda, *Johannine Exegesis*, 145–149 See also, M. L. Appold, *The Oneness Motif in the Fourth Gospel*, (Tubingen: JCB Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 1991) 280–289.

the oneness Jesus prays for is not only vertical (God-human) but also horizontal (human-human-cosmos). It is ecclesial and missional. «That the world may believe» links divine unity to the church's witness of justice and love in the world. This challenges today's churches to become living sacraments of divine *perichoresis*, especially among the marginalized and wounded.

## The Spirit and the Expansion of Divine Mutuality

The Johannine Paraclete sayings (John 14.16–17, 26; 15.26; 16.13–15) deepen the relational structure of divine oneness. The Spirit is not a metaphysical afterthought but an active participant in the divine communion. Proceeding from the Father (15.26) and testifying to the Son, the Spirit continues and expands the relational mission of God.

The Johannine Spirit is the key to maintaining relational theology beyond the incarnation. The Spirit is the bond of love that extends divine mutuality into the community. The advocate, the Spirit of Truth, is the «hermeneut of oneness» – the one who interprets and enacts divine communion in the ever-changing contexts of the world. The Paraclete leads the community beyond what they could understand through the historical theophany of God in Jesus, unfolding new dimensions of revelation.<sup>9</sup> The Paraclete indigenizes, contextualizes, and inculturates the message. This pneumatological dimension prevents oneness from becoming fixed in historical moments or doctrinal formulae. In Johannine theology, the Spirit is not merely a procession but a presence – breathing new life into old categories, unsettling the fixed borders, and expanding the horizon of communion.<sup>10</sup>

## Johannine Subversions: Empire, Flesh, and the Margins

The Johannine Gospel must be read against the backdrop of the empire. The frequent tension between Jesus and 'the world' (*kosmos*) is not a Gnostic rejection of creation but a prophetic critique of systems of domination. Johannine love is always counter imperial. Jesus' non-violent, non-territorial, and non-coercive kingship (John 18.36) is an exposition of true kinship. Divine oneness, then, is incompatible with the empire's logic of sameness, control, and domination.

<sup>9</sup> Eskil Frank, *Revelation Taught: The Paraclete in the Gospel of John* (Uppsala Gleerup 1985) 39–47.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115–117.

Moreover, the repeated emphasis on flesh (*sarx*), water, bread, and breath in the fourth Gospel testifies to a God who does not flee materiality but redeems it. The Word becomes flesh and bends down to wash the feet (John 13.1–20). This incarnation disrupts any dualism that would confine God to the realm of spirit. Divine oneness, in this view, is profoundly embodied. It touches wounds, embraces the outcasts and excluded, and raises those who are crushed by the death forces. Therefore, to abide in Christ is to abide in the wounded body of the world. Oneness is not a metaphysical state but a call to solidarity. It is lived wherever bodies are broken and communion is denied. The Johannine God is not above such places but within them.<sup>11</sup>

### **Toward a Liberative Grammar of Oneness**

Drawing together these strands, we see that Johannine oneness is a symphony of relational motifs: kenosis, sending, seeing, hearing, abiding, and glorifying. Each gesture does not move inwardly towards metaphysical certainty, but outwardly towards communion. This grammar refuses closure. It is open to the stranger, the wounded, the forgotten. Therefore, we can affirm that Johannine unity is best understood as «fluidic communion» – a constantly flowing relationship grounded in mutual love and enacted in concrete justice.

This Johannine theology, then, is not merely Christological. It is ecclesial and ethical. It calls forth a church that mirrors divine mutuality: porous, participatory, and prophetic. A church that lives into the prayer «that all may be one» does so not by erasing differences, but by weaving them into the fabric of love.

### ***Homoousios* in Context: Eusebius, Athanasius, and the Politics of Substance**

The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and its formulation of Jesus Christ as *homoousios* («of the same essence») with the Father marked a watershed moment in Christian theology. Yet the term *homoousios* did not emerge in a vacuum, nor did it offer a simple solution to theological division. Rather, it was the product of intense conflict, ecclesial politics, and philosophical adaptation. This section traces the emergence and reception of *homoousios*, focusing on the contributions of Eusebius of Caesarea

<sup>11</sup> D. R. Sadananda, *Johannine Exegesis of God*, 284.

and Athanasius of Alexandria, while engaging particularly with the interpretations of Michel René Barnes and Samuel Fernández. This section seeks to unearth how the concept of substance – initially a site of theological innovation and struggle – became intertwined with imperial power, doctrinal coercion, and contested meanings of divine unity.

### ***Homoousios*: Genealogy and Controversy**

The term *homoousios* did not originate at the Council of Nicaea. As Barnes and others have noted, it had a complex prehistory in both Gnostic and Christian usage, appearing in the thought of Paul of Samosata and later Valentinian sources.<sup>12</sup> It was often viewed with suspicion because of its associations with modalism and philosophical speculation.

Yet by the early fourth century, debates over the nature of the Son's relation to the Father demanded a new vocabulary. Arius and his followers emphasized the created status of the Son, insisting that «there was a time when he was not». This formulation, while defending divine uniqueness, threatened to sever the Son's unity with the Father and to undermine salvation. If the Son were not fully God, could he mediate divine life to humanity?

Samuel Fernández demonstrates in his recent reassessment of the Nicene sources, that the term was introduced not as a philosophical axiom but as a polemical necessity.<sup>13</sup> Arius had already been condemned in Alexandria. Fernández argues that the deeper conflict at Nicaea was between Bishop Alexander of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea – two figures steeped in the Origenian tradition but with differing understandings of divine generation and ontology.<sup>14</sup>

The Nicene Creed's use of *homoousios* thus functioned to protect the claim that the Son was not a creature or a demiurge but fully and eternally divine. However, the term's lack of scriptural basis, combined with its philosophical overtones, meant it remained controversial even among those who rejected Arianism.

<sup>12</sup> Michel René Barnes, "The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology," in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no.2 (2003): 201–225.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325: Reassessing the Contemporary Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 221–225

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 118–122.

## Eusebius of Caesarea: Relational Logos and Cautious Orthodoxy

Eusebius of Caesarea, often remembered as a historian, was also a significant theological voice. He initially resisted the term *homoousios*, preferring language that emphasized relational differentiation over shared substance.<sup>15</sup> «The Son [...] came second to Him, Whose Son He is, receiving from the Father both His Being, and the character of His Being».<sup>16</sup> «The Son [...] has received [life] from the Father [...] the one has given, the other received».<sup>17</sup> For Eusebius, the Logos is eternally generated and divine, yet distinct in will and activity: «Unthinkably brought into being from all time, or rather before all times, by the Father's transcendent and inconceivable will and power».<sup>18</sup> «He makes first of all existences next to Himself, His child, the first-born Wisdom [...] the perfect creation of a perfect Creator, the wise edifice of a wise Builder».<sup>19</sup> His theology reflects a Logos Christology grounded in participation, imitation, and subordination – though not in the crude sense, later Nicene polemicists attributed it to him.<sup>20</sup>

Fernández helps us recover Eusebius's nuance. His use of language such as «the Son receives his being from the will of the Father» should not be read as suggesting the Son is a creature, but rather as preserving the asymmetry and relationality between Father and Son within divine unity.<sup>21</sup> Eusebius draws on Origen's concept of eternal generation but tempers it with concerns about maintaining divine singularity and avoiding modalism.

Barnes reinforces this point by highlighting the diversity within early fourth-century theology. Not all who opposed *homoousios* were Arians. Many, like Eusebius, worried that the term implied a numerical singularity or modal collapse.<sup>22</sup> «He is the lasting agent of His Father's commands [...] as leader of and antecedent

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion on the theological position of Eusebius of Caesarea, see Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea* 325, 66–83.

<sup>16</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel: Being the Demonstratio Evangelica*, trans. W.J. Ferrar, (London: SPCK, 1920) book 4, chap 3, 167.

<sup>17</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Against Marcellus and On Ecclesiastical Theology*, trans. Kelley McCarthy Spoerl and Mark J. Edwards (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), book 2, chap 4, 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Demonstratio Evangelica*, book 5, chap 1, 198.

<sup>19</sup> *Demonstratio Evangelica*, book 4, chap 2, 157.

<sup>20</sup> See Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea* (Yale University Press, 2013), 224–227.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea* 325, 80–83.

<sup>22</sup> Michel René Barnes, “The Power of God,” 210–212.

to all things after Him».<sup>23</sup> For Eusebius, divine unity was best articulated through harmony, not sameness.

Nevertheless, political pressures – especially from Emperor Constantine – pushed Eusebius to sign the creed, albeit with caveats. «We have never been and will never be of a different opinion than that of the bishops assembled at Nicaea», he wrote in his *Letter to the Church of Caesarea* (AD 325).<sup>24</sup> Fernández notes that his post-Nicene writings reflect continued discomfort, as he attempts to interpret *homoousios* in a non-modalist, scriptural perspective.<sup>25</sup> This underscores the contested nature of the term and the fact that its inclusion in the creed did not instantly resolve the theological crisis.

### Athanasius: Soteriology and the Ontology of Solidarity

Athanasius of Alexandria emerges as the chief defender of *homoousios*, interpreting it not as a speculative formula but as the guarantor of salvation. His central claim was simple yet profound: if Christ were not truly God, humanity could not be truly redeemed. The divine Logos must be *homoousios* with the Father in order to fully unite with humanity and deify it. Barnes describes Athanasius' soteriology as a theology of transformative participation.<sup>26</sup> The Word becomes flesh not only to reveal the Father but to draw humanity into divine life. Only if the Word shares the same divine essence can this transformation be real. *Homoousios*, then, is not metaphysical speculation but incarnational necessity.

Fernández affirms this reading but adds critical texture. He emphasizes that Athanasius, especially in his early writings, drew heavily from anti-Arian polemics and was deeply shaped by the Alexandrian tradition's emphasis on divine immutability and simplicity.<sup>27</sup> «The Council was compelled to use the word *homoousios*, which is not in Scripture, to express the Son's genuine and true relationship to the Father».<sup>28</sup> The term *homoousios* was adopted to signify that the Son is not merely

<sup>23</sup> *Demonstratio Evangelica*, book 4, chapter 4, 160.

<sup>24</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans G.A. Williamson, rev. and ed. Andrew Louth, (London: Penguin Classics, 1989), appendix A, 365.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 196–204.

<sup>26</sup> Michel René Barnes, «The Power of God» 218–219.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 263–272.

<sup>28</sup> Athanasius, *De Decretis*, chapter 20, trans. John Henry Newman, rev. Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 4. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 155.



like the Father, but the same in essence».<sup>29</sup> His insistence on *homoousios* must be understood against the backdrop of a theological culture that feared fragmentation of the divine and sought to maintain a clear line between Creator and creation.

Yet Athanasius does not reduce oneness to identity. In his treatise *De Decretis*, he argues that *homoousios* does not negate the distinction of persons: «the Father is not the Son, but the Father of the Son».<sup>30</sup> «The Son is not a creature, but the proper offspring of the Father's substance».<sup>31</sup> The unity is one of shared being, not collapsed distinction. Barnes sees this as a major development: a move toward articulating unity as communion, rather than sameness.

At the same time, Athanasius was not immune to the political implications of theology. His battles with various bishops, his exiles and returns, and his deployment of *homoousios* as a boundary-marker reveal the contested and often coercive uses of doctrine.<sup>32</sup> What began as a defense of divine solidarity became, in his hands, a polemical weapon against any perceived deviation from his position. This points to the double edge of *homoousios*: it can ground liberative theology but also authorize exclusion.

### ***Homoousios* and the Politics of Empire**

The Council of Nicaea took place not in an ecclesial vacuum but in the shadow of Constantine's newly Christianizing empire. The emperor sought unity – theological, political, and social. As Fernández argues, Constantine's role in calling and influencing the council shaped both its proceedings and its outcomes.<sup>33</sup> *Homoousios*, whatever its theological merits, became a symbol of imperial orthodoxy.

Barnes warns against reading this too cynically yet acknowledges that the alignment of creed and crown had lasting consequences.<sup>34</sup> The creed became not just a confession of faith but also a test of loyalty. Those who hesitated over the term *homoousios* were not only questioned theologically but suspected politically.

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius, *De Synodis*, part II, Section 54, trans. John Henry Newman, rev. Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 467.

<sup>30</sup> Athanasius, *De Decretis*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, book 1, chapter 15, trans. Archibald Robertson, in *Select Works and Letters of Athanasius, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 4, 314.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 263–265.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 175–184.

<sup>34</sup> Michel René Barnes, “The Power of God,” 220.

Fernández is especially critical of the aftermath: the anathemas attached to the Nicene Creed, the swift condemnation of dissenting voices, and the increasing marginalization of theological diversity.<sup>35</sup> What was meant to affirm the radical nearness of God in Christ became a mechanism of dogmatic control.

And yet, both Fernández and Barnes caution against discarding the term. Instead, they urge a rereading: *homoousios* as a site of theological struggle, not finality; as an expression of divine relationality, not ontological enclosure.

## Rereading Substance: From Ontology to Communion

What, then, does *homoousios* mean when severed from imperial enforcement and reimagined through a liberative lens?

First, it affirms that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is no other than the God who creates, sustains, and redeems. Against Arian reductionism, *homoousios* proclaims a God who is not aloof but utterly involved.

Second, it invites a relational ontology. As Barnes has argued, early Trinitarian theology was less about static substance than about shared life, mutual presence, and dynamic communion.<sup>36</sup> The unity of Father and Son is not an undifferentiated monad but a living participation.

Third, it is a theological metaphor – a way of safeguarding mystery, not explaining it. When stripped of coercive politics and read through the lens of divine solidarity, it becomes a word of hope: the Son who is one with the Father is also one with the human beings and all that is created.

Finally, such a rereading demands ecclesial humility. No single formulation can exhaust the mystery of God. The term *homoousios*, valuable as it is, must always be held in tension with the realities of history, suffering, and human limitation. Doctrinal language must be responsive to the God who exceeds it. Fernández emphasises that, the term *homoousios* implies entities are one in a mutual relationship, which in the Christian understanding means that God is eternally triune.<sup>37</sup>

In this light, *homoousios* is not a metaphysical fence but a liturgical threshold. It welcomes us into the mystery of divine communion – a mystery that calls not for domination but for participation.

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 217–220.

<sup>36</sup> Barnes, “The Logic of Trinitarian Theology,” 203–224.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 301.

## Augustine and Victorinus: Oneness as Relational Intimacy

While the Council of Nicaea set the parameters for Christian orthodoxy through the term *homoousios*, the centuries that followed saw a profound deepening and diversification of how divine oneness was understood and articulated. Within the Latin tradition, two pivotal figures stand out for their rich theological contributions to the concept of divine unity: Augustine of Hippo and Marius Victorinus. This section explores how each theologian approached oneness not as numerical sameness or abstract metaphysical substance but as relational intimacy envisioning the Trinity as a communion of love.

### Augustine: Psychological Analogy and the Dance of Interior Unity

Augustine's magisterial work, *De Trinitate*, offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of divine unity in the Latin tradition. For Augustine, oneness within the Trinity is not reducible to an abstract monad but is mirrored in the relational capacities of the human soul. His psychological analogy – memory (*memoria*), understanding (*intelligentia*), and will (*voluntas*) – serves to illustrate how multiplicity can coexist with unity.

Augustine's approach is not merely speculative anthropology but a profoundly theological move: it internalizes divine oneness, rooting it in the structures of created relationality.<sup>38</sup> Through this analogy, Augustine articulates the Trinity as a unity of activity rather than a static essence. The persons of the Godhead are bound not by substance alone, but by love and mutual self-giving. «There are three things in love: the lover, the beloved, and the love».<sup>39</sup>

In this model, the Father eternally generates the Son, and the Spirit proceeds as the love between the two. Augustine emphasizes that these are not temporal actions but eternal relations of origin. Barnes underscores that for Augustine, the

<sup>38</sup> Michel René Barnes, *Augustine and Nicene Theology* (Cambridge: James Clerke & Co, 2023)174; Michel René Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 237.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, book 8, chap 10, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 1991), 243.

shared substance of the Trinity is a mode of being-together: a mutual indwelling that reflects perfect communion.<sup>40</sup>

Yet this analogy is not without its limitations. As Rowan Williams points out, the reliance on introspective, individualistic psychology risks reducing Trinitarian relations to intrapsychic functions.<sup>41</sup> The *analogia mentis*, though profound, can obscure the external and communal dimensions of divine life. It reflects a particular cultural location – male, monastic, and Roman – which may not resonate universally. Moreover, Augustine’s acceptance of the filioque (that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son) introduces a hierarchical tendency. While intended to emphasize the unity of divine action, it also subtly reshapes the relational dynamic of the Trinity, potentially marginalizing the Spirit’s distinct agency.

However, for Augustine, «The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God; and this Trinity is one substance, one essence».<sup>42</sup> «In the Trinity, nothing is greater or less; there is no inequality; the same essence, the same nature».<sup>43</sup> Thus Augustine offers a vision of divine oneness that is dynamic, intimate, and internalized. His theology invites us to see unity not as sameness but as relational coherence – an interweaving of life and love.

## Marius Victorinus: Neoplatonic Grammar and Trinitarian Distinction

Marius Victorinus, a Latin rhetorician and convert to Christianity, brought neoplatonic philosophy into conversation with emerging Trinitarian orthodoxy. While less well known than Augustine, his contributions are deeply significant, especially for a liberative rereading of *homoousios*. «The Son is of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father, not by division, but by the fullness of the divine nature».<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Michel René Barnes, *Augustine and Nicene Theology*, 1–13: for detailed discussion on Augustine in contemporary Trinitarian Theology and, 151–175 for Rereading Augustine’s trinitarian Theology.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 199–214.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, book 1, chap. 4, trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st. ser., vol. 3, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, book 7, chap. 4. trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st. ser., vol. 3, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, trans. Mary T. Clark, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 69 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 296–297.

Victorinus' *homoousios* doctrine of Trinitarian unity is a logic of «triadic mutual co-inherence». He consistently includes the Holy Spirit as *homoousios*.<sup>45</sup>

Victorinus was one of the first Latin theologians to explicitly use philosophical categories to articulate the co-equality of the divine persons. He insists that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct yet share the same essence – a claim that defies both Arian subordinationism and Sabellian modalism.<sup>46</sup> «There is one substance, but three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each is distinct, yet they are not separated».<sup>47</sup> His philosophical background enabled him to speak of multiplicity within unity, without collapsing one into the other.

Barnes praises Victorinus for his conceptual daring. Unlike Augustine, who grounds his theology in psychological introspection, Victorinus employs ontological categories from Plotinus and Porphyry to construct a grammar of divine life. Yet, as Barnes notes, Victorinus does not import neoplatonism uncritically; he adapts it. For example, he breaks with the neoplatonic hierarchy of emanation by affirming the equal divinity of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>48</sup>

In his theological treatises, Victorinus asserts that God is «*unum esse trinitas*» (one being, threefold), and that the persons are united not by derivation but by eternal relationality. Victorinus avoids conceiving divine unity as a simple numerical identity. Instead, unity is maintained through the eternal interplay of distinct persons who exist «in one another» (*mutuo in se*).<sup>49</sup> «The three are one not by nature but by mutual indwelling».<sup>50</sup>

This anticipates later eastern notions of perichoresis, even if Victorinus does not use that term. His language allows for a participatory ontology: each person of the Trinity fully indwells the others without erasing difference, a precursor to a liberative account of oneness as dynamic inclusion, not static uniformity.

Victorinus also plays with language in radical ways. He uses paradox and negation to speak of divine mystery, insisting that God is beyond category – not singular, not plural, but relationally one. This apophatic impulse resists any attempt to fix divine identity into conceptual moulds, which resonates deeply with postcolonial

<sup>45</sup> Michel René Barnes, *Augustine and Nicene Theology*, 128

<sup>46</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 69, 251–254.

<sup>47</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, 303.

<sup>48</sup> Michel René Barnes, *Augustine and Nicene Theology*, 127–128.

<sup>49</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, 234–235.

<sup>50</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, 103.

and feminist theologies, which warn against totalizing language and call for theological humility.

## Relational Oneness and the Ethics of Communion

Taken together, Augustine and Victorinus offer complementary visions of divine oneness: one introspective and psychological, the other philosophical and ontological. What unites them is a commitment to relationality. For both, divine unity is not solitary but shared. It is the result of eternal giving, receiving, and indwelling.

This relational focus allows Christian theology to speak of God without recourse to imperial categories. In contrast to the ‘unmoveable One’ of classical metaphysics, the God of Augustine and Victorinus is eternally in relation. Divine oneness becomes a model for ecclesial and social life: unity in diversity, communion without control.

This has profound ethical implications. If God is one in relational intimacy, then the church must embody that same pattern. Augustine himself links Trinitarian unity to the communal life of believers. In *De Civitate Dei*, he writes that the earthly city is marked by domination and pride, while the heavenly city reflects mutual service and love.<sup>51</sup> Oneness, then, is not a doctrine to be asserted, but a life to be lived.

This liberative perspective, challenges the use of *homoousios* as a tool of exclusion. Instead of demanding conformity, the doctrine should invite participation. Victorinus’s emphasis on mystery and mutuality creates space for plurality, contextuality, and difference within communion. It gestures toward a divine life that welcomes, rather than absorbs.

## The Ambiguities of Substance Language

Despite their contributions, both Augustine and Victorinus operate within the limitations of substance metaphysics. The language of «essence», «substance», and «being» carries philosophical baggage that can hinder rather than help. These terms risk reifying divine life into a category of Greek ontology – a move that can obscure the lived, relational character of God.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*), book 19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Barnes, “The Logic of Trinitarian Theology,” 203–224.

Moreover, the alignment of Trinitarian doctrine with imperial power in subsequent centuries casts a shadow over these formulations. While Augustine was not directly complicit in such alliances, his theology was later used to justify hierarchical and coercive ecclesial structures. Victorinus, too, writes within a world of elite Roman culture that often marginalizes the poor, the colonized, and the non-male.

A liberative rereading must therefore retain their relational insights while resisting the metaphysical fixity of their categories and calls for a return to the relational core of Trinitarian theology – a core that can inspire ecclesial transformation and social justice.<sup>53</sup>

### Oneness as Liberative Intimacy

Ultimately, Augustine and Victorinus help us see that divine oneness is not a matter of identity but intimacy. It is a unity that flows from love, not law; from gift, not grasp. Their theologies, especially when read through liberation perspective, allow for a dynamic, participatory model of God that resists exclusion and invites communion.

In this view, *homoousios* can be reclaimed as a term of solidarity rather than sameness. The Father, Son, and Spirit are one not because they are identical, one in substance, one in essence, but because they dwell in each other in perfect love. This divine dance becomes the model for human communities called to embody justice, mutuality, and grace. Trinitarian theology, rightly understood, is not about solving metaphysical puzzles but about learning to live in the rhythm of divine love. In that rhythm, we find not only the oneness of God but also the invitation to be one with each other in a communion that heals, liberates, nurtures, and endures.

### Toward a Liberative *Homoousios*: Oneness As Kenotic Justice

We have explored the relational, incarnational, political, philosophical, and psychological contours of divine oneness. We now arrive at a constructive turning point. This is a proposal for a liberative rereading of *homoousios*.

No longer do we treat *homoousios* as a static metaphysical claim. Rather, we interpret it as a theological summons – a call into divine solidarity. It is an invita-

<sup>53</sup> Barnes, “The Logic of Trinitarian Theology,” 221.

tion to participate in the life of God, a life poured out in love, justice, and mutuality. *Homoousios* becomes solidarity-in-essence. It names a divine oneness that dismantles the empire. It resists exclusion. It embodies the justice of a self-emptying God.

## Kenosis as Ontological Descent

The traditional reading of *homoousios* often emphasizes shared essence or metaphysical equality between Father and Son. While this formulation rightly combats Arian subordinationism, it risks abstracting divine unity from the narrative of Jesus' life. A liberative approach insists that divine oneness be interpreted not outside of history but through it.

The kenotic hymn of Philippians 2.5–11 reveals a Christ who, «though being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself». Similarly, the Johannine Gospel, using the simple imagery of giving, (*didomi*) expresses oneness of the Father and the Son in self-giving and self-emptying. This kenosis is thus not the suspension of divinity but its truest expression. «Incarnation, the descent of God into flesh is not a movement away from divinity but the revelation of its essence».<sup>54</sup>

In this light, *homoousios* names not just a metaphysical status, the essence or the substance, but a mode of divine being: the Word is one with the Father because the Word shares in the Father's liberative mission – to dwell among the fragile, the vulnerable, the outcast, the least, and the excluded, to heal, to raise, and to reconcile. This is the true revelation of the Trinitarian life as a rhythm of love poured out.

## From Essence to Solidarity: Jesus and the Margins

The Son who is *homoousios* with the Father is not merely ontologically identical but missionally aligned. His ministry to the poor, the sick, and the outcast is not incidental to his divinity – it is its fullest expression. The Son's identity is revealed in his abandonment and in his embrace of the abandoned.<sup>55</sup>

This interpretation allows us to reread *homoousios* as an ontological claim that commits God to the margins. The Word shares the same being with the Father, and that being is always turned outward – a being-for-others. Boff argues that the Trinity is a «community without domination», a divine fellowship where power is

<sup>54</sup> D. R. Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, 196.

<sup>55</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 63.



service and unity is mutual indwelling.<sup>56</sup> Gutiérrez similarly roots divine action in historical liberation. God, he insists, is known not in abstract being but, in the Exodus, the Magnificat, and the Cross.<sup>57</sup> The *homoousios*, then, is not merely the eternal Logos but the suffering servant, the crucified one whose resurrection inaugurates a new creation.

## Ecclesial Implications: The Church as Kenotic Community

If *homoousios* signifies divine solidarity, then the church must be its embodiment. The call to be «one as the Father and Son are one» (John 17.21) is a call not to metaphysical mimicry but to become a kenotic community. This oneness is lived out in justice, compassion, and mutual accountability. Johannine oneness is therefore primarily, participatory and ethical,<sup>58</sup> where the church becomes one not through institutional uniformity but through acts of love that mirror divine mutuality which are always intended to guide the life of the *ekklesiā*. The church, then, is *homoousios* not in essence but in vocation. It becomes one with the Son by sharing in his descent, his table, and his wounds. This requires dismantling structures of domination – whether patriarchal, racial, economical, or ecclesial – that contradict the kenotic life of God.

## Cosmic Dimensions: Creation, Ecology, and Kinship

A liberative *homoousios* must extend beyond the church to embrace the whole cosmos. The same Word who is one with the Father is also the Word through whom all things were made (John 1.3). Divine solidarity, therefore, includes the earth, its creatures, and its ecosystems.

Boff's eco-trinitarian theology imagines the Trinity as the heartbeat of creation: a communion that calls forth beauty, interdependence, and care.<sup>59</sup> In this vision, *homoousios* signifies not just Christ's unity with God, but God's oneness with all that is. To confess *homoousios* is to affirm that the groaning of creation is heard and that divine love sustains the entire creation.

This cosmic vision challenges any theology that would restrict salvation to souls or doctrine. The Son, who is of one being with the Father is also of one with

<sup>56</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 104.

<sup>58</sup> D. R. Sadananda, *Johannine Exegesis*, 146–148.

<sup>59</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 31.

the dust of the earth. It insists that divine oneness must therefore embrace all people, the planet, and all matter. It must be ecological, interspecies, and cosmic.

### ***Homoousios* Reimagined: From Doctrine to Dance**

How, then, shall we speak of *homoousios* today?

First, we must release it from metaphysical enclosure. Early Trinitarian debates were more concerned with relational coherence than philosophical exactitude.<sup>60</sup> *Homoousios* was not the end of theology but its beginning.

Second, we must re-embody it. The *homoousios* is found not only in creeds but in the poor, the prisoner, and the refugee. As Jesus says in Matthew 25.40, «What you do to the least of these, you do to me».

Third, we must dance it. *Homoousios* is not a proposition but a song – a liturgy of love that enfolds difference into communion. It is perichoresis, the divine dance that welcomes all bodies, all stories, all nations, and the whole cosmos.

In this liberative rereading, *homoousios* becomes a word of hope: God is not far off but near, not indifferent but incarnate. The one who is of the same being with the Father has made us kin with all that God has created, calling us to live in a unity that heals, liberates, and renews.

## **Conclusion: Becoming a Sacrament of Resistance in a Fractured World**

We have journeyed through the entangled history, contested meanings, and liberative potential of *homoousios* – that ancient yet unfinished term forged at Nicaea's imperial crucible. Beginning in the Gospel of John, we saw that oneness is not an abstract metaphysics but a dance of relational communion – a perichoretic love that crosses boundaries and resists the empire's violence. We traced this term through the theological struggles of the fourth century, where Eusebius and Athanasius debated substance and salvation under Constantine's shadow. We listened to Augustine and Victorinus, who imagined oneness in terms of relational intimacy, even as their categories bore the scars of Greco-Roman hierarchies. Ultimately, we

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<sup>60</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 281–285.

reimagined *homoousios* as a kenotic summons to cosmic solidarity – a living theology that refuses every empire’s logic of domination.

What emerges is not a rejection of the Nicene tradition but a reclamation of its deepest impulse: that God is radically with us. The confession that the Son is «of one being with the Father» becomes a confession of solidarity – not only divine solidarity with humanity, but also the church’s solidarity with the poor, all who are marginalized and the earth.

In this age of authenticity, where every truth claim is tested by its capacity to heal rather than harm – the question is urgent: Can *homoousios* become a living song of resistance, a language that names and confronts the systems that fragment, exploit, and oppress? Too often, the language of divine oneness has been weaponized to silence dissent and uphold patriarchy and colonial conquest. To confess *homoousios* today is not to guard a metaphysical fortress but to enter a covenantal embrace. It is to believe that God is one not despite difference but through it – a unity that is relational, participatory, and liberative.

To confess *homoousios* is to become a sacrament of resistance – a living sign against every force that fragments, marginalizes, and dehumanizes. It is to embody a unity that dances in difference, that breathes justice and grace. The church that proclaims *homoousios* must embody the oneness and unity it confesses – not as, sameness or uniformity, but as a radical communion of difference, standing with the fragile and vulnerable, the wounded, the disabled, the displaced, and the silenced. It must resist every empire’s temptation to define unity as control and instead live into the liberating oneness that the Son embodied.

May *homoousios* be interpreted not as a doctrinal relic but as a threshold of possibility – a call to live in the rhythm of divine love that heals, liberates, and renews. Only then can the language of oneness become more than doctrine; it can become the living sign of God’s dream for a cosmos reconciled and made whole.

# The Nicene Faith: Theological Roots and Continuing Fruitfulness of Incarnational Theology

*Anna Case-Winters*

## Introduction

An essential conviction of Christian faith is that «God is with us». Christians have claimed that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God's presence is seen in a distinctive and decisive way. As the Gospel of John expresses it, «the Word became flesh and dwelt among us» (John 1.14). But what does this mean? Early Christians struggled to understand how and in what sense God was in Christ. The creedal expression of this faith affirmation, most widely used ecumenically, is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.<sup>1</sup> This contribution will explore the theological roots of the incarnational theology we find expressed there as well as the ongoing fruitfulness of incarnational theology amid contemporary challenges for Christian faith.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed makes a remarkable set of affirmations regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. The earliest form of this Creed, developed at Nicaea in AD 325, takes care to articulate and elaborate his relation to God and to affirm his full divinity. The most commonly used English version of the full original reads as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> In scholarly usage this is referred to as the 'Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed' to reflect the history of its composition which began with the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and was expanded by the Council of Constantinople (AD 381). In liturgical use, it is more commonly simply called the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, became human, suffered and rose again on the third day, went up into the heavens, and is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit.

In AD 381, the Council of Constantinople expanded the Nicene Creed sections on Christ and on the Holy Spirit. The expansion on Christ expresses more fully his humanity, the incarnation, and redemptive work.

And was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

How did the writers of the Creed come to express these convictions around the incarnation in the way they did? What was at stake then? What is at stake now? What are the implications of this incarnational theology in this Creed for critical issues of our day?

## Historical/Theological Roots: What Was at Stake Then?

First, we will explore how the incarnation was understood by Irenaeus who greatly influenced Athanasius' perspective which became the dominant view after the Council at Nicaea. Along the way we will reconsider the historical presentation of the views of Arius. Arius and Athanasius were in fact struggling with similar concerns, and both relied on the theology of Origen for support of their views – though they came to different conclusions.

Next, we will give a brief account of Calvin's interactions with the Creed many centuries later. His response is illustrative of how Reformed tradition has understood the status and authority of creeds and confessions.

## On the Way to Nicaea: Theological Insights from Irenaeus, Origen, Arius, and Athanasius

We will first explore earlier developments in incarnational theology in the work of second century theologian Irenaeus (c. AD 130–198). Much of his theology is a direct refutation of the views of Marcion (c. AD 85–160). Marcion believed there were two gods. One was the Demiurge: the god of the Old Testament, a just but wrathful creator god, responsible for the material world. The second was the Father of Jesus Christ: a previously unknown God of love and grace, revealed only through Jesus and the New Testament. He rejected the Old Testament and any continuity between Judaism and Christianity. Marcion rejected the incarnation. He held a docetic Christology believing that Jesus only appeared to be human but did not truly take on flesh. His views called into question the goodness of creation, matter, and flesh. Since the material world was evil, Christ could not be truly incarnate.

In sharp contrast, Irenaeus believed in one God who is God of both creation and redemption. He insisted on the goodness, abundance, and beauty of the creation. The incarnation was not in appearance only, but in the flesh. Furthermore, God's saving work accomplished in the incarnation included the whole creation. It is not only human beings, but *all things* that are recapitulated and redeemed in Christ. For Irenaeus, God's work in creation was always already directed toward incarnation.

As theologian Denis Edwards has pointed out, Irenaeus, «resists all the disembodied theologies of his day and defends the earthiness and the bodily reality of incarnation, the cross and participation in resurrection life».<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar concurs noting that, «In his eschatology Irenaeus produces an important counterweight to the flight from the world and the failure to take seriously the resurrection of the flesh which marks the Platonizing Christian eschatologies of a later period and indeed the average Christian consciousness.»<sup>3</sup>

In his doctrine of God, Irenaeus maintained a high view of the transcendence (*magnitudo*) of God as uncontained and incomprehensible. Yet he joined divine transcendence to divine love (*dilectio*). For him, the cross is more than one moment in time. Rather the crucifixion makes visible the ongoing cruciform work of the

<sup>2</sup> Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, II Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 93.

Word of God, «in the height and in the depth, in the length and in the breadth of all creaturely reality».<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus set the stage for subsequent incarnational theology as we see it emerging in fourth century theologian Athanasius (c. AD 296–373). Athanasius attended the Council of Nicaea with his Bishop Alexander. While he did not have a hand in writing the Nicene Creed, he played a major role in articulating, defending, and promoting its affirmations afterwards. The bishops gathered at Nicaea were contending with claims made by Arius that: Jesus was neither eternal nor begotten by God; that he was not God, but a creation of God; and that he was a mediator between God and human beings and not a savior – since only God can save. Furthermore, not being God, he should not be worshiped and glorified. The very language of the Nicene Creed and the additions made at Constantinople can be seen to be a repudiation of the views Arius espoused.

Beyond the Council at Nicaea, Athanasius emerged as the chief opponent to Arius and his views. Interestingly, Arius and Athanasius were grappling with very similar concerns. Both sought to find a way of preserving God's unity while recognizing distinctions among the persons of the Trinity. Neither wanted to make those distinctions so sharp that Trinitarian theology would be misunderstood as some kind of tritheism.

Arius and Athanasius appealed to Origen (AD 185–253/4) to support their claims – though with very different interpretations of Origen. Origen saw the Son as subordinate in rank though not in essence. Arius emphasized subordination and Athanasius emphasized the shared essence. Origen affirmed the 'eternal generation' of the Son. Arius believed this allowed for a beginning of the Son, but Athanasius insisted this could not be a 'temporal' beginning. Both used Origen's Logos theology, but while Arius saw the Logos in an instrumental role, Athanasius saw the Logos as the eternal wisdom and reason of God, co-eternal and consubstantial with God. Where Origen affirmed the Son as the agent of creation, Arius believed this meant God created the Son before time in order to mediate creation. As a created being the Son is ontologically distinct from God. Athanasius, on the other hand, saw the Son as the eternal creator and not a creature who is the instrument of God's creative work.

The views of Athanasius triumphed, and the writings of Arius were ordered to be destroyed. The death penalty awaited any who tried to conceal such contraband

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*, 54.

items. This history makes it difficult to obtain a full and fair picture of the views of Arius. Much of what history carried forward was the polemic against Arius especially in the writing of Athanasius, which may oversimplify and misrepresent his views. It may be that Arius came to some of his conclusions motivated by his concern to defend monotheism and to affirm the unity and simplicity of God. Rowan Williams has observed that, «The image of Arius that dominated later patristic and much modern scholarship was more the creation of his adversaries than an objective account of his teaching».<sup>5</sup>

Athanasius went on to write his work, *On the Incarnation*. This was the first text in Christian history devoted specifically to the incarnation. He further develops and extends ideas consistent with what Irenaeus had earlier affirmed, though he does so in ways distinctive to his time and context. Among his insights is his distinctive affirmation that the Word of creation is the Word of redemption. The Redeemer is the Creator. The cross is salvific not just for human beings but for the whole creation. Khaled Anatolios describes the relationship between God and creation as the ‘architectonic center’ of the Christological vision Athanasius articulates. «It is Christology that radically unites God and the world of creatures».<sup>6</sup>

For Athanasius, God creates all things through the divine Word and Wisdom. «All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being» (John 1.3). This conviction is embedded in the Nicene Creed in the passage, «through him all things were made». In his *Orations against the Arians*, Athanasius affirms that the whole creation and every creature bears the imprint of divine Wisdom. In the incarnation, divine Wisdom, already imprinted in all things, becomes present in a radically interior way.

Athanasius goes on to add that all things are created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and forever rest on nothing. The eternal Word through whom they were created holds them in being over that abyss of nothing. The Word, «gives life and protection to everything, everywhere, to each individually and to all together».<sup>7</sup>

The affirmation of «true God from true God» and «of one being with the Father» is articulated by Athanasius in this way, «So he was not a human being and later became God. But, being God, he later became human in order that we may be di-

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 39–40.

<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Greeks*, 41 ed. and trans. Robert Thomson in *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).



vinized».<sup>8</sup> The bodily humanity of Jesus is deified by its union with the Word. Athanasius builds on Irenaeus and others here, but he uses the language of deification more often. He pairs it with other terms like adoption, salvation, and vivification.

As with Irenaeus, Athanasius holds divine transcendence and loving kindness together. The attribute of loving kindness makes it possible for God to «transcend God's transcendence» in the immanence that is the incarnation.<sup>9</sup> The uncreated Word condescends to be with creatures in self-humbling, self-giving love. For Athanasius, this is not *contrary* to God's true nature but rather *a true expression* of it. Gregory of Nyssa put it this way, «We marvel at the way Godhead was entwined in human nature, and in becoming human, did not cease to be God».<sup>10</sup>

Athanasius goes on to affirm that in the incarnation the Word is not 'enclosed' in the body of Jesus. Instead, it continues to act creatively and providentially in the whole creation. Nor is the Word contained even by the whole of creation. On the contrary, it is the Word that contains the creation. Athanasius affirms, «the most amazing thing is this, that he both lived as a human being and, as the Word, gave life to everything, and as the Son was with the Father».<sup>11</sup>

## The Relative Authority of Creeds and Confessions for the Reformed: Calvin's Response

From these early thinkers whose theology was influential in the shaping and later interpretation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, we now move on to consider the appropriation of these theological themes in Reformed theology. In particular, we will consider the theology of John Calvin, whose insights continue to inform how Reformed Christians understand and receive the Nicene Creed.

At the outset, it is important to clarify the status of creeds within Reformed tradition. Calvin's own response to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is emblematic of the Reformed reserve regarding creeds in general. Calvin resisted the elevation of creeds as he observed it in the Roman Catholic Church. He criticized

<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, 1.39, in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004) 96.

<sup>9</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 104.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Orations* 14, in Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 203.

<sup>11</sup> Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 104.

use of creeds as binding authoritative formulas and noted that this status is sometimes obtained even without a genuine embrace of the teachings within the creed. Calvin worried about empty formalism and the elevating of church tradition alongside Scripture.

In the early years of Calvin's ministry, Peter Caroli, a doctor of the Sorbonne, raised the charge of Arianism against Calvin and Farel at a synod in Lausanne in May of AD 1537. To prove their orthodoxy Caroli challenged them to sign the Athanasian Creed (with its anathemas) to prove their orthodoxy. They refused to do so. Their refusal was due to reservations regarding the independent authority of creeds. Although Calvin concurred with the essential affirmations on the Trinity and Christology in the Athanasian Creed, he insisted on the priority of Scripture. Calvin held that the Bible was the final and supreme authority for Christian doctrine, not any humanly devised creed no matter how ancient or widely accepted. Furthermore, he did not accept the idea that adherence to a creed should be a condition for church membership or leadership. In his understanding, creeds and confessions, including the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, were valuable only insofar as they faithfully reflected the teachings of Scripture. This stance was entirely consistent with Calvin's ongoing emphasis on *sola scriptura*, the principle that Scripture alone is the final authority in matters of faith and doctrine.

Calvin's agreement with the doctrinal content of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is borne out in his writings. He fully accepted it as a faithful expression of Christian theology of the Incarnation and Trinitarian faith. In the *Institutes* (I. 13), he explicitly defends *homoousios* («of the same essence») and argues that the Son is fully divine and co-eternal with the Father.

Contemporary practice around use of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed reflects the distinctive Reformed understanding of the status of creeds. Liturgically, unlike Lutherans and Anglicans who retained recitation of the Nicene Creed in their liturgy, Reformed folk did not make it a standard part of worship. It was more often used as a teaching tool for Christian doctrine.

## Fresh and Fruitful Readings: What is at Stake Now?

What fresh and fruitful readings of the Creed might be possible (and needed) in our time? Many prospects present themselves, but only a few will be addressed here. The first step will be to argue for the importance of a robust affirmation of the In-

carnation we find in the Creed. This has implications both for how we think about God and for how we understand our calling. Next, we will take a fresh look at the Creed in relation to three significant challenges for our time: interreligious relations, social ethics, and ecological responsibility. While the treatment of these challenges must be brief, it will illustrate the ongoing relevance of affirmations in the Creed for today.

## The Importance of a Robust Affirmation of Incarnation

The incarnational affirmation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is that Jesus Christ, «true God from true God» was «incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human». This claim that he could be both «true God» and «truly human» has seemed to many contemporary believers to be paradoxical at best and contradictory at worst. The apparent tension has in practice led to distortions in Christological understanding. Facing the seeming incoherence, many Christians end up settling for either a Christology from above (deemphasizing the ‘truly human’) or a Christology from below (deemphasizing the ‘true God’). These options risk Docetism on the one hand and Adoptionism on the other. Both alternatives are problematic. In Docetism the incarnate One only *appears* to be human<sup>12</sup> – a kind of divine deception. In Adoptionism, Jesus, is an ordinary human being who, because of his obedience to God, is ‘adopted’ to divine status (whether at his baptism, resurrection, or ascension).

The resolutions attempted created their own problems theologically and practically. The result is a level of incoherence that has threatened the religious viability of these Christological affirmations.<sup>13</sup> People choose either a high Christology or a low Christology and cannot hold together the fullness of the meaning of the Incarnation.

The practical outworking of making a choice between divine and human in the person of Jesus, the Christ, is of real religious consequence. On one hand, if we do not see «true God» in Jesus, the Christ, then our view of who God is and how God is related to us and to the world cannot be shaped by what we see in Jesus. The com-

<sup>12</sup> Docetism in Greek δοκεῖν “to seem.” The human, fleshly form seen as Jesus of Nazareth was mere semblance without any true reality. God was present but the human form itself was a kind of illusion – God only seeming to be human. This way of thinking was rejected at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Case-Winters, “Incarnation: In What Sense is God Really ‘with Us’?” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2019).

passion and the vulnerable, suffering love we see there are not reliably revelatory of the heart of God. What Jesus does and teaches reveals who he, the human being, is, but it does not reveal God's nature and activity in the world. We cannot really acknowledge, as Barth did, that because of Jesus Christ, we know about the (humanity of God).<sup>14</sup> The deeper implication of the incarnation – that God is in, with, and for the world – is lost. Many claims central to Christian faith are grounded in the belief that in the Incarnation we see «true God». If this is not the case, then the ancient saying, «if this is God, then thus is God», cannot hold. Here we see the import of the affirmation of divinity in the Creedal affirmation «true God from true God».

On the other hand, if we do not see Jesus as 'truly human,' then his life cannot serve as a model for our own. If God's presence in Jesus is ontologically different from God's presence in the rest of us, then we cannot be expected to be like him.<sup>15</sup> We might be moved to worship him (as divine), but we cannot really be expected to follow him. The 'reign of God' that Jesus preached ceases to be the focus of our attention, and a 'cult of Jesus' takes its place. He becomes a mere object of devotion rather than a companion in seeking and working for the reign of God.<sup>16</sup> If we do see a true human being in Jesus, then he can truly be an exemplar for us and the calling to follow in his way becomes viable and compelling. Ethical implications and obligations come to the fore.

Karl Barth urged that the full humanity of Jesus be claimed. In fact, he put the matter provocatively and insisted that the question is not whether Jesus is human but whether we are! This is the case because it is only in Jesus that we see what a 'true' human being looks like. The true human being is one who lives in the fullness of covenant relation with God (undistorted by sin). Being in right relation with God, the true human being will be in right relation to all else.<sup>17</sup> This true humanity is opened up for us by Jesus. It becomes a future possibility and destiny, however imperfectly it may be realized in our situation of sinfulness. These insights further

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 49–51. «When we look at Jesus Christ, we know precisely that God's deity includes and does not exclude His humanity [...] His deity encloses humanity in itself [...] In his divinely free volition and election, in his sovereign decision, God is *human*».

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Bracken, *Spirit, and Society: A Trinitarian Cosmology* (London/Toronto: Association of University Presses, 1991) 28.

<sup>16</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), III/2: 222–225.

illustrate the theological importance of the Creed's affirmation of the full humanity of Jesus.

## An Incarnational Ethic

Now we turn to consider how the insights of the Creed – especially its incarnation-al theology – might illuminate critical challenges we face in our own day and time. Many challenges could benefit from such an exploration, but only three can be touched upon in this brief treatment: interreligious relations, social ethics, and ecological responsibility.

### *Interreligious Relations*

The challenge of interreligious relations is critically important in our contemporary context. How can we further mutual understanding, engagement, and cooperation? In many contexts, there are tensions and conflicts among people of different religions. Religious minorities in many locations around the globe are oppressed, persecuted, and victimized by hate crimes. In several places, oppression is so extreme that religious minorities are forced to flee their homes and homelands for their own safety. In some ways this is not a new problem for us. If we take a clear-eyed look at the history of the Christian church, we have to grapple with a long and shameful history of religiously motivated violence. To mention Crusades, inquisitions, witch burnings, and pogroms is only to make a beginning. Sentiment about religion today is very mixed given these current dynamics and this history – and understandably so. Some would even say that in fully modern, secular contexts, religion is defunct, and where it still exists, it is divisive and dangerous. The acid comment of Jonathan Swift seems very much to the point: «we have just enough religion to hate one another [...] But not yet enough to love one another».<sup>18</sup> The world needs religious folks to do better than this.

These realities in our contemporary context press us to ask some hard questions concerning affirmations in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Do Christian claims about incarnation lock us into an unavoidable exclusivism? Does the incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth mean that God's self-revelation has happened only in him and not in other times and places?

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects Moral and Diverting in The Work of Jonathan Swift*, DD (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1814), 9:431.

The Creed affirms that Jesus Christ is «the only Son of God». Looking with fresh eyes, cognizant of the mixed history and current challenges of interreligious relations, how do we understand this affirmation? Among the Reformed, it is customary to approach creeds and confessions looking through the lens of Scripture and attentive to the ongoing witness and guidance of the Spirit.

If we frame this statement from the Creed in the larger context of the biblical narrative, a fresh understanding may emerge. The biblical texts we have include affirmation of Jesus' divine Sonship as does the Creed. At the same time, the vision is enlarged in Scripture. For example, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus addresses God as «*Our Father*» not «*My Father*», and he encourages others to pray in this way. Can it be that Jesus' relation to God, though distinctive, is not exclusive? Is there not a sense in which we affirm that all of us are «children of God»?

A similar set of challenges arises when we take up the incarnational theology we see in the Creed. Do these creedal affirmations of God's Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth necessitate belief that God's self-revelation has happened *only* in him and nowhere else? Here we are helped by looking both at the theological roots of the Nicene Creed concerning the nature of the Incarnation and the distinctive Reformed appropriation of this understanding. A more open reading is perhaps possible.

In discussing the Incarnation, Athanasius insists that the Word was not «bound to the body» of Jesus. The Word was «in it [his body], and in everything, and outside creation, [...] and the most amazing thing is this, that he both lived as a human being and as the Word gave life to everything, and as the Son was with the Father».<sup>19</sup> Viewed in this way, the Word need not be seen as dissolved and disappearing in the person of Jesus. The Word continues to act creatively and providentially in the whole of creation, even as it is incarnate in Jesus. Calvin affirmed this understanding<sup>20</sup> which, was named, by its disparagers, as the *extra calvinisticum* – that Calvinist extra!

<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>20</sup> This view was in fact widely held in Catholic tradition. Lutheran theology took a different direction on this. It held that because of the incarnation the finite is capable of (can bear or contain) the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*). The Reformed insisted that the finite is not capable of (cannot bear or contain) the infinite (*finitum non capax infiniti*). This led to different understandings of the eucharist. For Lutheran's there can be a *physical* presence of Christ at every Eucharist because the incarnate Christ is capable of divine ubiquity.

The claim of «true God from true God» can be affirmed in the incarnation with the full wealth of conviction without needing to claim that this is the only locus of divine presence, self-revelation, and action. We may say that Jesus Christ is wholly divine without claiming he is ‘the whole’ of the divine. To illustrate one might think of San Francisco Bay. In its constitution, it is all ocean, but it is not *all* of the ocean. So also, we might claim that the Incarnate one is «all God» (Latin *totus*), without claiming that he is «all of God» (Latin *totem*).

### ***Social Justice***

Another critical challenge before us today is social injustice. Is it possible that an incarnational ethic arising from our creedal affirmations might challenge unjust social systems and structures?

We have the remarkable affirmation that Jesus Christ, «true God from true God [...] was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human». What might this strong affirmation of divine embrace of humanity yield in the way of an ‘incarnational ethic’?

Among other things, incarnation signals a divine embrace of embodiment. It invites us to embrace embodiment, as well. This is, in some sense, countercultural in challenging the still prevalent body-soul dualism in which the soul is the important thing, and the body is quite secondary. Such a view can make more thinkable the devaluation, objectification, and even commodification of bodies (*some* bodies) we have seen in our history. A hierarchical dualism of body and soul is problematic theologically, biblically, scientifically, and in terms of its social consequences.

Theologically, we may recall that Gnostic dualism was rejected early in Christian tradition. Gnostics typically embraced a radical dualism between the material body, seen as corrupt, illusory, or even evil, and the soul (or spirit), which is divine and originates from a higher, spiritual realm. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed directly counters the Gnostic view that material reality was created by a lesser God. God is «maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible». The Christian claim is that God is the source of all that is. What God creates is good – bodies included.

The biblical stories around the creation of human beings offer a more holistic picture. It is instructive to look closely at the account of the creation of the human being in Genesis 2. There is no differentiation between body and soul. The human being is created as a «living being» (Hebrew - *nephesh hayah*). Biblical scholar Ted Hiebert points out that:

receiving the breath of life does not grant the first human being a soul or spiritual character different from the animals, since this breath is the physical breath of all animate life (cf. Gen 7:22). the human being and the animals alike are called ‘living beings.’<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, English translators of the King James version imposed a dualism that was not there in the original. They translated the same two words (*nephesh hayah*) differently for animals and for human beings. For animals they used ‘living creature;’ for human beings they used ‘living soul’.

Contemporary neuroscience bears out a more holistic picture of the human being. Brain processes have been shown not only to be correlates of our experience, but also physical bases. We are integrated, embodied selves. Dualism is a false report on human experience. As Whitehead pointed out, no one ever says, «(Here I am, and I have brought my body with me)». <sup>22</sup> God, as the creed affirms, brought the whole material world into being and comes to us in the flesh. God embraces embodiment in the incarnation. An incarnational ethic will evoke reverence and respect for bodies. Bodies matter. *Every* body matters.

Even as we affirm that *every* body matters, there is much more to be said. Some bodies are more vulnerable than others, and this must be taken into account. Theology is only as good as its ability to address the situation of the most vulnerable. Liberation theologians insist that God is on the side of the oppressed – that their wounds are God’s wounds. When Latin American liberationists first talked about God’s preferential option for the poor<sup>23</sup> they met with resistance. Surely God is impartial, people countered. When the Black Lives Matter movement arose in the US, it also met resistance. Many insisted on countering with «*All* Lives Matter». The relevant consideration is whose life is vulnerable. In Scripture, the eighth-century prophets are very clear – the God who loves us all takes the side of the most vulnerable: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the prisoner, the captive. This is regularly reiterated in the prophets and is prominent in the teachings of

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 139.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, (New York: Free Press, 1938), 114.

<sup>23</sup> God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ was first fully articulated by Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P. in his landmark work, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973). Gutiérrez asserts that this principle is rooted in both the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the prophets and the teachings of Jesus. Gutiérrez claimed that a preferential concern for the physical and spiritual welfare of the poor is an essential element of the Gospel.



Jesus. Jesus' ministry was centered among «the least, the last, the lost, and the little ones».<sup>24</sup>

An incarnational ethic will insist that bodies matter and that all bodies under threat require advocacy and action on our part. Furthermore, we have an obligation to create a social world that ensures the rights, dignity, and equality due to all human beings. As we love our neighbors and seek their welfare, we necessarily involve ourselves in work for social justice. We are not changing the subject when we move from 'love' to 'justice.' As Cornell West pointed out, «Justice is what love looks like when it goes out in public».<sup>25</sup>

### *Ecological Responsibility*

In the face of the hard realities of our current eco-crisis, care of creation arises as a matter of urgency for the whole human community. What are the resources of our faith tradition that may guide and motivate our engagement in this essential work? Affirmations we find in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed invite a fundamental reorientation of our ordinary ways of understanding and relating to the natural world.

The Creed begins, «We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen». This reminds us that all that is, comes from God. All that is, is good. The status of the whole of creation is elevated in these affirmations. They challenge and directly counter the Gnostic position that the natural world is created by a lesser (evil) deity and that spirit is somehow separate from, and superior to, matter. In this creation theology, matter matters to God. Like the dualism of body and soul, the dualism of spirit and matter has proven deeply problematic. Human beings are imagined as having a monopoly on spirit, in a natural world that is *mere* matter – a collection of objects. Such a view seems to permit careless and rapacious relations with the natural world. Living this way has led us to the brink of ecological disaster.

The first article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed poses a direct challenge and implies an alternative. If all that has come from God, and all that God has created is good, everything there is, has intrinsic value. Our relation to the natural world should be one of gratitude, loving attention, and blessing.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Case-Winters, «The New Community,” *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 220–223

<sup>25</sup> Cornell West, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, a Memoir* (Carlsbad: Smiley Books, 2010), 232.

In the second article of the Creed, we are reminded that the incarnate Christ is the one «through whom all things were made». Our incarnational theology can also reorient us in better directions.

While some have posed the question whether the Incarnation is irreducibly anthropocentric – human centered, it need not be understood in this way. Niels Gregersen's work on 'deep incarnation' envisions the nature of God's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth in ways that emphasize a comprehensive embrace of creation – not limited to human beings as such. He proposes that Incarnation «reaches into the depths of material existence».<sup>26</sup> The text in John 1.14 does not say, «the Word became human». It says rather that «the Word became *flesh*» (Greek *sarx*). This is a much more inclusive term. *Sarx* is the Greek term that would be used to translate the Hebrew term for «all flesh» (*kol-bashar*). It can even be used to indicate the whole of material reality. In this way, «the eternal Logos embraces the uniqueness of the human but also the continuity of humanity with other animals, and with the natural world at large».<sup>27</sup>

'Deep incarnation' envisions an internal relationship between the Word made flesh and the wider creation. We are co-constituted by our relationships, so also with the Incarnate one. Material relations are co-constitutive of Christ, including our whole biological, evolutionary history – even our dependence on atoms formed in the stars. Ecological interconnectedness is our reality. We can no longer think of ourselves as simply individuals whose reality ends with our skins.<sup>28</sup> Vaclav Havel put it beautifully, «We are mysteriously connected to the entire universe; we are mirrored in it just as the entire evolution of the universe is mirrored in us».<sup>29</sup>

The Word, the cosmic Christ «through whom all things were made» is incarnate in the creaturely humanity of Jesus with all its ecological and cosmic interconnections. These interconnections are by divine intention co-constitutive of the Word incarnate. As Edwards points out, «theology tells us that it is by the very intention

<sup>26</sup> Niels H. Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 25, no. 2 (2009):173–88, at 174.

<sup>27</sup> Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation," 174.

<sup>28</sup> Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 111.

<sup>29</sup> Václav Havel, "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World," acceptance speech for the Liberty Medal, Philadelphia, July 4, 1994, National Constitution Center, accessed July 12, 2025, <https://constitutioncenter.org/about/liberty-medal/recipients/vaclav-havel>

of God that *all things* are assumed in Christ, so that *all things* may be liberated (Rom 8.21), reconciled (Col 1.20), and recapitulated (Eph 1.20) in him.<sup>30</sup>

These insights challenge the anthropocentric orientation that is common and problematic ecologically. There is a vital interconnection of all things. The human being cannot be seen as separate from and over and above the rest of the natural world. Each creature, just by being what it is, reflects the glory of the Creator and renders its own praise to God. Calvin proposed that the whole world is a «theatre of God's glory». In a sense, it all reflects or images God. The Psalms (19, 66, 96, 98, 104, etc.) are full of images of nature's praise of God.

Thomas Berry has proposed that, «the universe is primarily a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects».<sup>31</sup> Theologian Elizabeth Johnson speaks of a «convivial community of creation». Humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems – make up an interrelated web of life. All creatures have intrinsic value because they are created and loved by God. 'Convivial' suggests a vision of harmony, mutual respect, and interdependence among all members of creation. It also carries connotations of delight. Humanity's role is not domination but participation in the flourishing of all life. Justice for the Earth is inseparable from justice for the poor and marginalized. What is required of us is an 'ecological conversion' rooted in compassion, humility, and solidarity with all creatures. «The community of creation is not a pyramid with humans on top, but a circle of beloved creatures, all called into being by the same loving God, all destined for the fullness of life».<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

This exploration has sought to delve into the theological and historical roots of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. In doing so, we have seen how the contributors at Nicaea and Constantinople sought to grapple faithfully with complex issues before them. They struggled to understand the mystery of the Trinity; they sought a fitting balance that affirmed both the unity of God and the distinctive work of the Word and the Spirit. In doing so, they refuted ways of settling these complex ques-

<sup>30</sup> Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 127.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 98.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 205.

tions that seemed problematic. The incarnational theology that has emerged from ongoing reflection on these questions and this Creed has been decisive in shaping central insights of Christiann faith.

As Christians of the Reformed tradition, our practice with respect to all creeds and confessions is to receive them with gratitude as the testimony of people of faith who have gone before us and left us a rich legacy. But our calling is not simply to repeat what they said in their time, but to do for our time what they did for theirs. So, we too must grapple with the hard questions and offer our own timely testimony. To do so, we continually reengage with creeds and confessions we have received, even as we return to Scripture with new eyes and ears open to hear what the Spirit might be saying to us anew. In this way we are empowered to address the critical challenges of our own time in ways that are fresh and fruitful and faithful.



# Public Opinion and Power in Nicaea 325 and Modern-Day Samoan Christian Nationalism

*Fraser Tauaivale and Brian Fiu Kolia*

## Introduction

The premise of this chapter is an inquiry into the Council of Nicaea and its potential use by Constantine as a tool for political and imperial ascendancy. Despite being a minority in the Roman Empire, Christianity was recognized by Constantine as an emerging movement that transcended the political and cultural borders of empire, with a growing presence beyond regions and populations under his authority. This growth potential initiated Constantine's agenda in Nicaea in AD 325 to appeal to the visible and ever-growing Christian community to gain Christian support whilst also strengthening his political status. In modern times, similar means of persuasion have been undertaken in the Samoan political arena and its associated rhetoric. In arguing its premise, this chapter draws parallels between Constantine's use of Nicaea and the Samoan politicians perpetual use of 'God-talk' in the light of Christian nationalism as a means of soliciting public opinion and consolidating power. Lastly, the chapter seeks to explain how Christian nationalism in the Samoan context is motivated by traditional and conservative readings of Scripture. In response, we will offer a re-reading of John 1, a text that has been a point of discussion under the Nicaea mandate, from a Pasifika Moana perspective, that seeks to decolonize and revitalize our understanding of the text but also re-imagines the Nicaea interpretation from an alternative standpoint.

## Constantine's Conversion

The sincerity of Constantine's conversion to Christianity has been the focus of much criticism throughout the years.<sup>1</sup> As noted by Arnold Jones, «The debate still goes on whether his conversion was a matter of policy or of religious conviction, and in the latter alternative what brought about his change of heart, and finally whether he became a full Christian or whether he passed through a stage when he regarded Christianity as one of many forms in which the Supreme Power could be worshipped.»<sup>2</sup> Apologetics of Constantine's 'genuine' conversion may point to the fact that Christians were a minority of the Roman population and therefore the Christian movement could not have been hugely influential for those in the higher echelons of Roman society, let alone the emperor. As such, arguments claiming that Constantine's conversion was a part of his political agenda may not seem plausible. To suggest the emperor's sympathy for the persecuted Christians was a strategy for the gain of favorable public opinion would make sense if Christians actually had a strong influential voice in the realm of Roman politics. However, this was not the case for the Christian minority.

The social context of the Roman Empire leading up to the days of Constantine was barely influenced by Greco-Roman religion. It was a «secular world with the religion having no important role in public – state decisions and on moral questions».<sup>3</sup> Although there was a sense of religious toleration within the multi-religious context of the empire, the exasperation of Rome towards Christians increased post-Nero due to what can be summed up as Roman emperors' desire for power and control. For instance, Justo Gonzalez identifies Christians «rejection of Roman gods and of many Roman traditions» as one explanation for Domitian's indifference towards and subsequent persecution of Christians in the late first century, for the emperor saw this resistance as a threat against his desire to maintain Roman tradition.<sup>4</sup> This attitude towards Christians was reignited during the reign of Decius in the mid third-century, when the emperor noted Christianity as a barrier towards

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah Mutie, «A Critical Examination of the Church's Reception of Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan of AD 313», *Perichoresis* 19, no. 4 (2021): 37.

<sup>2</sup> AHM Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1978), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Constantine Bourlakis, «The Emperor's New Mind: On Constantine's I Decision To Legalize Christianity», *International Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2016), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 46.

his goal of promoting «the worship of the gods».<sup>5</sup> Such policies enacted in response to Christian resistance of imperial decrees were means of forcing the public to align with the desires of empire.

Although the empire persisted in its persecution of Christians – while Christians persevered in their resistant witness amidst oppression – the relationship of Christians to the empire was one where their «primary duty to the state was to be «good citizens» as they thought fit».<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, this attitude to citizenship amongst the Christians was conjoined to a strong reluctance to denounce and betray their faith in persecution. In persecution, Christians «made opposition to Rome an important aspect of Christian identity» and subsequently «solidified communities around the person of their bishop».<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is this sense of solidarity, community, and respect for local leadership – forged by oppression – that made Christianity appealing to the political aspirations of Constantine.

Imperial sympathy for Christianity came into fruition with the *Edict of Milan* in AD 313 (or Edict of Toleration) issued by Emperors Constantine and Licinius signaling the end of Roman persecutions of Christians. Included in the imperial decree was the mandatory «release of all imprisoned Christians and the restitution of their property, guaranteeing them and all other citizens freedom to worship as they pleased».<sup>8</sup> This was only the beginning of Constantine's institution of policies favorable towards the once persecuted Christian community. Among these policies enacted by Constantine was the subsidizing of the church from public funds<sup>9</sup>, providing tax exemptions for the church, and rendering Sunday «an official Roman holiday so that more people could attend church».<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, the implementation of such policies made Constantine a favorable figure for the Christians of the third century, especially with the memory of Diocletian still embedded in their minds.

<sup>5</sup> Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 102.

<sup>6</sup> Valentine Ugochukwu Iheanacho, «Church and State: A Conflicting Collaboration,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44, no. 3 (2018), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Harold A. Drake, «Church and Empire,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan A. Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 447–448.

<sup>8</sup> Drake, «Church and Empire,” 449.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Eini Artemi, «Constantine and Christianity Through the Writings of Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Medio Aevo* 5, no. 2 (2016), 167.



## The Rise of Christianity in the Empire

At the beginning of Constantine's rule, only about five to ten percent of the population were Christians.<sup>11</sup> However, his reign «began to reduce paganism to a minority, not by limiting its freedom, nor by having recourse to repression, but by granting Christians liberty of action and privileges of various kinds».<sup>12</sup> In a way, such action is a subtle incentivization of conversion to Christianity. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that Constantine's ascension to power and the policies he enacted gave new impetus to the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Indeed, the rise of Christianity in the fourth century correlates with the reign of Constantine. Although to the public he was religiously ambiguous, based on some of his earliest political actions, it appears that the opinion of the Christian minority mattered to him. He recognized their influence on the Roman community and made clear in various ways his favor towards them. Christians were present across Roman territories, even though they represented a small fraction of the population. Even amidst persecution, Christians still emerged in various regions. Before AD 304, Christian congregations cover[ed] more or less the whole area of the Roman empire» and «all the largest cities had already been Christianized in the first century».<sup>13</sup>

Even with Christians being spread apart throughout the empire, they were bonded by a common allegiance to their faith. Such an allegiance was strengthened by their monotheistic conviction which gave them «spatial independence», meaning God was not «spatially bound», and therefore «elusive and beyond the control of Roman officialdom».<sup>14</sup> A characteristic of Greco-Roman polytheism was that certain gods and religious groups held a special influence within certain geographical regions, whereas for Christians, there was only one true God regardless of their residence. Moreover, the maintenance of such unity, despite Christian congregations throughout being separated by miles and cultures, was possible through Christian networks of communication. In the first century, community was maintained in the form of «epistolary communication and occasional visitation», and beginning

<sup>11</sup> Mary Balzer, "Constantine's Constantinople: A Christian Emperor, A Pagan City," *Ezra's Archive* 3, no. 1 (2013): 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ilaria Ramelli, "Constantine: The Legal Recognition of Christianity and its Antecedents," *Anuario De Historia De la Iglesia*, no. 22 (2013): 66.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Fousek, Vojtech Kase, Adam Martel, Eva Vytvarova, and Ales Chalupa, "Spatial Constraints on the Diffusion of Religious Innovations: The Case of Early Christianity in the Roman Empire," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 12 (2018), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Lipka, *Roman Gods: A Conceptual Approach* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 187–188.

in the second century, «high clergy» met «periodically at regional synods under metropolitans of increasing power and authority».<sup>15</sup> Prior to AD 324, Constantine's authority was confined to the western part of the empire. His support for Christianity bridged any political divides within the Roman-Christian community, as their allegiance lay with the church rather than the government. This consideration may explain why Constantine focused significantly on the Christian minority. Their presence in both the Eastern and Western regions of the empire, coupled with their unity, ensured that Constantine enjoyed favorable public opinion wherever Christians resided. The political environment among the Romans in the East was generally not supportive of Constantine's leadership. However, by aligning himself with Christian opinions, Constantine was able to secure support in various regions given the existence of Christians throughout the Roman empire. The urgency in Constantine's involvement in the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) is a prime example of Constantine recognizing the importance of public opinion in his maintenance of power. Ancient Roman Historian H. A. Drake notes that «The real brilliance of this emperor's achievement lies in precisely [...] his ability to soothe the rightful fears of wary parties and bring them to work together in the name of a higher purpose».<sup>16</sup> Constantine 'soothing of fears' and 'bringing people to work together' is largely evident in his role in Nicaea.

The Council of Nicaea was convened in AD 325, only a year after Constantine assumed the role of sole emperor of the Roman Empire. The proximity between Constantine's official rule and the Council had political implications, as it is likely that the attempt to solve the theological differences that arose in the church was a means of ensuring that the religious tension would not affect the early stages of Constantine's united empire. So important was the settling of theological differences to Constantine that a key note from his speech in the opening of Nicaea was that «internecine strife within the Church [...] [was] a greater disaster than war or invasion.»<sup>17</sup> The tension arising from the dispute over Arianism caused friction among the bishops as they resorted to «verbally attacking one another».<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Joseph M. Bryant, "Decius & Valerian, Novatian & Cyprian: Persecution and Schism in the Making of a Catholic Christianity – Part I," *Athens Journal of History* 9, no.2 (2023), 127–128.

<sup>16</sup> Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> C. G. Bateman, "Nicaea and Sovereignty: Constantine's Council of Nicaea As An Important Crossroad in the Development of European State Sovereignty" (LL.M. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2009), SSRN (<https://ssrn.com/abstract=1759006>), 29–30.

For Constantine, such tension amongst a growing demographic/population in his empire – a demographic with a presence in every major city and rural area in his empire – sought to derail the maintenance of peace during his reign. Therefore, his intervention as a government figure was necessary for the Christian cause. Constantine's involvement, though politically justified, highlights the irony that the central issue causing tension with the church was one of interpretation: the question of Jesus Christ's identity.

In the light of this question, historical records do not indicate whether Constantine's understanding of Jesus swayed in favor of 'homooousios' or 'homoiousios' before the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Although it must be noted that the recommendation to adopt 'homooousios' was Constantine's idea to calm the quarrel. It still can be debated that such a recommendation had very little theological influence on the part of Constantine, and his authority as emperor was the main force behind the church fathers accepting such a suggestion. But what exists as a historical fact is that regarding this important Council, Constantine «called it, financed it, published some of its decisions, and added secular penalties to its ecclesiastical anathemas».<sup>19</sup> For the Christian community, their positive view of Constantine initially stemmed from his acknowledgment of their existence. Constantine not only recognized the discord within the church but deemed it significant enough to invest his time, government resources, and his presence as the supreme ruler of the empire to address the issue. For Christians who lived through Diocletian, to see their community in a positive relationship with the Roman government was unimaginable. The same institution that had targeted them had not only begun to tolerate them, but prioritized their community's issues. Furthermore, the government that once allocated funds to see through their community's demise, were now recipients of dedicated funds for their community's conflict resolution. In a subtle way, Constantine was shaping the Christian community's perception of himself and his reign. Regardless of whether he was discreet or outspoken about his own Christian commitment to the faith, for Christians in AD 325, Constantine's involvement in Nicaea painted him as a God-fearing individual who was genuinely concerned about the welfare of the church.

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<sup>19</sup> Everett Ferguson, "Creeds, Councils, and Canons," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan A. Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 437.

## Constantine's Recognition of Christian Resistance

Another key factor in the shaping of Christian opinion of Constantine and its perception of him as a Christian hero was his acknowledgment of the church's governance and leadership. Prior to the convening in AD 325, he made an attempt to reach out to the two key figures at the forefront of the theological conflict (Arian controversy), Bishops Alexander and Arius.<sup>20</sup> The goal in his outreach was to persuade the two to find common grounds but his effort was to no avail. In most communities in Rome, a message or letter from the emperor would likely suffice to resolve any conflicts, particularly given the military support available to the empire. However, Constantine's unsuccessful attempt at a peaceful resolution pre-Nicaea is a reflection of the resistance to empire embedded in the Roman-Christian identity. Intriguingly, this did not dishearten Constantine's drive to prove his great consideration of the Christian community and their concerns. The emperor turned to the community of bishops throughout the empire, inviting them to sit at the table of discussion and decision to solve the tension once and for all. Being that the Christian community at his time extended beyond the Roman Empire's borders, Constantine's invitation was also extended to bishops from outside of his jurisdiction.<sup>21</sup>

The supreme authority's recognition of the church's governance and leadership across the empire significantly bolstered Constantine's public image within the Christian community. This enhancement in his perception was due not only to his acknowledgment of the church's leadership but also to his implicit acceptance of their autonomy. His unsuccessful effort to mediate peace between Alexander and Arius alerted the emperor to the reality of the church's independence. Resolution therefore could only be achieved with the involvement of the church's leadership; thus, this was the audience Constantine needed to engage to maintain a favorable reception from the Christian community, which led to the invitations to Nicaea.

Constantine's favorable perception among Christians was further solidified by his use of imperial authority to support the decisions of the Nicaean Council. The recognition of Constantine as a positive figure in Christianity is attributed also to his use of his institutional power to enact legislation supporting the church's stance. For Arius and his supporters, such use of power may have tainted their perception of Constantine. It can be argued that Constantine's use of his secular legislative power did not fully benefit the members of church, as Arius and those who stood

<sup>20</sup> Bateman, "Nicaea and Sovereignty," 33.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 130.

against the Council's decision are clearly not represented in the Council's outcome. This 'minority' group within the church community was further marginalized by the Council's decision and Constantine's secular policies. The prevailing Christian perspective on Constantine was favorable, recognizing his readiness to utilize his political authority to endorse decisions made by numerous church leaders.

The defeat of Licinius in AD 324 solidified Constantine's role as sole leader of the Roman Empire. Considering that Christianity was the religion of only a minority of the population that he ruled, why then would their perception and the opinion of Constantine matter in sustaining his power? Firstly, political lines clearly separated Constantine's West and Licinius' East. Yet within both regions, faith for Christianity trumped the political divisions of empire, as it was more likely for Christians to identify with their religion instead of their imperial ruler and government. It would appear then that Constantine's rhetoric would appeal to the common ground that Christians throughout empire shared – their faith rather than their geographical location. Initiating the Council of Nicaea was a declaration to the diverse Christian communities of the empire that he had their best interest at heart.

Furthermore, obtaining approval from the Christian community through the Nicaean convening would show the Christians of the East, who were subject to some of Licinius' persecution,<sup>22</sup> that Constantine was there for support. Nicaea could be seen as an approach to alleviating the distress and discontent that Eastern Christians felt towards political authority. It aimed to address any sentiments that might result in dissent or dissatisfaction with the government, and in extreme cases, potential physical rebellion. The purpose of Constantine's initiation of the convening was clear: to seek peace and unity among differing parties. However, his political motive of using the convening to garner favorable opinion from the Christian community at large became apparent only after the Council concluded.

## Constantine, Nicaean Creed and Religious Nationalism

The excommunication of Arius and the categorization of his teachings as heresy meant that there was an otherized group at the end of the Council. Although a

<sup>22</sup> «Licinius continued patronizing pagan rituals across his regions, and reviving persecution of Christians in his legislation – preventing bishops from traveling to synods, forbidding family worship in churches, and dismissing Christians from civil and military positions». Charles M. Odahl, "Constantine the Great and the Christian Imperial Theocracy," *Connections: European Studies Annual Review* 3, (2007): 98

general consensus solidified the decisions made at Nicaea, it came at the expense of the exclusion of lifelong, devout Christians. Constantine in upholding the Council's decisions would use rhetorical tactics in his writings to persuade those who opposed the canons of Nicaea. Arius eventually compromised, and then submitted a request to Constantine to allow him and his excommunicated peers back into the church.<sup>23</sup> Constantine agreed to the request; however, he recognized the importance of convincing Alexander to consider Arius' appeal. This is quite a reversal of opinion given that Constantine not only joined the Christians in their denouncing of Arius after the Nicaean Council but also implemented legislation that sought the destruction of all of Arius and his associates' work, and implementing the death penalty for those who were in possession of these documents.<sup>24</sup> However, the church had seemingly cemented their decision and remained stubborn upon the emperor's appeal. A decade after the Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine observed that Christians in the Eastern regions were adhering to Arian teachings. This observation contributed to the decision to reevaluate and overturn the resolutions established in AD 325. Constantine's response to the Arian controversy had significant religious, political, and theological implications, both immediate and enduring. His intervention not only influenced the evolution of Christian doctrine, particularly the production of the Nicene Creed, but it also defined the relationship between the Roman state and religion.

## A Nation's Legitimacy? Constantine and Christian Nationalism

From our discussion in the previous section, it has become apparent that a key component of Constantine's project of imperialism was Christianity. This resonates with the issue mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that being the matter of Christian nationalism. Before we discuss this connection further, we want to clarify what is Christian nationalism, and here it is helpful to consider an American definition, given the prominence of Christian nationalism in the American context. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry argue that

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Opoku, "Constantine and Christianity: The Formation of Church/State Relations in the Roman Empire," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 5, no. 1 (2015): 24.

Christian nationalism is a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life. It includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It aims to merge a particular expression of Christianity with American civic belonging and identity.<sup>25</sup>

One may be able to trace the roots of Christian nationalism to this very relationship between state and religion as mobilized by Constantine. In other words, there is a noticeable parallel between Constantine's agenda and Christian nationalism. Both perspectives regard a nation's legitimacy and identity as intrinsically linked to unity, and in the case of Constantine and Christian nationalists, this unity is forged by the values and belief that state power should support and enforce specific, and at times extreme, religious views.

Religion and nationality are distinct identity markers that define individuals and groups. Although there has been much debate about religion's role as an identity marker since Western culture transitioned into secularization, many still view religion's role in their lives as «a non-negotiable feature of a person's identity, like one's ethnic, linguistic, or gendered identity.»<sup>26</sup> Freedom of choice is indeed a key component, at least for the modern Western world, when it comes to people adopting a set of beliefs and doctrines and committing to the rituals and nuances of religion. But for others, the indoctrination is often a matter of inheritance – that is, being born into a religious family often means taking on the religious identity of said family.

Similarly, nationalism implies one's «identification to the nation», not to be confused with «patriotism, this being loyalty to one's state».<sup>27</sup> Nationalism transcends ethnic boundaries as it is a means of identification in which an individual sees themselves as belonging to a nation. It is an identity marker whose sense of belonging is fostered by how one adheres to the status quo – that is the social, economic, and political norms – of a nation.

The conflation of these two identity markers, religion and nationalism, forms a sort of political belief known as 'religious nationalism.' In this section, religious

<sup>25</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford Press, 2020), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Avigail Eisenberg, "Religion as Identity," *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* 10, no. 2 (2016): 6.

<sup>27</sup> Murray Stewart Leith, "Nationalism and National Identity in Scottish Politics" (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2006), 17.

nationalism refers to the fusion of these two separate identity markers to create a belief system that propagates the idea that national politics must always adhere to the religious guidelines, or that nationalism and political action must always be shaped by religious tradition. For such an approach to work, a national government as the governing institution of a nation would have to accept one religion as the standard upon which its politics must adhere to.

Although conforming to Christian norms would logically be a component of Christian nationalism, the diverse beliefs within the Christian umbrella leaves room for tension and confusion on identifying what would be Christian ‘norm.’ However, what unites this broad umbrella is a sense of tribalism amalgamated by the idea that political governance should be in accordance with Christianity. ‘Christianity’ here is then a sort of loose and flexible noun, that is, it embodies not only the beliefs and ritualism of the Christian religion, but it also encapsulates whatever the Christian tribe interprets to be ‘Christian.’ In other words, Christian nationalism aside from being a type of religious nationalism, is also a political conviction.

Western governments have long transitioned from institutions that upheld religious nationalism into secularism. For many, the institution of secular governments is upheld in national constitutions with phrases that strongly impose a clear separation of religion and state. Because of such documents, strong feelings for reinstating some kind of Christian or religious nationalism are often deflected by national law. However, the spirit of Christian nationalism did not cease to exist in such spaces. And these voices have become a clear target audience for politicians in their campaign efforts. In a way, Christian nationalism has become a part of persuasive rhetoric, a mere tool for political exploitation and a means of enticing the political opinion of voting constituencies. Such rhetoric is often applied by Samoan politicians in their efforts to attract positive public opinion during their campaign trails and their political endeavors.

## **The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Samoa**

Christianity was initially brought to Samoa by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1830. Since then, the Christian religion has been regarded as a central component in Samoan culture. Today, although membership to the Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS) – the successor of the LMS – has experienced a



decline since the 1960's (with 27 per cent of Samoans identifying as adherents of the CCCS today), Samoans still generally identify as Christians, with over 90 per cent of the population practicing some form of Christianity. Relative to the decline of CCCS numbers, is the rise of charismatic and Pentecostal churches in Samoa which harness a more fundamentalist view of Scripture and theology that seems to resonate quite well with Samoan politicians.

Politicians are aware of these figures and these fundamentalist aspects of Christianity, and therefore public speeches are deliberately coordinated to trigger Christian sentiments, with much of the political rhetoric of persuasion adhering to the largely influential fundamentalist brand of Christianity. For instance, one senior political leader, La'auli Leuatea Polataivao, is known to throw his support behind Israel in the current Israel-Palestine conflict. His rationale for supporting Israel emerges from conflating the modern state of Israel with the biblical nation. This misunderstanding creates a mistaken context for Gen 12.3. In this verse, God blesses those who bless Abraham, and curses those who curse him. The fallacious context sees Gen 12.3 being applied directly to the modern state, thus promoting a misguided theological agenda that justifies support for modern Israel. The theological institutions of the mainstream churches (CCCS, the Samoan Methodist Church, and the Roman Catholic Church of Samoa) have followed modern scholarship in differentiating the biblical nation of Israel and the modern state created in 1948, yet the public rhetoric of influential leaders who endorse the fundamentalist view – most prominent in the United States – and Polataivao's great influence on the Samoan public, has seen such fundamentalist appropriations of Christian theology and biblical interpretation being imposed on the masses. Although this is a reflection of the religiosity of individual politicians, but in the realm of political debate, the acknowledgment of Christianity, through its various iterations and theological interpretations, is also a means of garnering public favor. At this point, we ask the question: How did Christianity become so prominent in Samoan political reckoning?

To answer this question, we need to go back to Samoa's political independence. The nation of Samoa (consisting of constituencies in four main islands – Upolu, Savai'i, Manono, and Apolima) gained political independence in 1962 after formerly being under New Zealand rule (1914–1962) as a British mandate administered by the League of Nations and the United Nations. Prior to New Zealand's governance of Samoa, the group of islands were annexed by Germany (1900–1914) after the

Tripartite Convention in 1899.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, a rise in resistance against these Western forms of governance emerged in the late nineteenth century, through the resistance movement, the *Mau a Pule*, consisting of a group of *matai* (Samoan chiefs) from the island of Savaii under the leadership of influential *matai* Lauaki Namulauulu Mamoe which opposed the German administration and its oppressive regime. Later in the early twentieth century, a more expanded edition of the *Mau* Movement, which comprised of *matai* from all over Samoa, became a *force de resistance* against the despotic New Zealand reign.

The influence of indigenous resistance to Western governance paved the path for Samoan independence which came into fruition in 1962. The newly politically independent Samoan nation penned its Constitution, and in its preamble, the following statement is embedded:

IN THE HOLY NAME OF GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, THE EVER LOVING

Whereas sovereignty over the universe belongs to the Omnipresent God alone and the authority to be exercised by the people of Western Samoa within the limits prescribed by His commandments is a sacred heritage; Whereas the Leaders of Western Samoa have declared that Western Samoa should be an Independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Two vital components that matter to Samoans are evident in the preamble: firstly, culture, as noticed by the phrase «Samoan custom and tradition», and secondly, Christianity, which is reflected in the references to «the Omnipresent God» and «Christian principles». Since the formulation of this Constitution, these core identity markers – culture and Christianity – have also been subjects of political interest, both for politicians and their respective constituencies. In a country like Samoa, the line between church and state is blurry compared to Western democracies, so much so that the predominantly Christian number of Samoan citizens have a shared responsibility of holding their government accountable to maintaining and protecting «Christian principles» as noted in the Constitution.

Politicians are thus aware of how their decisions can and will be interpreted by the general public, especially in cases where their decisions may impact any component of ‘Christianity.’ For instance, in the many decades since independence,

<sup>28</sup> The eastern Samoan island of Tutuila was acquired by the United States of America through this Convention. Tutuila was eventually joined by the islands of Manu’a to form what is now known as American Samoa.

<sup>29</sup> Faala Sam Amosa, “A Theological Interrogation of the Motto: Faavae i le Atua Samoa,” (MTh thesis, Charles Sturt University, 2014), 57.

businesses were usually closed on Sundays in observation of the Sabbath. However, over the last few years, the question of whether or not Sabbath observation should be compulsory has been a topic of debate in the political arena.

With the influx of Chinese business people, most of whom were not Christian, their ignorance of Christian values was reflected in their businesses operating seamlessly on Sundays. Members of the Samoan community were furious, for in their view, it undermined the Christian status quo.<sup>30</sup> The Samoan outrage stemmed from the belief that citizens had the shared responsibility of maintaining Christian values in the public sphere, and this responsibility extended to every citizen regardless of their religious belief. At the forefront of this complaint addressed to key Samoan government authorities was an ordained reverend of the CCCS. The Christian concern here was met by great support from within Samoa's parliament, however, the irony of Samoa's upholding of 'Christian principles' is that within the same Constitution, religious freedom is also a protected right, or such is the interpretation of this part. Intriguingly, the official response from the government highlighted the importance of 'religious freedom'; a religious freedom that the government of the day argued to include the rights of all peoples to observe or to not observe Sunday.<sup>31</sup> In other words, religious freedom included the right *not* to practise religion!

Although the issue of Sabbath observance originally did not sway in the favor of some of Samoa's vocal Christians, it did however play a pivotal role in influencing other politicians to prioritize the voice of Christians in their political tactics. Six years after the Sabbath debate, the opposition to the Samoan government openly advocated for strong laws prohibiting work on Sundays.<sup>32</sup> However, other political factors had already contributed to the lessening of this particular group's influence. Perhaps their support for the compulsory Sabbath observation may have been a desperate attempt to amass any sense of support from Samoa's voting population.

<sup>30</sup> "Samoa govt urged to stop business operations on Sunday," *Radio New Zealand* (December 14, 2010). <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/194271/samoa-govt-urged-to-stop-business-operations-on-sunday>

<sup>31</sup> "Samoa church leader renews call to end Sunday training," *Radio New Zealand* (April 4, 2011), <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/196360/samoa-church-leader-renews-call-to-end-sunday-trading>

<sup>32</sup> "Sunday laws and freedom of religion," *Samoa Observer* (January 17, 2016), <https://www.samoaoobserver.ws/category/columns/13661>

## Rhetoric and Public Opinion in Samoan Christian Nationalism

The successful implementation of Christian rhetoric by politicians in the attempt to gain public support was most evident in Samoa's general election of 2021. For decades, Samoans interpreted the Christianization of their Constitution as also extending a particular privilege to clergy. Since Samoan teachers of the Gospel began serving local congregations throughout Samoa, Samoans practiced the Samoan custom of *tausi feagaiga*, or a covenantal agreement that villagers would contribute to caring for the physical needs of clergy (finances, material goods, etc).<sup>33</sup> This tradition whose origins are rooted in the 1840's transitioned into Samoa's age of independence until 2017 when the Samoan government implemented legislation that taxed the donations made by congregations to their ministers as income tax.<sup>34</sup> According to government officials, ministers who protested and resisted this legislation would face civil charges on the count of tax evasion.

The most vocal resistance to this legislation was the CCCS. In their annual General Assembly held in May of 2017, the church (leaders, clergy, and lay people) agreed to denounce the bill and declared its full support for individual clergymen that would protest this legislation.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, tax evasion charges were made by the government against individual clergymen who publicly protested the legislation by refusing to pay their taxes. Fuelling public opinion on the matter was a war of words exchanged between Samoa's Prime Minister at the time, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, and then CCCS General Secretary, Rev. Vavatau Taufao.

At the height of their disagreements, Tuilaepa did not mince his words concerning the defiance of the CCCS. Adamant about the general public falling in line with the government's decree, Tuilaepa's rhetoric attempted to dissuade the CCCS and its clergy by referring to them as members of the general public that are susceptible to consequences for their disobedience. The Prime Minister then highlighted these said consequences, which included an array of ramifications ranging from the seizure of personal assets and possible arrest. Furthermore, he used his platform to display his own theological wit in his criticism of the CCCS'

<sup>33</sup> Faalefu Tumutalie, "Re-reading Matthew 22:15–22 Amid A Taxation Law Affecting Church Ministers in Samoa," (BTh thesis, Malua Theological College, 2018), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Tumutalie, "Re-reading Matthew," 11.

<sup>35</sup> Mata'afa Keni Lesa, "Government and Church Ministers tax law threat," *Samoa Observer* (June 18, 2025), <https://www.samoobserver.ws/category/editorial/6347>

stance. In one particular interview with media organizations, Tuilaepa stated: «Paul made it very clear that all authorities are from God. All authorities in all organizations in the world are of God. So those people who reject such authorities in these organizations are against God. Therefore, pay your taxes! So, give tax to the government, tax belongs to the government».<sup>36</sup>

Tuilaepa's interpretation of Scripture within this political controversy is both an attempt to persuade the CCCS and their resistance, and to attain public favor through the use of fundamentalist theology. Through the above statement and many more, Tuilaepa sought to convince Samoa's Christian community that he was indeed operating out of God's will, and on the contrary, the CCCS were not. The employment of Christian rhetoric here is a means of establishing his own credibility as a devout Christian who faithfully engages in biblical studies. Unfortunately for Tuilaepa and his peers, their legislation was not openly endorsed by the CCCS, Samoa's predominant denomination. Therefore, Tuilaepa's government lacked the backing needed to persuade Samoa's citizens that they were indeed on the side of God.

Prior to the CCCS' General Assembly in 2017, there was very little public opinion generated regarding the tax legislation introduced by Tuilaepa and his party and it was passed by the parliament. However, the 2017 General Assembly brought the legislation under much scrutiny, and because of the church's credibility within the very religious Samoan community, the public began to question Tuilaepa and the government regarding their shared responsibility of upholding Samoa's 'Christian practices.' In 2019, court orders against clergy who willingly abided by the CCCS' stance against the taxation of ministers stood before court judges on the count of tax evasion.<sup>37</sup> The willingness of the ministers to stand judgment was the spirit alluded to by the then CCCS General Secretary Rev. Vavatau Taufao when he declared «If there are consequences in the meantime, we have to remember that Jesus said I'm sending you as sheep among wolves. The pastors are prepared to carry the cross. But remember what Jesus told Peter. He said I would establish my church upon this rock and give you the keys; even the gates of hell wouldn't prevail against it».<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ilia Likou, "Pay your taxes, P.M. tells Church Ministers," *Samoa Observer* (November 17, 2017), <https://www.samoaoobserver.ws/category/samoa/23977>

<sup>37</sup> "Nineteen More Church Ministers Face Tax Charges in Court," *Samoa Global News* (June 4, 2019), <https://samoaglobalnews.com/nineteen-more-church-ministers-face-tax-charges-in-court/>

<sup>38</sup> Joyetter Fegaimaali'i Luamanu, "Reverend Vavatau Taufao – Standing up for the Church," *Samoa Observer* (December 30, 2018), <https://www.samoaoobserver.ws/category/samoa/29436>

From such statements, it became unquestionable that public opinion in Samoa began to sway in favor of the church. The political institution, held with high esteem by the people as the organization responsible for upholding ‘Christian practices,’ was now at the forefront of undermining such responsibility, at least from the public view. Despite Tuilaepa’s incorporation of theological God-talk into his rhetoric, the church did not validate or endorse any of his ideologies. Consequently, in the realm of public opinion, this was no longer a matter of taxable income or tax evasion. Instead, the debate could be described in dualistic language: good vs. evil; heaven vs. hell; Christianity vs. government; the church vs. Tuilaepa.

With such public opinion in mind, the political party *Faatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi* (FAST) was established by former members of Tuilaepa’s faction in 2020, ahead of the 2021 elections. Even the name of the political party (translated as ‘Faith in God, Samoa is United’) recognizes the interweaving of Samoan culture and the Christian religion that have become core values for the Samoan constituents. One of the key components of their manifesto during the campaign season was the removal of the tax legislation set in place by Tuilaepa. This was perhaps the most important legislative elements that brought FAST favorable public opinion. Considering the dualism that shaped public opinion at the time (good vs. evil; church vs. Tuilaepa), FAST filled the ‘good’ void by becoming the defender of the church in public view. And this was the main rhetoric established in their campaign efforts. They were here to undo the injustices experienced by Christianity due to Tuilaepa’s faction. Embedded in the core of their rhetoric was God-talk, this sense of heightening their calling into politics by presenting themselves as Christian apologetics.

It was through this God-talk that FAST acquired favorable public opinion and support. Although receptiveness to the rest of their manifesto played a positive role in their campaign efforts, it was their clear assertion of their intention to defend God’s people that truly made a mark in the heart of Samoa’s Christian nationalists. Their language and attitudes catered to the desire of Samoan Christian nationalism. Although the CCCS and other mainline churches did not openly endorse politicians or political parties, the direction of their adherent’s votes would be unquestionable. The vote came down to two things: the party and politicians that oppressed Christianity, or the party and politicians that clearly support ‘Christian practices.’ FAST, in their initial year as a political organization, successfully garnered the majority of seats in parliament, therefore ousting Tuilaepa and his political faction which held the authority of the Samoan government for forty consecutive years. As in the case of Constantine and the early beginnings of Christian Nationalist Rome, Samoa’s

legitimacy and identity is an interweaving of culture and religion, and those who wish to assume power must be strategic in their upholding of both values.

## A *Moana* Reckoning of Scripture

In the light of the problem of Christian nationalism in Samoa and across the Moana, it must be said that one of the key manifestations of such a glaring issue is the way the Bible has been used and interpreted. In many countries with a Christian contour, Scripture has been foundational in providing moral and ethical standards. However, as it stands, countries with a fundamentalist account of Scripture reflect a perception of time that is static, and as ideals and public opinion shifted, interpretation of the Bible has remained stuck in time, at the mercy of traditional and conservative agendas. Such readings of the Bible have henceforth maintained a colonial stance that upholds Western perspectives while neglecting and castigating native, indigenous and Pasifika means of making meaning. For Pasifika, they are people of the Moana, and as people of the Moana, they have a fluid understanding of time and a fluid manner of perception just as the Moana is fluid! Moving with the times rather than being stuck in time with old and conservative readings resonates with our Moana worldview. Here, we invite you to reimagine the biblical text in a new light that seeks to decolonize fundamentalist and traditional Western ways of reading, and implement our Moana mindset and attitude to re-reading the biblical text.

In conducting this reading, I want to bring into conversation a hermeneutic in conversation – or as we in Pasifika say – in *talanoa*, with the biblical text. Such a hermeneutic is based on the *Moana*, a Pasifika term for the ocean and sea. It is a word that is common to many Pasifika people, and for this *talanoa*, we want to bring our own understanding as Samoans to the fore. For Samoans, the root word of *Moana* is the word *moa* which means ‘centre’ or ‘middle.’ The word *moa* also means ‘heart.’ The implication here is that the *Moana* is the centre or the heart of all existence. Everything is connected through the *moa* (centre) for the *Moana* is a multi-laned bridge which connects (is)lands. As such, we want to construct a hermeneutic based on the *Moana* as the centre (*moa*), so that we privilege the ocean/sea/*Moana* in our worldview. To clarify, let us view how Epeli Hau’ofa privileges the sea/ocean/*Moana*:

There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of island.’ The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power. Focussing, in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships.<sup>39</sup>

This second position invites us to include (or perhaps bring back?) the ocean/sea/*Moana* into our worldview. This means that our perspectives for reading reflect the groove, the rhythm and complexity and fluidity and chaotic nature of the waters of the *Moana*. *Moana* therefore is more than just an aqueous force, it is an attitude! Indeed, the *Moana* is not only the centre of the created order, but in reading, *Moana* perspectives must also be centred and given privilege.

Turning to the biblical text, one particular verse whose interpretation was influenced by the Nicene Creed, is John 1.1. While the Arian reading of this text imagined Christ/Logos as subordinate to God, in response, the Nicene re-interpretation emphasised full ontological equality between Christ and the Father. Luke Timothy Johnson comments that

The orthodox saw the Arian position as a reduction of the mystery of Jesus to what seemed “reasonable,” as one-sidedly emphasizing some scriptures and suppressing others, and above all, as denying the full Christian experience of Jesus. This section of the creed therefore is fundamentally a piling up of epithets to characterize Jesus Christ’s relationship to God, precisely in order to safeguard the belief that Jesus Christ is our savior.<sup>40</sup>

Such an interpretation of Jesus seeks to simplify at the expense of ignoring the complexity of Jesus’ being and ministry. From a *Moana* perspective, we ride the waves of complexity and ambiguity, and navigate the paths that its waves take us, because the journey through the *Moana* waters is just as important as the destination to where our *va’a* (canoe) sails. Reading John 1.1 from a *Moana* perspective, we are interested in the complexity of the word *λογος* which has been reduced to ‘Word’ in most English translations. We say ‘reduced’ because the old Samoan translation of the Bible uses a transliteration of *λογος* through the word *lokou* as opposed to contemporary Samoan translations that use *Upu* (‘Word’). The attitude of simplifying may have also been influenced by the Nicene Creed which also re-

<sup>39</sup> Epeli Hau’ofa, *We are the Ocean: Selected Works*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press, 2008), 31–32.

<sup>40</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Doubleday 2003)



moved the word *λογος*, replacing it with the word “υιος” (‘Son’) to reflect a relational dynamic within the Trinity, expressing the Jesus’ relation to the Father. This also suffers from simplifying *logos*, as Joseph S. O’Leary argues

That all things come to be through the Son—δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο—has less salience in the Creed than the Gospel’s declaration that all things come to be through the Logos. The addition of τὰ τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ in [the] N[icene Creed of 325], not retained in [the] C[reed of 381], does not suffice to give the Creed a broad cosmic dimension and rather suggests an effort to fill up a felt lack with a hollow rhetorical flourish.<sup>41</sup>

With a Moana mindset, let us reclaim and recover the complexity of *λογος*. Marian Hillar notes that «The term Logos was widely used in the Greco-Roman culture and in Judaism. It has many meanings such as word, speech, statement, discourse, refutation, ratio, proportion, account, explanation, reason, thought.»<sup>42</sup> In this Greco-Roman context from which the Fourth Gospel emerged, Gail O’day argues that «it is important to remember that during the first century CE, the boundaries between different religions, philosophies, and cultures were fluid».<sup>43</sup> O’day explains further that «One cannot draw a sharp line between Hellenism and Judaism, for example, because the two were in constant contact with each other in the eastern Mediterranean world. One should not be surprised, therefore, that logos appears in a variety of religions and philosophies with which the writer of John may have been familiar».<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the term *λογος* does not just communicate a theological understanding, but an attitude reflective of the context, specifically, the complexity of a multi-religious, multi-philosophical and multi-cultural society.

At this point, we wonder how this multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-philosophical understanding of Christ could be ignored, particularly in a Christian community that demands a Messiah to give respite from political unrest and oppression. Christ therefore is *λογος* not just as Son, or Messiah, but as a word, a speech, a statement, a discourse, a refutation! In these nuances, the Christ of John 1.1 can be seen in the ambivalence and ambiguity of the Greco-Roman context, the multi-cultural contours of the Mediterranean world, and the colonial underpinnings of the Roman Empire. The *λογος* allows us to envision the Johannine Christ

<sup>41</sup> Joseph S. O’Leary, “Johannine Revelation, Nicene Witness,” *Religions* 15 (2024): 8.

<sup>42</sup> Marian Hillar, *From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from Pythagoras to Tertullian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Gail R. O’day, “The Gospel of John,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 519.

<sup>44</sup> O’day, “John,” 519.

as a response to these state of affairs, as a refutation of these colonial visions. From a Moana perspective, this fluid picture of Christ gives rise to liberation of marginalized bodies while pushing back at the colonial project, not only within the Greco-Roman society, but also against the colonial systems of modernity.

## The Complexified Son

How could this nuanced understanding of *λογος* alleviate the extent of damage that Christian nationalism has caused in modern society? Perhaps our re-envisioning of *λογος* can recontextualize the understanding of *υιος* «the Son» in the Nicene Creed of AD 325 for modern Christians. Let us *talanoa*. The change from *λογος* to *υιος* was a conscious decision based on a shift of theological emphasis. But the change is also a reminder that when opinions shift on current issues, interpretation does not have to remain static. Like the ebbs and flows of the Moana waters, interpretation can also move from one point to another, in constant motion. This Moana reading reminds the reader of the context from whence John 1.1 emerged, as a way of rethinking the Son from these original contexts of *λογος*, in *talanoa* with the Nicene context of *υιος*, while providing further *talanoa* points for modern Christian communities that decolonize and deconstruct conservative writings that fuel the tragic project that is Christian nationalism. As opposed to the Christian nationalist ideal that a nation's legitimacy is linked to Christianity, the complexified Christ as envisaged in this Moana reading, allows us to reimagine our Christian heritage as fluid and complex. The complexified Son is therefore a response to different contexts of struggle and does not seek to align with power and empire. Moreover, the complexified Christ helps us to reimagine 'homoousios' as the Son being of the same substance as the Father, not to legitimize power and privilege, but to highlight the extent of God's compassion which Christ shared, with all of humanity, and all of creation.

## Conclusion

One of the growing movements in Pacific theology today seeks to decolonize and deconstruct colonial ways of reading and understanding. Especially such interpretations that have damaged the self-perception of Pasefika peoples. 1700

years removed from the initial convening at Nicaea, the decision of this Council is cemented as a part of the theological foundation for churches across the globe. However, in this commemoration of Nicaea's anniversary, we as Samoan exponents of Nicaea's somewhat diluted legacy, in love for God and church, dare to question the colonialism embedded within the historical background of this Council in AD 325.

Although the church fathers were perhaps genuine in their seeking of a unifying theology, it is clear that Constantine's involvement – a very hands-on one – was less about seeking the reality of God and more about garnering favorable public opinion and consolidating power. Nicaea, 'homousios,' 'homouousios,' and Christianity itself were but mere tools in an attempt to gain the trust and support of a community that transcended political borders. And such strategy proved successful then in AD 325 as it does in Samoa in 2025. So long as leaders are fluid and fluent in God-talk, the Pasifika opinion will likely gravitate towards such energy. And at many times, at the expense of their own political interests.

This is what makes the complexified Son important amidst Samoa's political context today. From our Moana reading, we consider some implications for further reflection. In particular, we want to highlight the extensive degree of privilege and supremacy associated with Christian nationalism in its modern iterations in the United States and 'Christian countries' such as Samoa, and how such countries, which seek to find legitimacy as a nation through Christian principles, do not resonate with the contexts of struggle which Christ was constantly standing with.

For many politicians in Samoa – whether they are conscious of it or not – Christian nationalism is a political tool for attaining and consolidating power. Such logic reflects one's internalization of imperial views, whereby power and authority supersede genuine concern for public welfare. For the constituents, it is the rhetoric of Christian nationalism that informs their political stance and election. Sadly, this pro 'Christian principles' strategy in voting and staying informed can come at the expense of undermining social and economic benefits for communities that are marginalized. Such tendencies may also promote support for empire and authorities attempting to consolidate power by turning a blind eye to other aspects of politics in favor of maintaining a tunnel vision on the pro 'Christian' policies.

Reflecting upon Nicaea, we are pushed to question Constantine's genuine concern for his Christian population. Was Nicaea then truly a theologically inspired convening, or was it a means of consolidating political power? Or was it both? In the same breath, was the rise of the FAST party in Samoa and its Christian nationalist

manifesto a means of ousting a political powerhouse only to replace it with another? Perhaps it is time that the church, within an authoritarian context, embraces the Creed under a different premise, and here we go back to our Moana reading of the *λογος* and our subsequent re-envisioning of the *υιος*. The complexified Christ therefore invites us to find and live out an alternative course of Christian identity, where we do not legitimize power and privilege, but instead follow the example of Christ as depicted in the Gospels, by supporting and sustaining the marginalized and the oppressed.



# Reading the Nicene Creed with Audre Lorde

*Shannon Craigo-Snell*

## Introduction

This chapter will look at the Nicene Creed through the lens of Audre Lorde's famous statement: «the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house». Lorde – an African-American scholar, author, and activist – offers this guidance for all who engage in justice-seeking actions. The patterns, policies, and ways of thinking that support oppression might seem effective strategies for resistance, but they will always undergird or reproduce oppressive hierarchy.

The Nicene Creed is, among many other things, a statement generated by empire. A product of a council called by Constantine that served to homogenize Christianity, the Nicene Creed is a tool of empire, one of 'the master's tools.' And yet, the content of the Creed gives witness to Jesus Christ, who opposed the Roman Empire and was executed for his resistance. In its witness to Jesus as «true God from true God», the Nicene Creed places all empires under the embodied critique of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. One can then read the Creed through Lorde's lens in the other direction: In the Council of Nicaea, Constantine attempted to use the tools of the true, divine Master to dismantle the Master's anti-imperial house.

Furthermore, the theological affirmation that Jesus is «begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father», recognizes difference within God. The Trinitarian theology developed out of this distinctly Christian theological innovation perceives the divine life as a giving and receiving of love, which is only possible with the

presence of difference. This theology affirms difference, which is completely contrary to the master's tools as Lorde describes them.

## Audre Lorde

«The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house». This statement by Audre Lorde (1934–1992) has become a motto for social justice movements in the United States. Lorde, an author and activist, was invited to comment on the papers presented by other academics at a conference at New York University in 1979. The conference was overtly feminist, convened to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir. Lorde's criticism of the conference became, in itself, a constructive blueprint for advocacy work going forward.

Lorde's first critique could anachronistically be described as a lack of intersectionality in the presentations. White feminists were discussing sexism as if it were a stand-alone issue. In stark contrast, Lorde states that in the US, «racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable». <sup>1</sup> Noting that only two Black women were among the presenters, Lorde writes, «What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.» <sup>2</sup> Dismayed that the Black women who did present were invited at the last minute, implying they were add-ons to the monochromatically white slate of academics, Lorde argues:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic [...] Only within [an] interdependence of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. <sup>3</sup>

Not just the lack of difference among the presenters, but the lack of appreciation for difference, necessarily limits the horizon of opportunity for new futures. Lorde says that for women who are marginalized, survival necessitates «learning how

<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin, 2017), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 18.

to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*.<sup>4</sup>

As a Black woman in the United States, Lorde's use of the word 'master' immediately conjures the specter of slaveholders. It encompasses all those whom Black people would have been forced to call 'master,' meaning all white men. Lorde poetically evokes whiteness itself, within the particular history of the US, as a social construction deployed for domination. In the British colonies on the American continent, people of various social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds were all under the control – to various degrees – of British colonizers. In 1676, William Bacon led an armed rebellion against the governor of Virginia, which included men from different ethnicities and classes. The rebellion was put down by British loyalists, but it hinted at the possible power of solidarity across differences on the American continent. The terms 'white' and 'black' were first enshrined in law in the colonies in the years following Bacon's Rebellion, legislating race and racial segregation. 'Master,' in Lorde's statement, indicates the slaveholder and the colonizer, it indicates all those who reside in and protect the dominant center of power in society.

Using the tools of the master can only create temporary or provisional successes; it will never «bring about genuine change».<sup>5</sup> The need for a different set of tools and for genuine change is deeply threatening to «those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support».<sup>6</sup>

In every stratified society there are people on the margins who gain some measure of power and privilege through their proximity to the dominant group. Such power and privilege are always precarious and contingent. However, many people cannot imagine a source of power outside the structures of domination. This is particularly true when people are isolated from others who are marginalized, and the more a person identifies with the dominant group upon whom their power depends, the greater their isolation. Lorde's remarks are a call to community that embraces difference as opening up new possibilities for common life.

Difference – in Lorde's framing – is exactly what 'the master' cannot appreciate and the necessary prerequisite to true change. Without embracing difference as a source of power and strength, any change will not even rise to the level of reform, but rather be its insipid cousin, reformism. This term was used in the US during

<sup>4</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 19, emphasis hers.

<sup>5</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 19.



debates about slavery, describing those who opposed abolition in favor of the fiction that slavery itself could be changed into something slightly less abhorrent.

Lorde's brief comments raise issues critical to thinking about the Nicene Creed today: difference, domination, and the possibility of change. Her caution about 'the master's tools' is an apt warning for easily embracing the Creed.

## The Nicene Creed as The Master's Tool

The Council of Nicaea, and the documents it produced, are *prima facie* the tools of empire. Emperor Constantine called the Council, planned its location, and paid for the travel of the participants. He was present for at least some of the proceedings. While our knowledge of the inner workings of the Council is limited due to predictable loss of some historical records over time, we know enough to understand at least some of Constantine's aims.

In the first and second centuries, the Roman Empire was in many ways a 'community of cities.'<sup>7</sup> Governance was less hierarchical and more 'horizontal' than one might imagine, with the ruling elites of these cities playing a large role in governance. This structure was inadequate to the challenges of the middle of the third century, including financial, political, and military woes. Changes were required and made. One of these involved the creation of the Tetrarchy. Emperor Diocletian created levels of leaders to effectively govern the various regions under one imperial rule. Under one emperor there were two Augusti, under each of whom were two Caesars, comprising the Tetrarchy.<sup>8</sup>

Historian Robert Brown suggests that in times of great change, societies long for at least one element of stability.<sup>9</sup> Under Diocletian, this stability was found with continued adherence to traditional *religiones*, which were «clearly differentiated ways of worship, each one appropriate to a specific god and a specific place».<sup>10</sup> Each city had its own particular deities, to whom public rites and sacrifices were made. These public practices of *religio* were local, multiple, and handed down through family traditions.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 54–55.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 56; cf. the contribution of Kathleen M. Griffin in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 59.

It was a commonly held belief that these deities would intervene in human life regularly.<sup>11</sup> Harold Drake explains, «it was obviously the primary duty of leaders to do everything they could to make sure that these interventions would occur in ways that were beneficial to the state».<sup>12</sup> Roman Emperors were religious figures. In the third century, Roman Emperors «started to make this divine tie their pre-eminent claim to legitimacy».<sup>13</sup> A form of state religion emerged that recognized *Sol Invictus*, the unconquered sun god, as conferring the status of *pontifex maximus* to the Emperor.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, as Diocletian helped move the Roman Empire away from a ‘community of cities’ into a more stable configuration, he also moved to suppress Christianity on an empire-wide scale. Previously persecution had happened sporadically, on a local level, yet as government consolidated, so did persecution of Christians in attempts to make them renounce their faith and participate in traditional *religiones*.<sup>15</sup> Diocletian began what came to be known as ‘The Great Persecution,’ lasting from AD 303–AD 314.<sup>16</sup>

Constantine took a very different tack than Diocletian, in both military and religious terms. His father was one of the four Caesars in the Tetrarchy. After his death, Constantine rose to the status of Augustus and waged military battles against other imperial troops until he became emperor. In this respect, he gained unified control over the entire Roman Empire through violent means.<sup>17</sup> In religious terms, he attempted non-violent means of unification, taking the «position that religious change must take place through peaceful means – persuasion, not coercion».<sup>18</sup> The ‘Edict of Milan,’ issued by Emperors Constantine and Licinius in AD 313, gave Christianity legal sanction, including releasing Christians who were imprisoned. Drake notes that by legalizing Christianity, the ‘Edict of Milan’ «opened the door for Constantine as *pontifex maximus* to assume responsibility for the correct function

<sup>11</sup> Harold A. Drake, “Church and Empire,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, eds. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 455.

<sup>12</sup> Drake, “Church,” 456.

<sup>13</sup> Drake, “Church,” 456.

<sup>14</sup> Drake, “Church,” 456; cf. the contribution of Kathleen M. Griffin in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 62, Drake, “Church,” 448

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 62.

<sup>17</sup> cf. the contribution of Kathleen M. Griffin in this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Drake, “Church,” 452. Drake notes this came after one attempt at violent enforcement. Harold A. Drake, “The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 116.

of that god's cult».<sup>19</sup> Constantine drew both on traditional Roman *religiones* and a Christian understanding of providence to buttress his legitimacy as emperor.

At least until AD 324, the unity Constantine desired required only «a religiously neutral public space built around a policy of vague monotheism».<sup>20</sup> This could include the continued practice of *religiones*, dedicated to smaller deities, while also embracing the significant variety of Christian communities within the region.<sup>21</sup>

Given the mindset that the Emperor was responsible both for the «the good will of divinity and the well-being of the state», in some conflicts Christian groups would appeal to the Emperor for assistance. Previously such assistance meant something like enforcing a bishop's decision.<sup>22</sup> When the Donatists protested their treatment under Bishop Miltiades, Constantine responded in a novel way, calling and funding a council of bishops at Arles in AD 314.<sup>23</sup> Bishops convening to discuss differences and resolve conflicts was not new at all; Acts 15.2–35 attests to such a meeting, sometimes called the 'Council of Jerusalem,' and others followed. The novelty was that Constantine inserted himself into the ecclesial deliberations.

It was only a year after Constantine had consolidated the entire Roman Empire under his rule militarily that another disagreement among Christians came to his attention. The conflict seems to have been about several issues, including the date of Easter, which was celebrated on different days in the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire. Theologically, the conflict focused on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. Arius, a presbyter who led a congregation, posited that Jesus was neither eternal nor fully divine. He was brought into existence by the Father's will, and therefore able to be fully human and mediate salvation. This stood in contrast to Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, who taught the co-eternity and consubstantially of the Father and the Son. Only a fully divine Christ, in this view, could enact salvation by taking on humanity, forever changing the relationship between God and humankind. In addition to the liturgical and theological tensions, there were likely several other social and political issues at play, some of which might be lost to history, that contributed to the intensity of the conflict.

At first, Constantine wrote to encourage the parties in the conflict to work out their differences privately to preserve the unity of the church and, at least by

<sup>19</sup> Drake, "Church," 449.

<sup>20</sup> Drake, "Church," 454.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 85.

<sup>22</sup> Drake, "Church," 455, 449.

<sup>23</sup> Drake, "Church," 449.

implication, the Empire.<sup>24</sup> When that did not work, Constantine again called for a council of bishops. He paid for their travel to Nicaea, thus making himself the host of the event. Furthermore, Constantine attended the Council, thus acting as *de facto* moderator of portions of the proceedings. Constantine effectively hijacked the ecclesial tradition of synods and councils, using it for his own ends. Brown says bluntly: «[W]hat Constantine wished from [the Council] was uniformity».<sup>25</sup> For Constantine, this was a critical part of ensuring the stability of the Empire and divine approbation of his rule.

The Council was intended from the beginning to suppress dissent among Christian groups. In Constantine's letter concerning the date of Easter, he writes, «We must consider, too, that in a matter so important and of such religious significance, the slightest disagreement is most irreverent».<sup>26</sup> Difference is nearly demonized in this account. This is the opposite of Lorde's call for difference to be recognized as a strength and spur to creativity.

Whatever unifying effect the Council had for the Roman Empire, it did not erase differences between Christian communities. Indeed, in her chapter in this volume, Griffin argues that the work of Nicaea and the anathemas it produced increased the persecution among Christians. When the legislation after Bacon's Rebellion ossified the categories of 'white' and 'black' in US law, it undermined the potential for creative solidarity across differences. This political maneuver – getting people to fight with their neighbor rather than those who hold power – has been on replay for 500 years. While Nicaea did not legislate segregation, it did function to harden divisions between Christian groups. Perhaps this also functioned to keep Christians fighting with one another rather than against the Roman Empire.

The Council of Nicaea actively suppressed difference among Christians by anathematizing Arius and condemning dissidents. It demonized difference by portraying difference as irreverent and dangerous. And it hardened divisions between Christian groups, fostering an atmosphere of conflict rather than solidarity. In all these ways, the Council of Nicaea was one of the master's tools.

<sup>24</sup> J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, eds. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 245.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *The Rise*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> "Emperor Constantine to All Churches Concerning the Date of Easter," trans. Aaron West, Austin Clafflin, and Glen Thompson, *Fourth Century Christianity*, Wisconsin Lutheran College, accessed 5 April 2025, <https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-26/>

## Which Master?

There are many legacies of the Council of Nicaea, yet the theological legacy resides most fully in the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus is «the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father». This includes the critical term, *homoousios*, with which Arius could not agree. The exclusion of Arius and his fellows was made explicit: «The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that «there was a time when he was not» or «he did not exist before he was begotten» or «he came from nothing» or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence, or a creation, or changeable, or alterable».<sup>27</sup>

While this was, in several ways, a win for empire in suppressing Christian diversity, there are also positive elements of this inheritance. The contested term *homoousios* recognizes Jesus as fully divine and, further, clarifies that the actions of Jesus are the work of God. Historian Rowan Williams notes that the unity of the Father and the Son, affirmed in the Nicene Creed, means that what «is revealed in the incarnation of the Word is the eternal nature of God».<sup>28</sup> Given the testimonies to Jesus' identity in the Gospel narratives, this means God stands against empire.

Throughout the four Gospel narratives, Jesus is presented as a threat to the Roman Empire. The genealogies in Luke and Matthew place Jesus in the line of David, identifying him as a possible Messiah from the start. In the Gospel of Matthew, Herod, a Jewish ruler aligned with the Roman Empire, perceives the newborn Jesus as such a threat to his rule that he orders all the boys under two years in Bethlehem to be slaughtered (Matt 2.16).

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary's Magnificat praises God, who has «brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, [God] has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty» (Luke 1.52–53). Mary understands her pregnancy to be part of God's justice and mercy, which upends human hierarchies. A few chapters later, Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue:

<sup>27</sup> "Creed of the Council of Nicaea," trans. Aaron West, *Fourth Century Christianity*, Wisconsin Lutheran College, accessed 20 April 2025, <https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-24/>

<sup>28</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 239.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4.18–19).

Then Jesus says, «Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing». (Luke 4.21).

In these two Lukan texts, Mary and Jesus proclaim that what God is doing in Jesus is antithetical to the domination and injustice upon which all empires rest.

Jesus routinely associated with those on the margins of society, refusing to abhor difference or maintain social hierarchies. He offered food, teaching, healing, and community to all – even the Canaanite woman whom he first deemed unworthy (Matt 15.26–28). His greatest teachings, referred to as the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ as they appear in Matthew, and the ‘Sermon on the Plain’ as they appear in Luke, proclaim blessings on those who suffer most under the power of empire. In Luke, the blessings are followed by woes, including «Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep». (Luke 6.24–25) Jesus’ words and deeds proclaimed a radically different worldview than that of the Roman Empire.

All four Gospels recount Pilate confronting Jesus with the accusation that he is ‘the king of the Jews.’ The Gospel of John, which portrays the Jewish authorities as plotting Jesus’ death, positioning the Roman Empire in the best possible light, spells out the implications of this accusation: «every man who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar» (John 19.12). Reports of the resurrection would magnify the danger presented by Jesus’s followers. The Gospel of Luke reports that Pilate set guards at Jesus’ tomb to make sure Jesus’ disciples did not steal the body and declare Jesus risen (Matt 27.64–65). These guards witnessed the angel rolling the stone away from the entrance to the tomb and proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection (Matt 28. 2–7). They reported their experience to the chief priests, who told them to lie and say the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body. The purpose of the lie was to deceive the governor, who would cause trouble if he heard reports of the resurrection (Matt 28. 13–14). Jesus, from birth to death to resurrection, was a threat to the Roman Empire.

There are many ways of characterizing the strange fact that this man, who was executed by the Roman Empire as a political threat, would be labeled *homoousios* with God at an event presided over by the Roman Emperor. It might just be ironic.

Or it might be a form of domestication, in which a once-radical figure is folded into existing power structures to diffuse the threat he once posed. Or, perhaps, the Nicene Creed is a bit like a Trojan Horse. It appears friendly to empire on the outside, but nestled within the Creed is a dangerous truth: God stands against and above every empire.

## Mastering the Master

One would imagine that all enslaved people and their descendants would associate only evil with the word ‘master’. However, many Black congregations in the US sing hymns that refer to Jesus as ‘Master.’ The lyrics of a spiritual titled, ‘Ain’t Got Time to Die,’ begin «I keep so busy praising my Jesus» that «I ain’t got time». It proceeds to say, «I keep so busy working for the Kingdom» that «I ain’t got time to die». Different verses explicate what this work consists of, including healing the sick and feeding the poor. A later verse says, «I keep so busy serving my Master [...] ain’t got time to die».<sup>29</sup> The term ‘master’ is scriptural, of course, and carries the connotations of a teacher and leader. It is similar to ‘Lord’ as a title of honor. At the same time, the word cannot be separated, in the US context in which this spiritual is sung, from the historical reference to the slaveholder. The lyrics of this spiritual do not compare Jesus to a slaveholder, rather, they deny anyone except Jesus the title ‘master.’

This is a recognizable pattern in Christian hymnody. When the Hallelujah chorus of Handel’s *Messiah* refers to Jesus as the ‘King of Kings,’ this minimizes the power and authority of any King but Jesus. All earthly configurations of power are nothing in comparison.

Such songs provide a different lens through which to view the Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed. The term *homoousios* was the most divisive in the Creed. Some accounts imply that Constantine himself suggested this term, although that cannot be known for sure.<sup>30</sup> This one word – of one substance – definitively excluded Arius and his followers. Other terms and metaphors, such as ‘Light from Light,’ would have permitted a wider range of perspectives within Nicene Christianity.

<sup>29</sup> Hall Johnson, “Ain’t Got Time to Die,” *PMBCmusic*, Peace Missionary Baptist Church, accessed April 15, 2025, [https://pmbcmusic.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/2/0/11201932/aint\\_got\\_time\\_to\\_die\\_hall\\_johnson.pdf](https://pmbcmusic.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/2/0/11201932/aint_got_time_to_die_hall_johnson.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Drake, “The Elephant,” 126.

And yet, this term also recognizes Jesus as eternal and fully divine, one with the Creator of the universe.

At the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, the Nicene Creed was amended in several ways, including omitting the condemnations and expanding description of the Holy Spirit. This revision, referred to as the ‘Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,’ is voiced in worship by millions of Christians around the globe. In its characterization of Jesus, it includes the description: «whose kingdom shall have no end». This further minimizes the power and authority of the Emperor and the Empire, setting them next to the eternal God and the everlasting kingdom.

This kingdom was proclaimed by Jesus throughout his ministry. Reformed theologian Letty Russell describes Jesus as ‘a memory of the future.’<sup>31</sup> The kingdom – the Kindom, as Russell would say – is the future God intends and Jesus proclaims. When we want to know what this coming Kindom will be like, we should look back to Jesus. Our communal memories of his life and ministry show us what the Kindom will look like: for example, where the sick are healed, the marginalized become central to the community, and everyone is fed. As Christians, Russell says, we are called to live in this future today: «We study the Bible to understand how God acts so that we can participate in those actions on behalf of humanity».<sup>32</sup> We are called to God’s future; in order to know what it looks like, we look back to the past; this shapes how we live today.

Our lives should be out of step with the hierarchies and power systems of the world today. Instead, they should be shaped to fit the Kindom God intends and Jesus proclaims. Not only does Jesus of Nazareth oppose the Roman Empire in the particular context of his earthly life, he also calls all those who follow him to live similarly – opposing every empire and living into the Kindom of God.

## Divine Difference

The affirmation of Christ’s divinity is one part of a larger theological affirmation in the Nicene Creed: the Trinity. Reformed theologian David Kelsey points out that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity was rooted in reflection on Christian liturgical practices.<sup>33</sup> Christians had been, for example, baptizing «in the name of

<sup>31</sup> Letty M. Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 157.

<sup>32</sup> Russell, *The Future*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 47.



the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit» (Matt 28.19). In these early practices, this «triadic doxological formula» is used to talk «to God and on behalf of God, not in talk about God.»<sup>34</sup> This formula references «three sets of stories about God» in the Bible: those about God as Creator or ‘Father of us all,’ about God as reconciler in Jesus Christ, and stories about «God bringing us to consummation in eschatological life in the Holy Spirit».<sup>35</sup> Early Christians understood God as relating to them in a ‘threefold way,’ an understanding with roots in the multiplicity of biblical narratives and reflected in practices of blessing and praying that referred to God with a threefold form of address.

As Christianity continued into the fourth century, the changing context demanded more than repetition of «three sets of stories about God» and the «triadic doxological formula». Kelsey notes that the focus shifted from how God relates to humanity in this threefold way, to how the Father relates to the Son. Williams credits Arius with perceiving «the necessity of new argument, of a critical and logical defence of tradition in the face of increasingly dangerous theological ambiguities in the teaching of his day».<sup>36</sup> Athanasius and other Nicenes came to «agree with the need for conceptual innovation».<sup>37</sup> In Williams’ view, Arius helped Christianity embrace the task of theology. Williams writes,

There is a sense in which Nicaea and its aftermath represent a recognition by the Church at large that theology is not only legitimate but necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate as a means of securing continuity at anything more than a formal level; Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another.<sup>38</sup>

The diversity of portrayals of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the four Gospels left room for varied understandings of this relationship. Arius and Athanasius – Alexander’s successor who came to represent pro-Nicene theology – agreed that the ineffable God created «all-else-that-is-not-God» from nothing (*ex nihilo*).<sup>39</sup> This is, for both Arius and Athanasius, an exercise of *monarchia*.<sup>40</sup> Both men had inher-

<sup>34</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 235.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 236.

<sup>39</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 51.

ited from the philosophical traditions of the time an understanding, «according to which the ultimate principle (*arche*) that rationally explains the structures and changes of the cosmos must be singular (the one); *monos*».<sup>41</sup> The understanding of creation from nothing emphasizes the ontological distinction between Creator and creation. Furthermore, they both agreed that Jesus, the Savior, is «the divine Logos or Word incarnate»,<sup>42</sup> while recognizing that Jesus is «genuinely other than God the Father».<sup>43</sup>

The point of contention is how to understand this otherness, this distinction or difference. Kelsey frames it this way: There is a clear delineation between God the Creator and all of creation. On which side of the line do we see Jesus? Arius sees Jesus, the Word of God, on the creation side, as a mediator effecting the reconciliation of God and humanity. Athanasius sees Jesus on the Creator side of the line. In Jesus, the Son of God, God takes «our alienated and sinful reality on Godself so that we, in turn, may be made Holy by being united with God's reality».<sup>44</sup>

The Council of Nicaea took the second approach, placing Jesus firmly on the side of the Creator. The distinction between the Father and the Son is not across the ontological divide of Creator and creation. This is made explicit in the line of the Creed that describes the Son as «begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father». Theologically this word, *homoousios*, marked one of the distinctive theological innovations of Christianity. It opened up a possibility of imagining a monotheism in which the *monarche* was not a single, static, eternal rule. Within the one God there is a process of begetting, a motion between, a giving and receiving of being. The sole divinity is dynamic and relational – not just in God's dealings with humanity, but within God's own self. Difference is not just between creatures or between Creator and creature, but within God.

Although it is impossible to fully reconstruct Arius' theological positions, given the paucity of primary sources, we can reconstruct his concern for the transcendence and freedom of God, especially in creating, and for the capacity of Jesus to fully experience human life, including suffering. Ironically, when the Council of Nicaea rejected Arius's views, condemning difference on one level, it elevated difference on another. Divinity includes difference.

<sup>41</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 54

This is a near-polar opposite attitude towards difference than the demonization mentioned above in Constantine's missive. The Nicene Creed does not, precisely, divinize difference, but it comes close, for divinity cannot happen without it. The Creed affirms a basic trinitarianism: «We believe in one God, the Father Almighty [...] and in one Lord Jesus Christ [...] and in the Holy Ghost». As Christian theology later developed a fuller doctrine of the Trinity, it affirmed the giving and receiving of love as, metaphorically, written into the divine DNA. This fluid dynamism of giving and receiving is only possible because of difference.

Because the divine life is constituted by the 'structured dynamic' of 'giving and responding,' the act of creation is not, as Arius had viewed it, a punctiliar decision of an utterly transcendent and free God. Rather, creation is consonant with the character of God. Creation is rooted in, and «in some way revelatory of the divine life».<sup>45</sup> Creativity coming naturally from the relations within difference is something Audre Lorde recognized and longed for in an academic setting that did not provide it. She highlighted the «creative function of difference in our lives».<sup>46</sup> Lorde challenged her audience: «[D]ifference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark».<sup>47</sup>

Lorde's famous statement, *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* follows immediately upon an assertion that survival requires «learning how to take our differences and make them strengths».<sup>48</sup> The essential characteristic of the tools of the master is the denigration and suppression of difference. Honoring, valuing, and learning from difference opens up new «ways of being in the world».<sup>49</sup> One of those new ways of being is solidarity – bonds of unity across lines of difference. The Nicene Creed opens a theological and ethical path to solidarity. If unity within the Godhead includes difference, why should unity among humans exclude it?

## Conclusion

Our world is still rife with the inseparable problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Demonizing differences in order to stoke fear and anger, as well as to reduce the productive possibilities of solidarity, is still a favored tactic of the

<sup>45</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 19, emphasis hers.

<sup>49</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 18.

powerful. Those of us who long to see a world in which these problems can be spoken of in the past tense have much work to do. Audre Lorde's admonition that *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*<sup>50</sup> is still needed.

The Council of Nicaea was clearly a tool of the master. It was called by an emperor to stabilize the Roman Empire, used to suppress difference within Christianity and solidify battle lines between Christian groups. And yet, the Council also bequeathed to us the Nicene Creed and laid the foundation for the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

This creed recognizes the divinity of Jesus Christ, who was a threat to empire from the moment he was born. His life and ministry challenged the stratification of life within the Roman Empire and every empire. His teachings proclaimed a Kingdom of God that «will have no end». He was executed by the Roman Empire as a political threat, marked by a sign that read, 'King of the Jews.' Then, on the third day, Jesus Christ was raised again, defeating both empire and death itself. The Nicene Creed, insofar as it testifies to the divinity of this man, thereby affirming his birth, life, death, and resurrection as those of God, exposes all empires as pretense and folly.

Furthermore, the Creed's Trinitarian affirmation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a new, distinct understanding of the one God as comprising and being comprised of relations of difference. Christians are not to worship a static singularity but single God characterized – both internally and externally – by the giving and receiving of love. Trinitarian Christianity rests on difference within divinity. This has a logical ethical implication that difference ought to be appreciated as a source of creativity and possibility.

Writing about the rather vicious political machinations involved in the Council of Nicaea, Kelsey writes that «[I]t takes a very strong doctrine of the Holy Spirit to construe the hand of God working through all of this to bring the Christian community to clearer understanding of God.»<sup>51</sup> This paper has such a strong pneumatology, and argues that while the Council of Nicaea was a tool of the master, through miracle or faithfulness, the Nicene Creed is not. Indeed, the Creed carries within it testimony to the sinfulness of empire and the value of difference. Of course, no text alone, no matter how radical, can reshape the world. But this one, the Nicene Creed, could be a tool in the hands of those acting for change.

<sup>50</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 19, emphasis hers.

<sup>51</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric*, 50.



# Nicene Influence on Reformed Synodality and Church Governance

## Introduction

The Nicene Creed proclaims, «We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church». But what does it mean to confess this in a world scarred by fragmentation, nationalism, racial exclusion, theological polarization, and ecclesial disunity? What does it mean to *receive* the legacy of Nicaea today – not as a closed system of dogma, but as an open invitation to cultivate shared authority, inclusive communion, and contextual theological witness?

This section brings together five contributions that reimagine Nicaea through the lenses of synodality, conciliarity, ecclesial governance, sovereignty, and communion – drawing from both Orthodox and Reformed traditions. Together, they ask: How do we reconcile the one and the many in the life of the church? How do we exercise authority without coercion? How do we remain rooted in the Nicene faith while responding to the demands of justice, diversity, and vulnerability in our time?

**Hanns Lessing** opens the section by meticulously tracing the theological trajectories of *koinonia* in the Orthodox tradition and *covenant theology* in the Reformed tradition. Both, he argues, offer rich resources for holding unity and diversity in creative tension. Drawing on the insights of John Zizioulas and Karl Barth, the essay explores how these traditions can shape contemporary structures of ecclesial discernment and conflict transformation. From Pentecost to the present, Lessing insists, the church must remain a dynamic communion – one that resists both rigid uniformity and disconnected fragmentation.

**Neal Presa's** contribution builds on this ecclesiology by exploring the triad of *adiaphora*, *subsidiarity*, and *authority* in Reformed synodal governance. How do

churches discern what is essential for faith and what allows for diversity? How does authority function not as control, but as accountable service? **Presa** roots these questions in the Reformed understanding of *covenant* and links them to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed's affirmation of the Spirit and the church's catholicity. In this frame, being a communion of churches is not a structural ideal, but a theological imperative.

In his Orthodox perspective, **Job Getcha** deepens the theological grounding of synodality. He argues that the Council of Nicaea was not the birth of hierarchical imposition, but the emergence of a conciliar model shaped by mutual accountability, freedom of expression, and shared discernment. Synodality, for **Getcha**, is not an ecclesial strategy but a reflection of Trinitarian life – where unity is not enforced but received through the Spirit across space and time. Drawing on examples such as the Enkomousa Synod and the Crete Council of 2016, he shows how Orthodox synodality continues to embody the vibrancy and fragility of communion in a fractured world. **Getcha's** essay challenges both East and West to recover Nicaea not as a frozen monument, but as an evolving practice of conciliar discernment in the life of the church.

**Rudolf von Sinner's** enlightening essay explores the theological-political question of *sovereignty* – God's, the people's, and the church's. Reading Nicaea as a public confession of loyalty to a God who becomes vulnerable in Jesus Christ, **von Sinner** examines how sovereignty must always be seen through the lens of *self-limitation and covenant*. Against the backdrop of political absolutism and ecclesial authoritarianism, the essay argues that divine sovereignty is Trinitarian and relational, expressed in self-giving love and covenantal faithfulness. Thus, Christian confession today must resist absolutist claims – whether theological, ecclesial, or political – and instead affirm a communal, dialogical, and vulnerable God who calls the church to relational witness in the midst of global ambiguities.

**Leo Koffeman** closes the section with a compelling vision of Reformed polity rooted in the Nicene attributes of the church. He reinterprets «one, holy, catholic, and apostolic» as quality markers – ethical, theological, and structural commitments that demand *inclusivity, authenticity, conciliarity, and integrity*. Rather than abstract ideals, these markers shape how churches govern, teach, and witness. **Koffeman** insists that Reformed polity must remain open to change, self-critique, and the continuing work of the Spirit through processes of communal discernment. The Nicene faith, in this light, is not merely about preserving order but about cultivating a church that is accountable, hospitable, and reforming.

Together, these five essays offer a critical and constructive re-engagement with the Council of Nicaea as a theological resource for shaping just, participatory, and Spirit-led church life today. They recognize its imperial entanglements, historical exclusions, and doctrinal coercions. But they also reclaim it as a generative space – a horizon of possibility where conciliarity, communion, and covenant still speak powerfully to the challenges of ecclesial life in our own age.

In a time when many churches are wrestling with questions of authority, inclusion, and discernment – when patriarchal and hierarchical structures are rightly being interrogated, when theological diversity stretches old frameworks, and when communities long silenced are raising their voices – this section insists that *receiving Nicaea today* mean inhabiting its vision of communion with openness, courage, and humility.

It is a call to resist ecclesial authoritarianism, to reject fragmentation, and to cultivate structures of governance and witness that are *conciliar*, *collaborative*, *self-critical*, and *liberative*. In doing so, it invites the church to become not only a confessor of the Nicene faith, but a living embodiment of its Trinitarian imagination: a communion of churches marked by justice, integrity, and the freedom of the Spirit.





# The One and the Many: Synodality in the Orthodox and Reformed Traditions

*Hanns Lessing*

## Introduction

Since the day of Pentecost, all Christian communions have struggled with the right balance between the One and the Many in their church polities. In recent years, this endeavour has become increasingly challenging. Religious bodies around the globe were among the first to experience the increasing polarization in their societies. In several churches, attempts to reconcile hardening moral principles with self-conscious calls to respect diversity have failed. These conflicts not only compromise the witness of the church, but they also offer a space for the wider public to claim narratives of the church to justify often highly controversial political projects. The emerging Christian nationalisms in all parts of the world are indicators of this development.

The 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is an opportunity to reflect on these challenges. The Council was organized according to the relational structure of the early church that was designed to keep the One and the Many together in unity. Elements of this structure can be found in the orders of many Christian churches. In the second half of the twentieth century, the ecumenical potential of this tradition was rediscovered. *Koinonia* theology continues to inspire the ecumenical movement ever since.

In the exercise to reconcile the One and the Many in polarized situations, the Nicene tradition is both an inspiration and a warning. On the one hand, the affirmation of Trinitarian theology, which integrates the notion of otherness in the un-

derstanding of unity, offers considerable opportunities to develop church orders that can effectively respond to current challenges. On the other hand, the anniversary also calls to account the problematic legacy of the Nicaean church polity tradition. As the Orthodox bishop of Los Angeles, Maxim Vasiljevic, in his keynote to the “Listening to the East” conference at the Institute for Evangelical Studies Angelicum in Rome, noted:

For instance, *post-festum*, the Council of Nicaea resulted in more confusion than resolution, and it brought disunity to the Church instead of unity. It divided not only the Nicenes from the non-Nicenes, but it also caused divisions among the Nicenes themselves. In the course of more than 50 years after the Council, there was an immense effort among the God-bearing Fathers to readjust, reinterpret, and re-receive Nicaea’s theological legacy. Its Creed needed to be amended, and its theology re-explained. [...] Indeed, synodality—a word with many nuances—is a delicate matter. It implies a dialectic, and it requires a reception. It’s not *an end in itself*.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing this complexity, it is also essential to be aware of the other danger that the Nicaean tradition might suggest. Many of the conflicts arising from the Nicene church order tradition were resolved by recourse to the judicial system of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. With Nicaea, doctrines and canons became enforceable by law, which bent the balance of the One and the Many heavily to the side of Oneness.

Vasiljevic recognizes that the epicletic nature of the pre-Nicene church has been compromised by the alliance with the Byzantine Empire and the formation of autocephalies in modern nation states. He regrets that the Orthodox *have* allowed themselves to forget some aspects of synodality and/or adopt some foreign aspects.<sup>2</sup>

Seeing this strong tradition that allows for responding to challenges by strengthening the instruments of unity, the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church Synod on Synodality, and similar processes in Protestant world communions and the World Council of Churches, are highly remarkable.

In this paper, I explore the theological foundations of Orthodox and Reformed church order traditions with the intention of identifying those elements that would strengthen synodality in a situation as polarized as ours. The exploration of the

<sup>1</sup> Maxim Vasiljewitch, “The Orthodox Church is a Synodal Church. Towards a Synodical Ontology of the Church,” in *Listening to the East. Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions*, ed. the Institute for Evangelical Studies Angelicum, Rome (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 2023, 36.

<sup>2</sup> Vasiljewitch, “The Orthodox Church,” 37.

Orthodox tradition is based upon work by John Zizioulas (1931–2023).<sup>3</sup> The study of the Reformed tradition follows Karl Barth's (1886–1968) lecture, *The Theology of Calvin*.<sup>4</sup> Following the theological exploration, both approaches are tested in the context of contemporary challenges.

This chapter is structured following the three aspects that characterize *koinonia* theology. According to Vasiljewitch, *koinonia* is *relational*, *eucharistic*, and *epi-cletic*.<sup>5</sup> These three aspects shape Zizioulas' ecclesiology and are also significant in John Calvin's *Theology of the Church*.

## The Foundations of Synodality in the Context of the Orthodox Tradition

In recent discussions on synodality, Orthodox theologians have highlighted the ecumenical potential of a Trinitarian ecclesiology that has been developed in the Orthodox tradition. In his keynote, *The Church as Communion*, to the 1993 Faith and Order World Conference in Santiago de Compostela, Zizioulas pointed to the capability of a *koinonia* ecclesiology to reconcile «traditional dichotomies between the institutional and the charismatic, the local and the universal, conciliarity and primacy».<sup>6</sup> He suggested «that the concept, if it is used creatively in ecclesiology, would destroy all legalistic and pyramidal views of ministry, authority, and structure in the Church, which hinder progress towards unity».<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The analysis follows the structure of the introductory papers to the ecclesiology section in: John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*, ed. Fr. Edwards (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, n.d.). Read together, the three chapters present a comprehensive picture of Zizioulas' *koinonia* ecclesiology:

- *The Church as Communion* was the keynote lecture at the World Council of Churches Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, August 3–14, 1993.
- *Ecclesiological Presuppositions of the Holy Eucharist* is based on a lecture given at the Ecumenical Institute "S. Nicola" in Bari, Italy, on May 5, 1982.
- *The Pneumatological Dimension of the Church* was first published in: *International Catholic Review*, 2, no. 2 (1973).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1995 [1922]).

<sup>5</sup> Vasiljewitch, "The Orthodox Church," 38.

<sup>6</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 60.

## The Church as Communion – The Relational Aspect of *Koinonia*

In his keynote, Zizioulas develops the relational character of Orthodox *koinonia* ecclesiology from the foundations of Trinitarian theology: «God is Trinitarian; He is a relational being by definition; a non-Trinitarian God is not *koinonia* in His very being. Ecclesiology must be based on Trinitarian theology, if it is to be an ecclesiology of communion».<sup>8</sup>

Trinitarian relations ensure that the church, understood as the body of Christ, also has a pneumatological identity that gathers God's many people. According to Zizioulas, we must think of Christ «as a «corporate person», an inclusive being. The «head» without the body is inconceivable. The church is the body of Christ because Christ is a Pneumatological being, born and existing in the *koinonia* of the Spirit».<sup>9</sup>

### *The Relational Identity of the Church*

This pneumatological inclusion into the Trinity defines the relational identity of the church. The New Testament uses the term *ecclesia* often in a genitive construction, addressing a *vertical* and a *horizontal* dimension. In the *vertical* direction, the church is rightly called a 'Church of God, or Jesus Christ' and, in the *horizontal* direction, a 'church of a certain place'. Zizioulas emphasizes that there is no church that could be conceived in itself. The church is *koinonia* in communion with Father, Son, and Spirit. Such a church «is by definition incompatible with individualism; her fabric is communion and personal relatedness».<sup>10</sup>

### *The Relational Structure of the Church*

Trinitarian relations also define the structure of the church on both local and universal levels. The Holy Spirit makes each local church a church in its full meaning, in which each believer can exercise communion with God. Local churches embody the diversity of believers. They encompass natural, social, and spiritual differences. In the church, believers mutually depend on each other. No member of the church can say to another member, «I need you not». «Each member of the community is indispensable, carrying his or her gifts to the body. [...] All members are needed, precisely because they are different».<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 54.

The diversity in the local church raises the question of how oneness could be maintained. Zizioulas emphasizes the need for a ministry of oneness that the bishop should hold. To serve the oneness of the community, this ministry must be conducted by one minister only. At the same time, this one minister is part of the community and does not stand above it as an authority. «In the relational system of the local church, all pyramidal notions of church structures vanish in the ecclesiology of communion».<sup>12</sup>

This principle of relationality, in which the Many cannot be without the One and the One not without the Many, repeats itself on the regional and universal levels of the church. The many local churches are connected by the *koinonia* of their bishops, who represent their dioceses in synods and councils. To maintain the unity among the diverse churches, a primate is required who presides over the synods.

Zizioulas concludes that through this synodal model, the catholicity of each local church is fully safeguarded: «Without synodality, unity risks being sacrificed in favour of the local church. But a synodality which suppresses catholicity and integrity of the local church can lead to ecclesial universalism».<sup>13</sup>

### **Ecclesiological Presuppositions of the Holy Eucharist – The Eucharistic Aspect of *Koinonia***

Zizioulas presented his thoughts about the *Ecclesiological Prepositions of the Holy Eucharist* in a 1982 lecture at the Ecumenical Institute S. Nicola in Bari, Italy. In this earlier paper he presented a more pessimistic ecumenical outlook and pointed to the sharp division between churches in the East and the West about the centrality of the Eucharist: While the Orthodox hold on to St Ignatius' understanding that the «catholicity of the Church derives from the celebration of the Eucharist», Western churches severed the link between the 'Body of Christ' and the 'Body of the Church.' By doing so, they compromised their theological identity as churches.<sup>14</sup>

Zizioulas criticized the churches of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation alike. In his view, the Reformers put little emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist by allowing it to be celebrated only a few times a year. The Counter-Reformation, on the other hand, adopted a theology of the Eucharist which saw the

<sup>12</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 64f.

Eucharist as being produced by the church and, therefore, not constitutive of her being. The presupposition of the Eucharist in the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent was a valid ministry that had the authority to perform the sacraments «regardless of any other conditions, such as the presence of the community, orthodox faith, or other such factors».<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Eucharistic Community***

In Orthodox understanding, the Eucharist creates an eschatological community. The Eucharist is a *leitourgia*, an act of the People. Zizioulas, therefore, sees the fundamental ecclesiological presupposition of the Eucharist in the gathering of the people of God at one place. All members of the church possess the Holy Spirit by Baptism and Chrismation. This gives the eucharistic gathering a charismatic nature and makes it a foretaste of the coming kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Role of the Bishop***

However, in the matrix of the balance between the One and the Many, the believers cannot constitute themselves as a eucharistic assembly; they require a bishop or presbyter, as the representative of the bishop, to do so. In the Eucharist, the bishop mirrors Christ:

Christ «represents the community to the Father. He offers the Eucharist as the first-born of the brethren, as part of the community. At the same time, he addresses the community, especially by giving it the Holy Spirit, the charismata. In this sense, he stands above the community.

The bishop does the same paradoxical work. He offers the Eucharist as part of the community and as its head. However, simultaneously, he is the *sole ordainer*; no one else can give the Spirit to the community; none else can ordain. In this sense, he is addressing the community; he *constitutes* it, as the ecclesial presupposition par excellence».<sup>17</sup>

From an Orthodox perspective, the ministry of the bishop is thus the ecclesiological presupposition of the Eucharist par excellence.

<sup>15</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 71.

## ***The Ecumenical Function of the Bishop***

But the ministry of the bishop is not restricted to *vertical* representation of the community to God and God to the community. On the *horizontal* level, the bishop is also the link between the local and the universal church. It is the participation of the bishop in the ecumenical communion of bishops, which makes the local church ‘catholic’. This representing role has implications for the understanding of the Eucharist:

The Eucharist would remain a local event of a local Church were it not for the bishop. The bishop is a necessary condition of the Eucharist because it is through him that each Eucharist becomes *the one Eucharist* of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. If a Eucharist does not take place in the name of a bishop, it risks remaining a local event without catholic significance. This is one of the profoundest reasons that account for the importance of the bishop as an ecclesiological presupposition of the Eucharist.<sup>18</sup>

## ***Eucharistic Synodality***

In the bishop, the local church becomes catholic and the catholic becomes local. For Zizioulas, it is precisely this nature of the Eucharist and its practical implications that led to the emergence of the synodal system in the early church:

Conciliarity is closely connected with eucharistic communion [...] and with its suppositions. If two or more churches are in schism, the eucharistic life of *all* local churches is upset. Conciliarity, as an expression of the unity of local Churches in *one* Church, constitutes a fundamental condition for the Eucharist.<sup>19</sup>

For Zizioulas, eucharistic synodality is a condition for ecumenical *koinonia*: «No progress toward full eucharistic communion can be made without some kind of reformation of existing practices taking place in all churches in one form or another. The eucharistic communion requires a solid communion ecclesiological grounded in theory and in practice—especially in the latter».<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 72f.

<sup>20</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 74.



## The Pneumatological Dimension of the Church: The Epicletic Aspect

### *The Many in the One: The Spiritual Body of Christ*

These last remarks demonstrate how seriously the Orthodox tradition takes the order of the church. All Christian communions claim that the church is more than an institution, but only a few would go as far as to claim that, in the Spirit, the church becomes an «image of the Trinity itself»,<sup>21</sup> in which nature and person are identical with each other. In Orthodox understanding, «the Church is the Body of Christ precisely in its being a «spiritual body»».<sup>22</sup>

As a spiritual institution that is co-constituted by Christ and the Spirit, the church, therefore, constantly depends on the Spirit and exists only epicletically. This charismatic nature impacts the form of the church: The institution is not meant to create any objectified security but ought to be open for the work of the Spirit: «Although it relies on a given form, the institution is never this form itself; it cannot be isolated from the charismatic event of communion».<sup>23</sup>

For Zizioulas, it is the proper and specific function of the Spirit to create life in an event of communion by rendering the life of God a reality here and now. The primary location for this life-giving activity is again the Eucharist. This location entails that the freedom that the Spirit offers is enacted according to the roles that are defined by the eucharistic relations. The Holy Spirit is free, but this freedom unfolds itself in the dynamism of the ecclesial order: «The movements of the Spirit cannot be predicted, but their ultimate direction can».<sup>24</sup>

### *The One in the Many: Freedom and Authority*

In a charismatic institution, a hierarchical order is needed to balance unity and particularity. In the Orthodox tradition, the character of the hierarchy evolves from the example of the life of the Trinity: «It is the Father as a Person in particularity of his relation to the other two Persons that renders that Trinity both a unity and diversity. Hierarchy is thus a notion in the idea of divine personhood».<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 84.

The church is called to provide the means of personal and free existence for every human being in communion. However, this freedom is constituted by the Eucharist. Zizioulas describes the transformation of individual personhood of people in the Eucharist in a bold statement: The structure of the church becomes the fulfillment of one's personhood: «In the Eucharist each communicant is transformed into the whole Body of Christ, so in the same Spirit the very structure of the church becomes the existential structure of each person».<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Church and the World***

Zizioulas is aware that the introverted character of his ecclesiology might be contested by theologies that want to locate the church in the midst of current questions. Zizioulas warns against a «Marxist view of history».<sup>27</sup> In his opinion, the church must never identify the eschaton with history by trying to build the kingdom as part of a historical process. Instead, the church should make space in her sacramental structure for the 'Spirit of prophecy', which brings the eschaton into history and points beyond its boundaries.<sup>28</sup>

While Zizioulas was skeptical of Western forms of political theology, he embraced creation theology in the 1980s and frequently called for the care of creation.<sup>29</sup>

### **Challenges**

The epicletic understanding of the church, as presented by John Zizioulas, is being critiqued from two different directions:

For one group, the relationship between the One and the Many in the Orthodox understanding of the church is too loose because it does not provide a foundation for a self-sustaining church structure. From the Roman and Byzantine empires onwards, Orthodox churches relied strongly on the state and, after the demise of the empire, failed to maintain a universal structure.<sup>30</sup>

Roman Catholic observers see this intrinsic lack of certainty that derives from charismatic organization as a problem. Cardinal Kurt Koch, the current Prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, at a meeting of the Joint In-

<sup>26</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 88.

<sup>28</sup> Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 88.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance: John D. Zizioulas, *Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology*, *King's Theological Review* 12 (1989): 1–5, 41–45; 13 (1990): 1–5.

<sup>30</sup> Vasiljewitch, "The Orthodox Church," 37.

ternational Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church that tackled the question of the relationship between primacy and synodality made the following comment: «We, Catholics, have a Pope; you, Orthodox, have synodality. We have an *issue*, you have a *problem*».<sup>31</sup>

The other group criticizes precisely the opposite. For this position, the relationship between the One and the Many is too rigid. Theologians who follow this line call for more sensitivity toward individualization within communities and a more profound commitment to tackling burning political issues.

In this section, I analyze the approaches of Andrey Shishkov from Russia<sup>32</sup> and Pantelis Kalaitzidis from Greece.<sup>33</sup> Both hold to the fundamentals of *koinonia* theology, but criticize the narrow focus of Zizioulas' understanding of the Church.

### ***“Our Social Program is the Dogma of the Trinity”***

Andrey Shishkov affirms *koinonia* ecclesiology because of its potential to unite the One and the Many.<sup>34</sup> However, he calls for new theological approaches to unleash the potential of eucharistic theology in a situation where churches are becoming actors in the public space.<sup>35</sup>

Pantelis Kalaitzidis also holds on to the tenets of Trinitarian theology. Like Shishkov, he calls for a renewal of theology. To demonstrate the social and political potential of Trinitarian theology, he quotes the Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov, who has stated: «Our social program is the dogma of the Trinity».<sup>36</sup> Kalaitzidis expounds this directive with a reflection by the British Metropolitan Kallistos Ware:

The doctrine of the Trinity is not merely a theme for abstract speculation by specialists; it has practical and indeed revolutionary consequences for our understanding of human personhood and society. The human person is made in the image of God, that

<sup>31</sup> Vasiljewitch, “The Orthodox Church,” 37.

<sup>32</sup> Andrey Shishkov, “Radical Collectivity of Eucharistic Ecclesiology,” in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges and Divergent Positions*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl, Ingeborg Gabriel, and Aristotle Papanikolaou, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 189–205.

<sup>33</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Toward an Orthodox Political Theology: The Church’s Theological Foundations and Public Role in the Context of the Greek Economic Crisis,” in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges and Divergent Positions*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl, Ingeborg Gabriel, and Aristotle Papanikolaou, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 153–155.

<sup>34</sup> Andrey Shishkov, “Radical Collectivity,” 202.

<sup>35</sup> Andrey Shishkov, “Radical Collectivity,” 189.

<sup>36</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Toward an Orthodox Political Theology,” 160.

is to say, of God the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God is not just a monad, the One loving himself, but a triad of divine persons loving each other.

Formed in the Trinitarian image, the human person is thus created for relationship, sharing, and reciprocity. Cut off from others, isolated, unloving, and unloved, no one is a true person, but only a bare individual. Our human vocation is therefore to reproduce on earth at every level, in the church and in society, the movement of mutual love that exists from all eternity within God the Trinity.<sup>37</sup>

This theology of the Trinity radicalizes the *koinonia* identity of the church. According to Ware and Kalaitzidis, *koinonia*, taken seriously, does not permit a theocratic and hierarchical understanding of the Church (in both East and West), and rejects an understanding of religion in which the Church would impose power on society from above, «justifying more or less all the social anachronisms and prohibitions that continue to hold sway today».<sup>38</sup>

### ***The Eucharist Is the Mystery of Equality and Participation***

Andrey Sishkov points to contradictions in Zizioulas' understanding of the laity in the church assembly and challenges the theological reasoning that prevents critique from lay people. He presents two model situations that demonstrate the problem of 'negative reception':

- A part of the eucharistic assembly does not accept certain actions by the bishop, and the bishop in turn rejects this negative reception. Such a situation would divide the communion of the assembly because only the part that is in communion with the bishop can be regarded as the local church.
- And if the whole community rejects its presider, in the logic of eucharistic ecclesiology, it ceases to be an assembly and turns into a crowd. A local church has no resources to continue living without the presider, because the presiding bishop is a structural element of eucharistic ecclesiology without which it stops working.<sup>39</sup>

In both instances, lay people, as long as they want to remain faithful members of the church, have no opportunity for a negative reception of an action by the bishop: «They have always to exclaim «Amen!» and «Axios», but cannot say «Anaxios!»»<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology," 159.

<sup>38</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology," 160.

<sup>39</sup> Andrey Sishkov, "Radical Collectivity," 199.

<sup>40</sup> Andrey Sishkov, "Radical Collectivity," 199.

In response to such narrow conceptions of the Eucharist, Kalaitzidis proposes a radicalization of eucharistic theology:

Clergy and hierarchs celebrate the Eucharist, but at its most authentic, the Eucharist actually engenders the dissolution of the hierarchical structures and authoritarian stratification that reflect the fallen world's status quo."<sup>41</sup>

This is so because:

- the liturgy flows into the everyday life of believers, known by some as 'the liturgy after the liturgy,' the inseparable link between the Eucharist and the mystery of unity, the Eucharist and radical social transformation, the liturgy and committed engagement in society and culture;
- and the celebration of the liturgy presupposes the catholic participation of the people and the overcoming of the mediatory priesthood (as envisioned by the Old Testament) by the charismatic priesthood (as envisioned by the Epistle to the Hebrews).<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Church in the Public Space***

Shishkov concludes his paper with a call to the church to clarify its engagement in the public space. He affirms the potential of eucharistic ecclesiology to position the church in society. But such engagement must be thought through theologically. The body of the Church united by the Eucharist must not be used as a political instrument at the disposal of the ecclesial hierarchy. The Eucharist focuses on people and the community rather than the church hierarchy and vertical power.<sup>43</sup> In the current situation in Orthodox countries, Shishkov is pessimistic that such a renewal could occur. He, therefore, calls for more theological work on this issue.

Like Shishkov, Kalaitzidis calls upon the church to recall the forgotten understanding that Christian ethics are «anarchical, being eschatological and crucicentric»<sup>44</sup> and emphasizes the role of theology in this process of remembering:

Theology, as a prophetic and critical voice of the institutional church, should continually remind the Church of its eschatological memory and of the loss of its paradoxical identity within the boundaries of this world, as described by the well-known phrase, «in the world, but not of the world». This should happen whenever the insti-

<sup>41</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology," 166.

<sup>42</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology," 166.

<sup>43</sup> Andrey Shishkov, "Radical Collectivity," 204.

<sup>44</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology," 167.

tutional Church attempts to absolutize and to adopt historical or worldly schemes, or whenever it tends to forget Jesus' kenotic way for the sake of Caesar.<sup>45</sup>

The positions of Zizioulas, Shivkov, and Kalaitzidis demonstrate the potential of a *koinonia* ecclesiology to address current challenges for the church in changing social and political contexts. At the same time, the contributions also indicate that ecclesiology is a contested space in which hard battles are fought. These conflicts contradict the claim of *koinonia* ecclesiology to reconcile the One and the Many. It will, therefore, be interesting to see how the Orthodox churches will develop their theology of synodality to work through these tensions in a polarized world.

## The Foundations of Synodality in the Context of the Reformed Tradition

John Calvin has included in Book 4 (Of the Holy Catholic Church) of his *Institutes* a chapter "Of the State of the Primitive Church, and the Mode of Government in Use before the Papacy" (IV.4). In this section, he calls the form of the early church a «visible representation of the divine institution» (IV.4.1). He affirms the ministry of oversight as it was developed in the early church and states that the bishops «were so cautious in framing all their economy on the word of God, the only standard, that it is easy to see that they scarcely in any respect departed from it». (IV.4.1).

Calvin expounds his ecclesiology with constant reference to the early church and justifies his thinking with references to the Patristic period. Jerome and Cyprian are significant references for his argument.

It is, therefore, interesting to bring the Orthodox and Reformed church order traditions into conversation with each other. To allow a comparison, I follow the same matrix as in the chapter on the Orthodox ecclesiology. I analyze the relations that, according to the Reformed tradition, constitute the church, followed by an exploration of the significance of the Lord's Supper, and finally, an investigation of the pneumatological roots of Reformed synodality. The primary source for this analysis is Karl Barth's study of John Calvin's Theology (1923), which claims to present a 'living Calvin', who, centuries after his death, has something relevant to

<sup>45</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology," 177.

say to the church.<sup>46</sup> Afterwards, the Reformed approach will also be tested in response to current challenges.

### **“Christ Is the Covenant” – The Relational Aspect of *Koinonia***

Like Zizioulas, Karl Barth explores Calvin’s theology of the church in a relational framework that attempts to think together the *vertical* (divine-human) and *horizontal* (human-human) vectors of this relationship.<sup>47</sup>

### **“We Do know God and God Does Know Us”**

Calvin’s point of departure is the *vertical* dimension of the encounter with God. The enormous difference between God and human beings determines the character of the relationship between them. From the beginning of his theological work in the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin sets God in the light of a full and sufficient knowledge of *man*, and speaks of man in such a way that we know that this is the man who is seen and known by *God*.<sup>48</sup>

In this vertical relationship, human beings experience God as the judge who puts the fateful question whether we really serve his glory. In this shattering confrontation, they realize that all that is left in their innermost being is ignorance, wickedness, weakness, death, and judgment.<sup>49</sup>

### **“Enacting the Inconceivable”<sup>50</sup>**

Jesus Christ, who is true man and true God, turns this unequal opposition into a relationship: «Looking from Christ at God, we have knowledge of God, [the Creator who cares and provides for us]. Looking from Christ at us, we have knowledge of ourselves, out of which arises later the knowledge of God, the Redeemer».<sup>51</sup>

Jesus Christ, one with the Father, assumed our flesh and concluded the covenant with us. He draws us very closely to God, from which our sins had greatly estranged us. Christ died for us and thus freed us from curse and judgment that lay upon us. In our flesh and, therefore, in our name, he went up to heaven and is there at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us by participation in whom we are

<sup>46</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 169.

<sup>48</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 162.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 163.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 167.

<sup>51</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 164.

already in heaven, even though on earth.<sup>52</sup> The relationship between human beings on earth and God in heaven is a relationship based on the promise that human beings are obliged to receive in faith.<sup>53</sup>

This leaves the believer in a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, there cannot be any certainty that he or she belongs to the elected group that is gathered by Jesus Christ in heaven.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, they stand under the obligation of their faith that requires acceptance of God's truthfulness and the confidence that he will not deceive us.<sup>55</sup> Barth formulates the paradox of this situation: «Just because we have *only* promise, *only* hope, we have certainty, assurance, undoubted possession. Hope, not having, is true having vis-à-vis God».<sup>56</sup>

### **“Becoming an Eucharistic Community” – The Eucharistic Aspect of *Koinonia***

#### ***“In Christ, We, too, Are in Heaven”*<sup>57</sup>**

Barth explores Calvin's understanding of the *horizontal* relations among human beings in his chapters on the Sacraments and the Church. While dependency on other human beings is a general human experience, its significance can only fully be experienced in partaking of the Supper. Calvin's picture of fallen humanity is pessimistic. He sees humans as lonely individuals who must be constrained by force to prevent harming each other. The best to be expected without the presence of the Holy Spirit is not love but equity.<sup>58</sup> Horizontal relations come into view in the covenant, which is an «inconceivable and impossible thing that when enacted is also the most simple and most natural».<sup>59</sup>

For Calvin, the sacrament is an «appendix of the promise by which God seals the promise and makes it more credible to us [...]. The sacrament thus bears testimony to the grace of God by means of an outward symbol that confirms our faith».<sup>60</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 166.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 168.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 178. A more detailed analysis of Barth's interpretation of Calvin's theology of election is outside the scope of this paper, which explores the impact of this concept on the understanding of the Church.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 168.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 168.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 166.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 215.

<sup>59</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 167.

<sup>60</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 174. A more detailed analysis of Barth's interpretation of Calvin's theology of the sacraments is outside the scope of this paper.



Calvin's theology of the supper has a strong eschatological character. It assumes that Christ is in heaven in our place, while we are still on earth. In Christ, the believers gathered around the table receive the benefits that Christ has mediated to us in his body. For Calvin, the point of the sacred action is «(1) to remind us of the goodness of Christ and to summon us to recognize it, (2) to enable us to perform an act of confession, and (3) to bring us a fresh awareness of our fellowship in the brethren and to lead us to love of them in *Christ* and of Christ in *them*».<sup>61</sup>

The partaking of the Supper transforms the congregation into a 'eucharistic community'.<sup>62</sup> The transformed congregation «becomes sign and image of the miracle, and where people find themselves in the fellowship of those who expect this [...], *there* is the community of Christ on earth».<sup>63</sup>

### ***Invisible and Visible Church***

At this point in the argument, the comparison between the Orthodox and Reformed traditions becomes interesting. While both traditions emphasize the eschatological nature of the Eucharist and, therefore, agree that the worship of the church transcends its institutional character, the Reformed understanding is much more radical. While in the Orthodox tradition, the office of the bishop is firmly anchored in geography and history (apostolic succession), the institutionality of the church in the Reformed tradition is framed by the paradoxical nature of faith.

Calvin emphasizes the eschatological nature of the church. Certain institutional elements are necessary. The church needs a structure that allows the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. But what really counts for him is the faithfulness of the living church. For Calvin, the church is a church of faith. The church can only be the true church when the Holy Spirit inspires all its relations.

Like human beings in their relations to God, the church is also constituted by paradoxical relationships. The church is two things as one: «it is God's work and yet, that as such, it is also a human reality».<sup>64</sup> To come to terms with this paradox, Calvin distinguishes the *invisible* and the *visible* church:

The *invisible* church is the communion of saints, «angels or humans, and if humans, dead or alive, and if alive, living in various lands and scattered among

<sup>61</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 175.

<sup>62</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 268.

<sup>63</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 269.

<sup>64</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 177.

many peoples. There is one church, one communion, one people of God, of which Christ is the prince and leader, the head of the body».<sup>65</sup>

In contrast, the *visible* church is the church of fallible human beings who, looking at their sins and failures, can never be certain to belong to the invisible church. However, their lives in the *vertical* relations in the church and with the world give human beings «some signs or indications by which we may at least have some probability».<sup>66</sup>

Barth points out that these signs are not so much moral impeccability or industriousness, as it has been interpreted in some streams of Calvinism (of which Barth is quite critical).<sup>67</sup> The notes of belonging to God's church are rather «(1) confession of faith, (2) example of life, (3) partaking of the sacraments».<sup>68</sup> Calvin wanted «a truly visible church against the background of the invisible church, a human church that might dare with fear and trembling to equate itself with the invisible, but without being condemned thereby to passivity in this world».<sup>69</sup>

This challenging journey that continuously negotiates two identities requires perseverance. But the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit accompanies the congregation at this pilgrimage. Through the problems and assaults of the present life shines always the thought of the day of the consummation of the «eternal sabbath which is already dawning wherever we rest from all works that are not done by us as the fruit of the Spirit, and will dawn with eternal rest the moment the divine 'then' comes that confronts our human 'then'».<sup>70</sup>

## **“The Holy Spirit Makes Christians, Makes the Church” – The Epicletic Aspect of *Koinonia***

### ***The Many in the One: Christian Liberty***

«What is the Church? The Holy Spirit makes Christians, makes the church».<sup>71</sup> This, for Calvin, was always true, as unlikely as this possibility was, considering the imbecility to which even the most gifted are constantly subject. In the life of the church, the Spirit's presence is, however, not freely available but is guaranteed

<sup>65</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 178.

<sup>66</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 182.

<sup>67</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 179.

<sup>68</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 184.

<sup>69</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 184.

<sup>70</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 172.

<sup>71</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 199.

only by humble attentiveness to the Word. But if the Church pays due attention to the Word, becomes the company of those who are united by Christ and dares to speak out, «this company shall be heard and no other church».<sup>72</sup>

This strong link between the Spirit and the Word gives assurance to the pastors to preach the Word that is not theirs and could never be. In Calvin's understanding, they have authority if they preach the Word. This authority encompasses life in all its dimensions. Pastors are called:

to make all worldly power, glory, and greatness bow to God's majesty and obey it; to rule all, from the highest to the lowest by the Word; to build the household of Christ; to destroy the kingdom of Satan; to feed the sheep; to slay the wolves, to admonish and instruct the obedient, to correct and upbraid and oppose the rebellious and arrogant, to loose and to bind them; and finally to deal with them with thunder and lightning; but do all these things with the Word of God, whose spiritual power is different from the bishops as Christ is from Belial.<sup>73</sup>

While this almost sounds like a mandate to establish a spiritual authority with absolute authority, its exercise is limited by the requirement to be always attentive to the Word. Once the pastors move away from the Word, they lose their authority. The moment that the people do not bow before the word of God but before something human, the ecclesiastic authority is a deception and illusion.<sup>74</sup> Such an illusion should be challenged.

This possibility creates a paradox in the flow from preaching to hearing. On the one hand, the congregation is strongly admonished to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in the preaching and obey the preached word. But on the other hand, the gathered believers are entrusted to discern whether what the pastor is preaching really is the word of God.

The German theologian Werner Krusche points to Calvin's exegesis on 1 Corinthians 2.15, which summarizes the paradox in which the congregation finds itself: Although «obedience is owed to those who enjoy authority, this obedience ought to be critical. While the *donum interpretationis* (the gift of interpretation) belongs to the office of preaching and teaching, this corresponds on the side of the congregation to the gift of the discernment of the spirits, the *spiritus discretionis*,

<sup>72</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 199.

<sup>73</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 198.

<sup>74</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 198, cf. also 206.

which grants the ability to test all doctrines against the *lapis lydius* – the Holy Scripture – which allows judgement about right and false teaching».<sup>75</sup>

### ***The One in the Many: Discipline***

This dialogical concept of the truth could lead to the assumption that there were two truths: The truth of the Holy Spirit in the letter of Scripture and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer.<sup>76</sup> But time and again, Calvin emphasizes that these two expressions are one and must not be divided. What Calvin sees happening in the reception of the preached word in the heart of the believer is a conversation of the Spirit with itself,<sup>77</sup> which leads to ever-growing clarity in the understanding of God's call.

This greater clarity must become visible in the *vertical* and *horizontal* relations of the people of God. For Calvin, conflicts and divisions are a clear indication that the Holy Spirit is not at work. The church, therefore, needs instruments that foster holiness and unity. Calvin, thus, strongly emphasizes the need for church discipline that also includes the right of the congregation to excommunicate.

Discipline is an instrument of the visible church and does not mean that the punished had fallen from God's hands, as long as they had not openly condemned God's word.<sup>78</sup> Discipline is based on the confidence that God can change the worst of people into the best. It is «essential (a) lest anything unworthy be imputed to Christians to the dishonoring of God, as though his holy church were a conspiracy of law breakers and openly ungodly people. (b) in order that the bad example of such people should not corrupt others by their accepted presence, and (c) in order that by being put to shame, such people should repent and make a public confession».<sup>79</sup>

Barth quotes Calvin's conclusion: «We are not to condemn others. Their persons are in God's hands. From our part, we can only evaluate their deeds by the standard of the law of God, that is the rule of the good and the bad. Our purpose with the excommunicated, then, is simply to motivate them to bring forth better fruits and hence to return to the society and unity of the Church».<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1957), 325. Translation by the author.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 167.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 159.

<sup>78</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 187.

<sup>79</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 185.

<sup>80</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 186.

### ***The Church and the World***

This emphasis on covenant and discipline could lead to the misunderstanding that Calvin would see a «continuous path that leads step by step from an earthly city of God to the kingdom of heaven».<sup>81</sup> For Calvin, the divine was always divine and the human always human. His political ethics, therefore, were not a programme or a system of direction that would provide the Church with the final word: «do this and do not that».<sup>82</sup> Thus, every political decision requires the discernment of God's command.

This applies to rulers and those being ruled alike. Calvin's aim is not the founding and establishing of an ideal state, but he wants to demonstrate God's will in the orders that exist.<sup>83</sup> The point of civil order «is to integrate our life so long as we live among others, into human society, to frame our ways of life according to justice, to make us mutually responsible for one another, to nourish and to cherish peace and tranquility».<sup>84</sup> The civil order also entails the protection of true religion, which includes ensuring that there is no idolatry and no blasphemy against the truth of God.

These provisions already indicate Calvin's emphatical affirmation of the state. He makes clear that the Bible does not merely recognize authorities but eulogizes them. This dignity means for public officials that they have authority not of their own making, but according to a divine mandate that is defined by God's law.<sup>85</sup> The citizens have to obey, but as in the relation to their pastors, they also have the *spiritus discretionis* that allows them to discern the actions of the authorities: «When seen in this light, the state must be on the watch for what will become of it when its reality is in all too great contradiction with its claim».<sup>86</sup>

Calvin surely does not establish a right to revolt. Barth, however, observes that

Calvinism was never and nowhere reactionary or merely conservative. In the long run, it always had a reforming, unsettling, and even revolutionary effect on state life, and it did so just because it suppressed and stifled all the usual and most obvious reasons for revolutions and left only the great contrast that what is, that it is the

<sup>81</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 201.

<sup>82</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 205.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 207f.

<sup>84</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 208.

<sup>85</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 210.

<sup>86</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 217.

order of pilgrimage, the humanity that is necessary in all its imperfection, and that over against it, truly over against it, is the celestial country.<sup>87</sup>

## Challenges

Calvin did not develop a comprehensive theology of the synod, but his understanding of Christian liberty gave sufficient direction to the movement of Reformed Churches to establish their synodal traditions.

The Emden Synod (1571) has been a particularly significant step in the development of a synodal theology. The members of the synod gathered in Emden represented the underground churches in the Netherlands under Spanish occupation and refugee congregations from different parts of Europe. The synod can, therefore, be described as the first national synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. But its impact went far beyond the Netherlands. The decisions of the synod were widely distributed and shaped the self-understanding and the presbyterial-synodal church order of the Reformed Churches worldwide.

The letter of invitation, signed by Petrus Dathenus, Johannes Taffinus, and Petrus Colonius, embraced the principle of ‘broader discernment’ as the cornerstone for the emerging Reformed church polity. Calvin’s dialectic of the *donum interpretationis* and the *spiritus discretionis* is clearly recognizable:

God has assigned his gifts to men in such a way that he has not given to individuals the whole fullness, but only a very definite measure and a definite share of these gifts, so that they, joined and united together, enrich each other, and that they are among themselves instruments and, as it were, channels for his goodness and his grace, precisely through the fraternal union of their gifts.

It follows from this: The greater the number of believers who are united among themselves, the richer is the resulting flow of grace for all; just as, in the other case, when they are fragmented and at odds with each other, they deprive each other of the most glorious gift of God.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 216f. If it was ever true, today this statement cannot be maintained any longer. The history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries demonstrates that the Reformed tradition can resource conservative and progressive movements. This development calls for rigorous discernment of the kind that Calvin suggests.

<sup>88</sup> M. Freudenberg and A. Siller, eds., *Emder Synode 1571 – Wesen und Wirkungen eines Grundtextes der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2020) 68f, [[https://www.emder-synode-1571.de/Das\\_Einladungsschreiben\\_zur\\_Emden\\_Synode\\_von\\_1571-26856-0-0-75.html](https://www.emder-synode-1571.de/Das_Einladungsschreiben_zur_Emden_Synode_von_1571-26856-0-0-75.html)], accessed February 27, 2023.

Based on these fundamental principles, the Emden Synod developed a church structure based on the principle of subsidiarity. The design was strictly bottom-up: Since every Christian was seen as gifted by the Holy Spirit, the central body of the Church was the gathering of believers in the local congregation. The mandate of every other structure of the church had to be legitimized by the services that it could render to the congregations. In the tradition that developed from Emden, regional, national, and finally global synods held authority not because they were *higher* but because they were *broad*er and brought together representatives of a greater number of believers so that the gathering could witness to the richness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>89</sup>

This structure is tested in today's challenges. I look into crucial moments in the history of the World Communion of Reformed Churches<sup>90</sup> and examine how Reformed theology played out in these situations.

### ***“The Christian Church Can Never Be an End in Itself”***

The founding General Council of the then ‘Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System’ in 1877 explored the suitability of the Presbyterian system to sustain a world body of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. The founding president, Prof. William Blaikie from Edinburgh, praised the potential of the Presbyterian system for its ability to form a global structure. He stated that the possibility for a global body had always been there, even if it had not been implemented before. The new Alliance was a consultative body without jurisdiction over the member churches. Blaikie saw this as an advantage because it allowed churches in conflict with each other to come together in fellowship. In the spirit of the idea of a broader assembly as it was developed in Emden, Blaikie expressed the hope that the new body could demonstrate, «how the elements of true conservatism and legitimate freedom and progress might be adjusted to each other», and added the hope: «that due result of such an alliance

<sup>89</sup> Cf. W. W. J. van Oene, *With Common Consent: A Practical Guide to the Use of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1990), 132.

<sup>90</sup> In the course of its history, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) changed its name several times: *Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian System* (1875–1970), World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational) (1970–2010), World Communion of Reformed Churches (since 2010).

should not be an increase of sectarianism, because Christian brotherhood, as it enlarged in fellowship, enlarged itself». <sup>91</sup>

At the 1954 General Council in Princeton, New Jersey, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches defined its relationship to the emerging ecumenical movement. In his address 'The Witness of the Reformed Churches in the World today', President John MacKay summarized the approach of the Alliance:

The Christian Church can never be an end in itself; it can never become, as it tends to become in one great communion in our time, the fourth member of a quaternity which is added to the classical Trinity. No, the Church is most truly the Church, when it is God's servant, the medium whereby He expresses His redemptive love to mankind and radiates His everlasting light upon the minds and ways of men. This Reformed emphasis needs to be blazoned forth in the present ecumenical situation: no Church can ever be regarded as an end in itself or the master of its members. It is and must ever be instrumental to, and a servant of the will of the Living God. <sup>92</sup>

After World War 2, the World Alliance identified itself by its mission and was reluctant to use ecclesiological language to define its identity. This would change in the 1980s over the conflict of apartheid in South Africa.

### ***Gathered Around the Lord's Table: The Status Confessionis on Apartheid in South Africa***

The central formative moment was the engagement with the apartheid system in South Africa. For Reformed Churches, the injustice of the apartheid system was particularly challenging because racial domination had been conceived and legitimized by Reformed theologians under the continuous endorsement of their churches. For Black Christians in South Africa, apartheid was, therefore, not only a political problem but also raised the question of the integrity of the Christian faith.

At the 1982 General Council in Ottawa, Canada, delegates from black member churches in South Africa challenged the hypocrisy of a General Council where white delegates from South Africa would have table fellowship with the representatives of black churches, but would deny the same at home. They declared that

<sup>91</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Introductory Narrative*, in *Report of proceedings of the first General Presbyterian Council convened in Edinburgh in July 1877*, ed., Thompson, (Edinburgh: Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1877), 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Proceedings of the 17<sup>th</sup> General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian Order*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1954 (Geneva: Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1954), 114.



they could only partake in the celebration of the Supper if the Council would take decisive action against apartheid.

In response to this challenge, the 21<sup>st</sup> General Council declared a *status confessionis* on apartheid and moved that

in certain situations, the confession of the church needs to draw a clear line between truth and error. In faithful allegiance to Jesus Christ, it may have to reject the claims of an unjust and oppressive government and denounce Christians who aid and abet the oppressor. We believe that this is the situation in South Africa today. [...]

Therefore, the General Council declares that this situation constitutes a status confessionis of our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed Churches.

We declare, with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa, that apartheid ("Separate Development") is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.<sup>93</sup>

In declaring a *status confessionis*, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, gathered around the Lord's table, claimed the ecclesial authority to discern the spirits and decide which are from God. In consequence of this claim, the General Council disciplined two Afrikaans-speaking member churches and suspended their privileges of membership in the World Alliance (i.e., sending delegates to General Councils and holding membership in departmental committees and commissions)

until such time as the WARC Executive Committee has determined that these two Churches in their utterances and practice have given evidence of a change of heart.<sup>94</sup>

It is essential to recognize that, in Reformed understanding, a suspension is not an exclusion. As it becomes clear from the proceedings of the Council, the World Alliance did not pronounce a divine judgement on churches or people. Still, it sought to protect the integrity of the conciliar discernment. The Reformed appreciation of diversity reaches its limits when the church feels the need to declare certain positions to be sinful and heretical. Once such a decision has been taken, such positions could no longer be part of the ecclesial discernment.

<sup>93</sup> E. Perret (ed.), *Ottawa 1982: Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational) Held at Ottawa, Canada, August 17-27, 1982*, (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1982), 177f.

<sup>94</sup> Perret, *Ottawa 1982*, 179.

### ***A Koinonia Marked by Discerning, Confessing, Witnessing, and Being Reformed together***

In 2010, the World Alliance united with the Reformed Evangelical Council. The new body took the name “World Communion of Reformed Churches” (WCRC). The adoption of a communion identity was inspired by the trend in the ecumenical language of the time. However, the name change was also the result of an ecclesiological reflection of the evolving confessing identity of the WCRC. After the declaration of the *status confessionis* on apartheid by the Ottawa General Council, the Alliance had worked at an equally authoritative statement on economic justice. This process led to the Accra Confession, adopted by the General Council in 2004.<sup>95</sup>

The debate on the Accra Confession was controversial and rekindled the arguments about the authority of the Alliance and its General Councils. While the Accra Confession had a significant influence on civil society and the ecumenical movement, the reception among the member churches has been much weaker than the drafters of the confession had hoped.

This ambiguous situation raises the question of the status of the document and the ecclesial identity of the WCRC as a communion. In the concept of the Alliance, member churches saw themselves as actors in their own right. The Communion identity of the WCRC, on the other hand, constitutes itself by the broader discernment of the global Communion and claims divine authority for its proclamation and witness.

As a Communion, the WCRC sees itself called to confess the Christian truth according to the Holy Scripture as received in the broader discernment of the global fellowship. In its discernment processes, the World Communion draws from the rich Reformed tradition of the ‘broader discernment’ that the synodal tradition of Emden established to reconcile the One and the Many. The WCRC gratefully embraces the diversity of different and conflicting voices and sees its calling in transforming them into acts of authority in proclamation and witness. Today, the WCRC identifies as a *koinonia* marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed together.

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<sup>95</sup> See the text of the Accra Confession in the Appendix.

## Conclusion

For almost twenty years, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the World Communion of Reformed Churches were not engaged in an official dialogue. However, the developments of the two communions indicate that there was some degree of indirect conversation. The Reformed side embraced *koinonia* ecclesiology. The Orthodox discussed social justice questions and wrestled with the approach to public theology. On a deeper theological level, substantial convergences appeared that call for intensive exploration. Both communions emphasize the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity. Both underscore the epicletic character of the Church. They see themselves in the tradition of the relational order of the early church and have developed their theologies of synodality with emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist. The anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is an opportunity to explore these commonalities, which are often overlooked in the day-to-day business of the ecumenical movement.

Direct or indirect conversation might also be beneficial for both communions to develop their epicletic ecclesiologies to come to terms with the challenge to balance the One and the Many in a climate of increasing polarization. Both traditions struggle to uphold global structures. Both communions have been tempted to strengthen the authoritarian elements in their traditions to repress diversity, even if both sides know that stifling the participation of the Many contradicts the epicletic identity of the church.

Seeing these ecumenical possibilities invites a reflection on how the commemoration of the Council of Nicaea could be transformed into a process to share the learnings from the Nicene tradition that help the churches to address the challenges of today.

# Adiaphora, Subsidiarity, Authority: Being a Communion of Churches

Neal D. Presa

## *Semper* and *Ubique* and the Creedal Communion

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored,  
All rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually  
members of it

— 1 Corinthians 12.26–27 (NRSV)

To be the church is to be a community – in its core, its essence, its purpose, its *raison d'être*. The apostle Paul's letter to the church at Corinth is premised on the interdependent, interlocking, interrelatedness of not only individual believers one to another in one congregation, or in one city, but also their connectedness to the network of other worshipping communities in other cities. In liturgical studies, high sacramental churches describe eucharistic liturgies and practices as *semper et ubique*, or «always and everywhere». This claims that the words, rubrics, and practices follow in continuity with the early church communities of the first four centuries. This also describes that the apostolic doctrine manifested in those liturgies, by extension, are common, or ought to be commonplace by all of God's people always and everywhere.

This volume commemorates the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The creedal statement whose provenance was the council in AD 325 ended its three-paragraph descriptor of the triune God with the simple phrase, «And the Holy Spirit» connected to *Crediditum*, «We believe». In three brief sections, mirroring

the Trinitarian persons who subsist as the one living God, the Creed of AD 325 abruptly ends with the unambiguous, unequivocal affirmation that early worshipping communities confessed in the Holy Spirit. And in doing so, worshipping communities recognized the apostolic witness as essentializing the personhood, power, and presence of the Holy Spirit as a person of the triune God community, one-in-three, three-in-one. The Creed also asserted believers' connectivity with the triune God through each person of the Trinity. So that when the Creed took on its present form from the AD 381 council, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan version expanded the third section to describe the church as being «one, holy, catholic, and apostolic» in connection with the Holy Spirit. The Creed, then, manifests the early church communities' understanding, confession, and essential significance of the interrelatedness of the church's *raison d'être* with the Holy Spirit.

Linking the church and to the Holy Spirit speaks to the time-space character of the triune God and of the church's being and witness – that the Holy Spirit is immanent in and transcendent of time and space, the Holy Spirit's ministry is always, everywhere, or *semper et ubique*. When the AD 381 version of the Nicene Creed, therefore, describes the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, which is a further expansion of the third century Apostles' Creed in its descriptor of the church as «communion of saints», the lynchpin is the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity connects the church's witness in the present to the witness of God's people in all times and in every place. It is the Holy Spirit's present ministry among believers in any context that connects those communities of believers, in a sacramental and real way, to all of God's people in every time and in every place.

## The Holy Spirit and Sacramental Communion

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin saw the critical nature of the Holy Spirit as the one who connects us to Christ, particularly in that part of the Eucharistic celebration, the *Sursum Corda* («Lift up your hearts»), where the responsive litany is:

Pastor/Priest: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you (or And with your spirit)

Pastor/Priest: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up to the Lord.

That portion of the Lord's Table liturgy is the pivot point because there the Holy Spirit connects the assembled people of God with the living, ascended Christ. In doing so, God's people participate in Christ's resurrected life, and, through the resurrected Christ, to all of God's people in every time and in every place. Calvin wrote:

And, indeed, there is no need of this, in order to our partaking of it, since the Lord by his Spirit bestows upon us the blessing of being one with him in soul, body, and spirit. The bond of that connection, therefore, is the Spirit of Christ, who unites us to him, and is a kind of channel by which everything that Christ has and is, is derived to us. For if we see that the sun, in sending forth its rays upon the earth, to generate, cherish, and invigorate its offspring, in a manner transfuses its substance into it, why should the radiance of the Spirit be less in conveying to us the communion of his flesh and blood? Wherefore the Scripture, when it speaks of our participation with Christ, refers its whole efficacy to the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Calvin goes on to amplify the time-space connectivity, that because of the Holy Spirit's immanent-transcendent character, the ministration of participation for God's people in one time and place is connected, through Christ, to all, *semper et ubique*:

For though he withdrew his flesh from us, and with his body ascended to heaven, he, however, sits at the right hand of the Father; that is, he reigns in power and majesty, and the glory of the Father. This kingdom is not limited by any intervals of space, nor circumscribed by any dimensions. Christ can exert his energy wherever he pleases, in earth and heaven, can manifest his presence by the exercise of his power, can always be present with his people, breathing into them his own life, can live in them, sustain, confirm, and invigorate them, and preserve them safe, just as if he were with them in the body. [...] <sup>2</sup>

We can readily see how Calvin's Eucharistic theology expresses the apostle Paul's exhortation that Corinthian believers ought to recognize their own participation in the suffering and in the rejoicing of fellow believers. Noteworthy is the fact that the apostle's pastoral call to believers about unity, caring for one another, attending to their ethical life as a community – that all of this is connected to his description of and exhortations concerning the celebration of the Lord's Table in 1 Corinthians 11.17–33. Thus, we see how the ongoing ministry of Christ, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is *semper et ubique*. Therefore, their work and witness

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.17.12

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.18

upon and in the church is to connect God's people, yes, to the triune community of the living God, and through God the Holy Spirit, to all of God's people in every time and in every place.

## **From Alliance to Communion: The WCRC's Ecclesial Shift**

When in 2007 I had the privilege of being a member of the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), the predecessor body of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the change of name from 'Alliance' to 'Communion' was an intentional decision that was both aspirational, descriptive, and sacramentally strategic. Gathered at Tunapuna, Trinidad, the executive committee wrestled with what to name this fellowship of churches as the Alliance was in prayerful discussions with the Reformed Ecumenical Council to merge. Consequently, of course, the uniting General Council in 2010 birthed the new organization, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The debate and discussion at the executive committee had more to do about ecclesiology than about a mere cosmetic change. In its aspiration, the new organization sought to be not individual churches who decided individually to band together for common cause – as an alliance would be – but rather bound together, connected to one another. The executive committee also sought to describe the reality of what the church is. The church, at its core, is a community of believers whom the living God joins together. It is not a voluntary association, like one is joining a social club, but rather, there is a divine intentionality and divine action in what God calls together to form a community of churches. And then there was the sacramentally strategic character of the nomenclature. To shift from being an alliance of churches to being a communion of churches signaled the strategic move to bind churches' together for what we confess ourselves to be: God's people in the Reformed tradition who covenant with one another and with God and with all of God's people in every time and in every place. That is, a relationship with those in the Reformed tradition and in the wider Christian traditions – and beyond ourselves, to our common humanity, and with God's creation – for the flourishing of all. The universal application of the name – "communion" from "alliance" – is anchored to the particular specification of the tradition – Reformed – and how the communion of churches understood that our Reformed theological traditions and the wider Christian tradition connect us

one to another, and to all of God's people in every time and in every place, precisely because of the sacramental work of the triune God. It is the triune God who unites us to all of God's people in every time and in every place, and to all of creation. It was the then WARC Vice President for Latin America, The Rev. Dr. Prof. Ofelia Meriam Ortega, from the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba, who, after hearing the executive committee discuss multiple variations and combinations of names, asked, «Aren't we saying we are the World Communion of Reformed Churches?» It is noteworthy, that it was four years prior at WARC's 24<sup>th</sup> General Council (2004) in Accra where the *Accra Confession* operationalized the core priority, «Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth» as the Alliance and, consequently, the Communion, understood its purpose and existence as covenanting for the purpose of justice.<sup>3</sup> In other words, churches coming together to covenant with God, with one another, with humanity, and with the whole earth that we would work and pray for a world that is more just, equitable, and where all flourish.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches sees the essential work of the Holy Spirit in living out covenantal commitments to being a communion in the contemporary Reformed understanding of the sacramentality of the church, God's justice, and, their linkage with God's work of justification and sanctification in Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> The work of justification «will make possible and lead to the fruits of virtuous action» and the lifelong journey of sanctification in deepening and making more consistent the manifesting of faith.<sup>5</sup> The Holy Spirit uses the means of the church's ministry of word and sacrament to enable the work of justification and sanctification in the life of believers, both personally and communally.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the «reality of justification by faith and sanctification impels the Christian community to act on behalf of justice. The imperative for justice flows necessarily from justification and from the call of the whole Church to holiness».<sup>7</sup>

We as Christian believers who confess the Nicene Creed as an ecumenical expression of our faith, and we who are Reformed Christians who are part of the

<sup>3</sup> See the text of the *Accra Confession* in the appendix.

<sup>4</sup> «Justification and Sacramentality: The Christian Community as an Agent for Justice» Report of the Fourth Phase of Catholic-Reformed International Dialogue (2011-2015), paras 77-79, World Communion of Reformed Churches / Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitalcristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/alleanza-mondiale-delle-chiese-riformate/dialogo-internazionale-cattolico-riformato/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese.html>

<sup>5</sup> «Justification and Sacramentality,” para 77.

<sup>6</sup> «Justification and Sacramentality,” para 78.

<sup>7</sup> «Justification and Sacramentality,” para 79.



WCRC, see that *being* a communion of churches shapes and informs how, why, and for what we are *becoming* a communion of churches. The ontological nature of the church as being anchored to its very identity as called out by the living God to be a «communion of saints» who are connected to the Holy Spirit means that we are already one, holy, catholic, and apostolic because the living God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is themselves one (one God), is holy (in character), is catholic (is everywhere and for all), and is apostolic (sent to the world). But *being* is distinct, though related, from *becoming*. Analogously, my wife and I say we were married 23 years ago, at a certain city, on a certain day, at a certain time. The intervening 23 years since then and in the years to come are about becoming married. Likewise, it is one thing to inaugurate the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2010 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or to birth the Nicene Creed in AD 325. It is a whole other matter to become a communion of Reformed Churches today and tomorrow, as it has been of becoming one, holy, catholic, and apostolic since AD 325/381.

## **Adiaphora, Subsidiarity, Authority: A Triangulated Praxis**

In 2008, the Anglican Communion was at a pivotal point in their life of living into what it means to be a communion of churches. The Lambeth Conference convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury sought a way forward as the Anglican Communion was experiencing the fractures and fissures of their communal life under the pressure of vehement disagreements of Anglican churches around human sexuality, the consecration of bishops who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and same gender marriages. Representing the WARC as an ecumenical guest was The Rev. Dr. Prof. Iain Torrance, who was then the president of Princeton Theological Seminary and a former moderator of the Church of Scotland. After participating in and listening to the various small group and plenary presentations at the Lambeth gathering, Torrance was asked to report what he had seen and heard. He observed, what Anglican bishop N.T. Wright had noted elsewhere, that the Anglican Communion was seeking to navigate the way forward with the interlocking dimensions of adiaphora, subsidiarity, and authority.<sup>8</sup> Here, Torrance proposed that the ‘triangu-

<sup>8</sup> Anglican Communion, “Iain Torrance: Comments, final plenary, Lambeth Conference, 3 August 2008,” accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/me->

lation' of these realities was a matter about governance, or becoming a communion, rather than a focus on human sexuality *per se*.

Adiaphora are those matters of practice or belief that are regarded as 'non-essential', as not being explicitly forbidden nor restricted by Scripture. Subsidiarity is a principle of governance that understands that the location to best carry out an action is at the lowest level possible for maximal efficacy rather than a higher authority where abstractions and ambiguity can occur. With respect to the Lambeth Conference, specifically, and governance generally, the question of authority relates to the right to make decisions, recognition of the decision and the decision-makers, and the recognized legitimacy of both. Torrance went on to prescribe a humble avenue: becoming a communion around covenant. He averred:

A covenant is different. As all of you know, covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures begins with the unconditional promise of God's love. And who can come close to God and not be changed? So, a covenant is an initiative undertaken by transformed persons in response to a gift of unmerited grace.<sup>9</sup>

Torrance concluded his observations by drawing upon his scholarship in patristic studies:

Finally, over the last two weeks my mind has constantly gone back to St Cyprian, the great African theologian who was martyred in the mid third century. Near the end of his life, Cyprian fought to keep the church from schism. In his foundational treatise *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, chapter 5, writing about the authority of the episcopate, he said: «The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each bishop for the whole (For the whole): the Latin is (in solidum)». Now, recovery of that African sense of authority held on behalf of the whole is at the heart of covenant and the well-being of the Communion.<sup>10</sup>

Fifteen years after the inauguration of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and 1700 years after the Council of Nicaea, we are seeking to be a communion of churches in which we recognize «for the whole», or the current conversation around «synodality» concerns the triangulated dimensions of authority, adiaphora, and subsidiarity as we govern ourselves and have our life together primarily through councils and deliberative bodies. Even in the life of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we have the septennial (or sometimes octennial) gathering of the General Council as the highest governing

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dia/107098/iascer-resolutions-arising-from-the-2008-meeting.pdf

<sup>9</sup> Anglican Communion, "Iain Torrance: Comments," 90–91.

<sup>10</sup> Anglican Communion, "Iain Torrance: Comments," 91.

body of the Communion where delegates from all member churches discern the will and mind of Christ together for our times. Those same member churches gather in their respective national assemblies as they discern the will and mind of the Lord in their contexts, being mindful and heartfelt of various factors that will influence and shape decisions. Member churches consider, for example, the relationships and decisions of other member churches and councils of churches, various civic stakeholders, and the teachings of our faith through Scripture, creedal and confessional statements, and theological writings. Yet, when decisions are made, we then hope and trust that the interlocking dimensions of adiaphora, authority, and subsidiarity, don not fracture institutions and decision-making processes where particular decisions that are regarded as ‘adiaphora’ (important but not covenant-breaking) may be regarded by some others as being essential.

In our Reformed theological traditions, we see the adiaphora-authority-subsidiarity dimensions play out in our covenant life together when it comes to our regard of confessions. Reformed Christians have understood what I called elsewhere, «tethering flexibility»<sup>11</sup> when it comes to how we understand the nature of confessions and the applicability of confessions in our life together. In his 1923 lectures on the theology of the Reformed confessions at the theology faculty in the University of Göttingen, Karl Barth noted several key principles about the nature of Reformed confessions:

1. Confessions emerged from a particular church, in a particular context, in a particular time – such particularity was the pathway to universal ecumenicity, in that while a confession did not explicitly seek ecumenical recognition for its statements, ecumenical appeal was the «quiet and distant goal for which one prayed and for which one ultimately worked»;<sup>12</sup>
2. Each confession is a «singular work». None of the writers of the confessions sought to write a confession for all of the Reformed churches.<sup>13</sup>
3. Confessional unity comes not by doctrinal uniformity in the confessions, but by adherence to the notion that doctrine in the church must be

<sup>11</sup> See Neal Presa, *Here I Am, Lord, Send Me: Ritual and Narrative for a Theology of Presbyterian Ordination in the Reformed Tradition* (Eugene: Resource Publication/Wipf and Stock, 2012)

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 12.

grounded on Scripture, which «defines not the confessional unity but the confessional freedom of the particular churches in their relationships to each other»;<sup>14</sup>

4. Unity would be achieved not from above, as with some sort of «coordinating agency», but through horizontal and parallel relationships where freedom of movement was encouraged and differences were allowed so as to further critique and conversation. Barth noted Calvin's coining of the term *pia conspiratio* (godly compact) to describe the «fraternal and peaceful agreement» that linked the freedom of one another in the Reformed family;<sup>15</sup>
5. One could write, if one were able and capable, one's own confession, but one could not insist that one's own confession was the Reformed position on the matter;<sup>16</sup>
6. Only the early church ecumenical creeds are of a 'higher order' and, thus, no Reformed statement is designated a 'creed' but is called a Confession, Catechism, Consensus, Theses, Declaration, Article, or Summary;<sup>17</sup>

Barth concluded the following on the nature of Reformed confessions:

The Reformed confessions are and desire to be nothing other than mere human confessional acts, over against which the revelation of God in Scripture also stands constantly as a given. [...] They are measures, significant actions, one might even say solemn gestures, carried out by believers or by those chosen by believers for the sake of the good order and edification of the community of God on earth. They are made available for examination, to prove themselves, and for discussion. They bear the marks of the occasional, of relatedness to a specific time and situation, of the unique. [...] They are all emergency measures, temporary bridges upon which one can proceed, necessitated by the 'rationale of the times' (*temporum ratione*), without really being certain whether or not they will end in thin air.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 13. At this point, Barth noted how sixteenth-century Reformed communities were labeled as 'Confessionists' (*Confessionistae*) because of the many personal and local confessions; the Reformed were content to be labeled as such. Barth further noted how Calvin's imposition of the French Confession of 1559 upon the French church was not akin to the Pope's will being imposed but that it was rather a «fraternal and friendly form of help from church to church» at 13.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 20, 37.

## Confessional Life to Covenant: From Belhar to Barmen

What is the nature of the confessions in the Reformed tradition? The late Jack Stotts, former president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, wrote that the Reformed tradition holds to an ‘open’ rather than a ‘closed’ confessional tradition. He summarized:

A closed tradition holds a particular statement of beliefs to be adequate for all times and places. An open tradition anticipates that what has been confessed in a formally adopted confession takes its place in a confessional lineup, preceded by statements from the past and expectant of more to come as times and circumstances change. Thus, the Reformed tradition—itsself a wide river with many currents—affirms that, for it, developing and adopting confessions is indeed an obligation, not option. [...] This “occasional” nature of a Reformed confession is as well a reminder that statements of faith are always subordinate in authority to scripture.<sup>19</sup>

We can readily detect the connection of Barth’s thoughts on the nature of confessions and Torrance’s thoughts on covenant and the nexus of authority-subsidiarity. The provisional nature of confessions means that the community (or communion) of churches has discerned the will and mind of Christ for a particular time, a specific matter, a distinct context and applies the witness of the inherited faith of the Gospel to come to bear upon that matter in that context for that time. There is an inherent reliance that such a confession of faith will have resonance with other parts of the body of Christ, which may likely find a salutary word for their own particular context and similar matters, even if the time may be distant. Thus, we in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example, adopted and incorporated the Confession of Belhar into our *Book of Confessions* more than 30 years after the Belhar Confession’s adoption. Such authority to author, adopt, and promulgate a confession occurs because the community of believers understands the sacred nature of the interconnectedness of speaking on behalf of the whole, but not necessarily having a binding authority for all times and in every place. The statements of faith are beneficial and carry great weight insofar as they are being received from fellow believers who have painstakingly prayed, discussed, debated, and communicated the message of the Gospel for their time and context, often at great cost to their own welfare and life. The powerful efficacy of confessions as concrete expressions

<sup>19</sup> Jack L. Stotts, “Introduction: Confession After Barmen” in *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* by Jan Rohls, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), xi.

of covenant comes from the act of confessing itself i.e., the nature of confessions as intentional acts of witnessing to the faith, and the reliance upon the Holy Spirit to connect believers in one part of the body to believers in another part of the body.

When we as Reformed Christians recognize confessions and seek to apply confessions to our life together, we do so out of a sense of a covenantal commitment to one another, to live into the 1 Corinthians 12.26 exhortation «If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.» Covenant-making and covenant-keeping are serious, sacred acts that ought not be entered into lightly. As with marital vows, establishing and living into covenantal promises as a communion of churches requires intentionality, communication, and a daily dependence upon the grace of God, who is the substance, giver, and partner of the covenant. That covenant promises are entered into and lived into in the sight of the living God, means we ultimately stand under the judgment of the living God, whose mercies are abundant, and whose grace in Jesus Christ reminds us that such judgment is met with grace. But such grace does not excuse capricious commitments nor lackluster obedience nor willful disregard of covenant commitments. Quite the opposite (Rom 6.1–2). Rather, God's grace in Christ, the one who gave his own life for the life of the world, impels us to act with joyful obedience. And through that joyful obedience towards God's covenant promises for a world that is reconciled in God's love, the church as a whole and in its parts, acts to enact God's promises. But in doing so, the church leans upon and depends on the gracious mercy of God, who stands as both judge and savior lest the church become dispassionately callous on the one hand, or capriciously haphazard and neglectful on the other. Rather, the church strives to live into the covenant commitment as best as the church can, living in, with, and under the grace of God, seeking to discern God's work and God's call.

That is how we as a communion of Reformed churches largely and wholly, though not unanimously, condemned apartheid in South Africa and adopted the Confession of Belhar in solidarity with many Reformed Christians in South Africa, and we in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) followed suit in 2016. Likewise, the Theological Declaration of Barmen was a covenantal statement of those churches who authored and were signatories to it even at the point of being martyred for their declaration, in the midst of many other churches who rejected its premise and statement. Yet, decades after the Second World War, in the intervening years, and in our time with the rise of Christian nationalism and authoritarian regimes, the notion of covenanting for justice and truth becomes much needed in the years to come.

How do we live into becoming more of a communion of churches where the joys and struggles of siblings in the faith in one part of the world become the joys and struggles of siblings in the faith in another part of the world? How does the authority for discernment and the authority of decision-making over matters that might be regarded as *adiaphora* for one but is a matter of material significance and a literal matter of life and death for a whole lot of others become the basis for common witness and finding our life together? What does it mean to covenant whereby that which is implemented at a local or regional level (subsidiarity) account for the decision-making guidance and authority of higher governing bodies, and how do higher governing bodies like a General Council dignify and give due regard to the discernment and decisions of local and regional governing bodies so that there is mutuality in governance?

Two theologians – Lukas Vischer and Peter Opitz – writing/speaking nearly a quarter century apart, proposed similar themes of what it means to live in, with, and by covenant as a communion of churches. At the WARC 22<sup>nd</sup> General Council (1989) in Seoul, Lukas Vischer gave an address titled “Living in and Under God’s Covenant.”<sup>20</sup> Vischer asked the pointed question: «But what is the point of all these ecumenical efforts when the Reformed churches pay so little attention to fellowship among themselves?» He went on to propose that in response to and in connection with God’s covenant, we need to become a «fellowship of confessing churches» where we listen to one another’s confessions, where he likened it to being as like «one string of an instrument, a string which to be sure has its own distinctive sound but which must be attuned to the other strings so as to bring out their harmony». We are to become «a fellowship of missionary churches» in which we are aware of one another’s circumstance and conditions. We are to become «a fellowship of living communication» in which there is «regular exchange and communication among the Reformed churches a living reality» (of course he could not have imagined then what the internet would be and the consequent Digital Age). We are to become «a fellowship of praise» where «we assign the dimension of worship its due place in the life of the Church».

Then in 2013, Swiss Reformed theologian Peter Opitz, wrote about the contemporary application of Calvin’s vision for the church as the visible manifestation of what is confessed as «communion of saints» anchored in the celebration of the

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<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to my colleague and friend, Professor Dirk Smit of Princeton Theological Seminary, for directing my attention to Professor Vischer’s address.

Lord's Table.<sup>21</sup> Opitz saw Calvin raising the key dimensions of what it meant to be «communion of saints» as: «a confessional community, a teaching and learning community, and the real coexistence of Genevan society as a social community.» The first two – that being a confessional body and a teaching-learning community – are axiomatic and go without saying. The church as a covenantal community commits itself to confessing faith in Christ as we do so through the ecumenical creeds and the various catechisms, confessions, and declarations of faith in the Reformed theological traditions. To the third, of attending to the «real coexistence of Genevan society as a social community,» here Opitz found in Calvin a desire for the Reformed church in Geneva to bear witness in word and in deed to the care for refugees and those in need, to offer hospitality to neighbors and strangers alike; that by doing so, the church was living out what was being confessed in action at the Lord's Table. Opitz cited Calvin's word on the matter this way: «But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe».<sup>22</sup>

It bears repeating, and in doing so, in underlining the Reformed understanding of covenant and communion. The parties of the covenant of faith are God and humanity, in an asymmetrical partnership; God is God and we are not. The living God establishes promises and commitments with humanity, who, in turn respond through worship and service. That God's love is steadfast, constant, and consistent, and we as human beings are wounded, broken, and sinful, we are always in need of God's grace and mercy. The ultimate and complete fulfillment of God's covenant is God's self, whose steadfast promise ensures that what God says will be accomplished. «Even the stones will shout», so attests Luke 19.40, because the Gospel writers hold fast to the sure and certain promise that God will ensure that God's Word will be proclaimed, if even granite boulders will speak, or even Balaam's donkey will utter a salvific word. This means, then, that the covenant of faith, whose provenance is the living God, is on God's terms from its inception, to implementation, to fulfillment. Therefore, we as human beings are responsible for living out the covenant of faith, seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowerment. This also means that all the while we are trusting that our Lord Jesus Christ fulfills the covenant, and, in Christ, there is no longer any condemnation (Rom 8:1, 34).

<sup>21</sup> Opitz, "Calvin's Interpretation of the Church as the 'Communion of Saints': A Challenge and Opportunity for Contemporary Reformed Churches" in *Calvin Today*, ed. Michael Welker, et al. (London: T&T Clark, 2011) 232–250.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.30 quoted in Opitz, "Calvin's Interpretation of the Church," 250.



## **Living the Covenant Today: Lessons from San José**

In my current call as executive presbyter of the Presbytery of San José, one of 166 regional governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we are attending to the life and witness of 37 congregations, worshipping communities, fellowships, and affiliated non-profit entities in three counties in northern California. Entering my second year into this call, I learned quickly the interesting decision-making dynamics of this presbytery, whose bounds include Silicon Valley, the birth place of the Digital Age and social media revolution, and the global headquarters of Zoom™ and Microsoft Teams™. One of the key goals of the search committee which called me was to cultivate community among a community of churches and pastors who are two hours away from the northernmost congregation to the southernmost, and, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the presbytery gathered as a governing body four times a year in hybrid session, i.e., in-person at the host congregation with the option to join via Zoom videoconference. I soon found that 95 per cent of the decisions were being made by the various committees (which meet on-line) during the intervening weeks and months before quarterly presbytery meetings, and so that by the time of the quarterly presbytery meetings, presbytery then became a two-hour slog of reports that were already printed for all to read, PowerPoint presentations from various church representatives whose information were readily available on websites, and decisions of big items that constitutionally required the presbytery to act as a whole. It became apparent that the attendance at the in-person meeting was low and that people opted to meet via Zoom, or not attend at all.

## **Toward a Missional Communion for the Future**

What our presbytery began to implement this year changed the way we understand who we are and who we are becoming. With 95 per cent of business that required votes already made by our various committees which met via Zoom, we saw that we didn't need four business meetings, we just needed two. So, we re-fashioned it so that the presbytery met via Zoom only twice – once in the Winter and once in the Fall – and limited the meeting to no more than two hours and restricted the business to only those items that needed vote. There were no outside presentations, no outside groups offering their latest events or promoting their particular affinity

causes; those twice a year, two-hour meetings were restricted to resolutions and items of business that our governance documents required a vote on. Of course, meetings were opened and closed with prayer. We then established two in-person gatherings for the purpose of nurturing, educating, advocating, and resourcing, thus the abbreviation (NEAR). At each of the two NEAR gatherings – one in the Spring and one in the Fall – there were educational opportunities to be nurtured in one's ministry, vocation, and Christian life. These NEAR gatherings are hosted by one of our congregations – one in the northern part of the presbytery and one in the southern part of the presbytery – and these are in-person, with breakfast and lunch, worship, prayer, celebration of the Lord's Table, hearing and learning from outside speakers, panel discussions, town-hall conversations, networking, and mission fair exhibits. In fact, at a recent NEAR gathering held at First Presbyterian Church in Monterey, California, we confessed sections of the Barmen Declaration and the Accra Confession in morning worship following a homily by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who attended as our guest preacher and keynote speaker. In other words, NEAR gatherings are for edifying the body of Christ, strengthening our common faith and witness, not with votes and items of business, but through the community coming together, to learn together, to be with one another. It's also a time and space to share about one another's local ministries, to pray with and for one another, to hear testimonies from mission partners, to learn about ministries happening in national and global contexts, and to do so in the spirit of faith, hope, and love. The key with the NEAR gatherings is that they are practical theology in action, open to all in our congregations, where participants don't have to be ordained ministers or elders but anyone in the congregation and community can attend. NEAR gatherings are intended so that those who attend can return to their local church communities and to their homes, workplaces, school, and communities and put into action what they saw, heard, and learned, and in doing so, be strengthened in their Christian life and witness.

That is what being a communion of churches that 'perseveres in witness' is about: becoming more and more the people of God who love and serve, who worship and witness, who praise and pray, who decide and discern, who attend to the local-national-global dimensions of life. And who do so for the sake of and in service to the living God through Christ in the fellowship of the Spirit.

## Implications for Churches Today: Summary & Practical Take-Aways

1. The triune God establishes relationship with humanity and all of creation (covenant).
2. We respond to God's relating to us through worship and service.
3. The Holy Spirit connects us in relationship with the triune God and with all of God's people in every time and in every place.
4. The Nicene Creed and successive confessions in the Reformed traditions matter because they are about God, the Gospel, and the church's faithful response.
5. The Creed, and successive statements of faith, offer a witness of faith from and because of a particular context, with the hope that it speaks on behalf of and for the benefit of the whole body of Christ.
6. To belong to the church is to be in relationship with all of God's people in every place and in every time (covenant communion).
7. Flourishing in communion relationship means living in community with one another.
8. Community is marked by love, manifested through communication, mutual learning, seeking to understand one another, praying with and for one another, sharing of resources for common cause and mission.
9. Councils of churches are not only about decision-making. Like the NEAR gatherings of the Presbytery of San José, they are communities of faith for community worship, praying, networking, learning, sharing about God's mission in local and global contexts.
10. Community worship should include prayers, liturgies, confessions of faith from a variety of sources and context so as to connect the local, gathered community with the wider expression of the body of Christ. Include testimonials from mission groups, ecumenical and overseas guests, video conference testimonials from those serving in other contexts.
11. In the Presbytery of San José, we used a Paschal candle (which we called the Presbytery Unity Candle) that travels from one congregation to another each week. We publish where the candle is going for the upcoming week so that all congregations and worshipping communities in the presbytery pray for the host congregation and the pastoral leadership of that congre-

gation, and in this way the whole presbytery is aware of one another as being in community. And because the host congregation needs to pass the Unity Candle to the next congregation in the queue, someone from that congregation needs to be in contact with the pastor, an elder, or staff member from the next congregation to arrange for the hand-off, similar to the Olympic torch going from one runner to the next.

12. Living into what it means to be a covenant community takes intentionality, communication, collaboration, prayer, love, and reliance upon the Holy Spirit to engender in the heart and mind of God's people that we belong to one another, and, therefore, we matter to one another.



# An Orthodox View on Nicaea and the New Culture of Synodality

*Job Getcha*

Church life in the first centuries of Christianity was, above all, the experience of a local community gathered around its bishop. As a result, any questions that might arise within this community were resolved within the local church, assembled around its legitimate bishop. Ignatius of Antioch testifies to this practice in his letter to the Smyrnaeans, where he states:

See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, during this very early period of ecclesiastical history, the election of the bishop was also carried out within the local church, as witnessed by Apostolic Tradition and the Apostolic Constitutions.<sup>2</sup>

However, with the growth of Christianity within the Roman Empire, things changed. Indeed, the multiplication of schisms and heresies forced the church to

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans* VIII. 1–2, in *Ignace d'Antioche: Lettres*, ed. and trans. Robert-Émile Aubry (Sources Chrétiennes 10; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1946), SC 10, 139.

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: *Apostolic Tradition*, I. 2, SC11bis, in *La Tradition Apostolique*, ed. and trans. Bernard Botte, Sources Chrétiennes 11bis (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1984), 26–27; *Apostolic Constitutions*, VIII. 4, 2–3, in *Les Constitutions Apostoliques*, ed. and trans. Marcel Metzger, Sources Chrétiennes 336 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), SC 336, 141–143.

take joint decisions, even if only on a regional scale. Indeed, the ancient practice of the local assembly did not prevent a bishop from falling into heresy or from being capable of creating a schism within the church. Moreover, how could a local assembly ensure that the decisions made by the bishop in his eparchy were respected in neighboring eparchies?

Since each local church is the local manifestation of the «one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church», it was necessary that all local Churches profess the same faith and observe the same canonical order.<sup>3</sup> Following the persecutions and the appearance of the first schisms and heresies, it became urgent to resolve doctrinal and disciplinary questions by common agreement. It was then deemed necessary to bring together the bishops of the same region in a council to debate questions of faith and order and to make joint decisions so that concord would prevail among the local Churches. However, these councils did not constitute a permanent institution of the church, but rather a one-off event, intended to respond to a problem that had arisen which threatened the unity of the church as a whole.

Thus, in AD 314, a council gathered in Ancyra (present-day Ankara, Turkey) a dozen of bishops representing the regions of Syria and Asia Minor to discuss the problems caused by the persecutions that had just ceased after the *Edict of Milan* (AD 313). It had to deal with such questions as: What to do with the priests and deacons who had offered sacrifices to idols? What to do with the faithful who had behaved like pagans? Faced with these problems, which were common to all the local Churches, the church had to adopt a common position.

Shortly after, a second synod was convened at Neocaesarea in Pontus (northern Turkey) between AD 314 and AD 319 to legislate on the morals of the clergy. For example, it was decided to prohibit priests from marrying after ordination and to refuse ordination to a man married to an adulterous woman. Similarly, it was established that no one could be ordained to the priesthood before the age of thirty. Again, for all these matters, a common agreement was necessary on the part of all the local Churches, because one could not follow a practice contrary to that of another.

The major problem that shook the church at the beginning of the fourth century was the Arian controversy. It was a story of profound disunity and disagreement among Christians that continued for decades, a story of competing councils, of mutual excommunications and ongoing instability. Thus, it affected the unity of the

<sup>3</sup> See the text of *The Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed* in the appendix.

Roman Empire as well, and for this reason, the Roman Emperor Constantine had to take appropriate measures.

Concerned about the unity of the church in order to preserve the unity of the empire, Constantine gathered between 200 and 250 bishops<sup>4</sup> in his palace at Nicaea in Bithynia (present-day Iznik in Turkey) to discuss these questions and find an agreement. To this end, he placed all the services of the empire (including transport and accommodation) at the disposal of the bishops so that they could find a solution among themselves and put an end to the divisions. The Council started on 20 May of AD 325 and lasted until the end of July of the same year. A contemporary of the council, the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius of Caesarea who died in AD 339, gives testimony to this in his biography of Constantine:

Now when the appointed day arrived on which the council met for the final solution of the questions in dispute, each member was present for this in the central building of the palace, which appeared to exceed the rest in magnitude. On each side of the interior of this were many seats disposed in order, which were occupied by those who had been invited to attend, according to their rank. As soon, then, as the whole assembly had seated themselves with becoming orderliness, a general silence prevailed, in expectation of the emperor's arrival. And first of all, three of his immediate family entered in succession, then others also preceded his approach, not of the soldiers or guards who usually accompanied him, but only friends in the faith. And now, all rising at the signal which indicated the emperor's entrance, at last he himself proceeded through the midst of the assembly, like some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendor of gold and precious stones. Such was the external appearance of his person; and with regard to his mind, it was evident that he was distinguished by piety and godly fear. [...] As soon as he had advanced to the upper end of the seats, at first he remained standing, and when a low chair of wrought gold had been set for him, he waited until the bishops had beckoned to him, and then sat down, and after him the whole assembly did the same.<sup>5</sup>

One can imagine that such a scene was somewhat unusual, even surprising, for the majority of the bishops present, some of whom still bore the scars of the imperial persecutions of Christians. Although convened at the expense of the empire, the Council of Nicaea was not a purely imperial council, in the sense that the decisions

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ernst Honnigmann, "The Original Lists of the Members of the Council of Nicaea, the Robber-Synod and the Council of Chalcedon," *Byzantion* 16 (1942), 20–80.

<sup>5</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), III, 10.



were taken by the assembled bishops, and not by the emperor himself. Eusebius testifies to this, first quoting Constantine's address to the Council:

It was once my chief desire, dearest friends, to enjoy the spectacle of your united presence; and now that this desire is fulfilled, I feel myself bound to render thanks to God the universal King, because, in addition to all his other benefits, he has granted me a blessing higher than all the rest, in permitting me to see you not only all assembled together, but all united in a common harmony of sentiment. I pray therefore that no malignant adversary may henceforth interfere to mar our happy state; I pray that, now the impious hostility of the tyrants has been forever removed by the power of God our Saviour, that spirit who delights in evil may devise no other means for exposing the divine law to blasphemous calumny; for, in my judgment, intestine strife within the Church of God, is far more evil and dangerous than any kind of war or conflict; and these our differences appear to me more grievous than any outward trouble. [...] And now I rejoice in beholding your assembly; but I feel that my desires will be most completely fulfilled when I can see you all united in one judgment, and that common spirit of peace and concord prevailing among you all, which it becomes you, as consecrated to the service of God, to commend to others. Delay not, then, dear friends: delay not, you ministers of God, and faithful servants of him who is our common Lord and Saviour: begin from this moment to discard the causes of that disunion which has existed among you, and remove the perplexities of controversy by embracing the principles of peace. For by such conduct you will at the same time be acting in a manner most pleasing to the supreme God, and you will confer an exceeding favor on me who am your fellow-servant.<sup>6</sup>

To this, the witness adds:

As soon as the emperor had spoken these words in the Latin tongue, which another interpreted, he gave permission to those who presided in the council to deliver their opinions. On this some began to accuse their neighbors, who defended themselves, and recriminated in their turn. In this manner numberless assertions were put forth by each party, and a violent controversy arose at the very commencement. Notwithstanding this, the emperor gave patient audience to all alike, and received every proposition with steadfast attention, and by occasionally assisting the argument of each party in turn, he gradually disposed even the most vehement disputants to a reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, by convening the Council of Nicaea, Constantine promoted a culture of synodality that implies freedom of expression, listening, debate, and, above all, the pursuit of consensus. This would be the new culture that the Council of Nicaea sought to establish within the church by making it mandatory to convene regional

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III, 13.

synods twice a year, in spring and autumn, as prescribed by the fifth canon of Nicaea which is particularly explicit about the reason for this practice:

Concerning those, whether of the clergy or of the laity, who have been excommunicated in the several provinces, let the provision of the canon be observed by the bishops which provides that persons cast out by some be not readmitted by others. Nevertheless, inquiry should be made whether they have been excommunicated through captiousness, or contentiousness, or any such like ungracious disposition in the bishop. And, that this matter may have due investigation, it is decreed that in every province synods shall be held twice a year, in order that when all the bishops of the province are assembled together, such questions may by them be thoroughly examined, that so those who have confessedly offended against their bishop, may be seen by all to be for just cause excommunicated, until it shall seem fit to a general meeting of the bishops to pronounce a milder sentence upon them. And let these synods be held, the one before Lent, (that the pure Gift may be offered to God after all bitterness has been put away), and let the second be held about autumn.<sup>8</sup>

We see in this resolution that the concern of Nicaea was that the decisions of some bishops (notably on excommunications) should be respected by others, and that these sentences should not have been imposed out of narrow-mindedness, a spirit of contradiction or a feeling of hatred. This contributed greatly to the development of a synodal culture which required bishops to make decisions not individually, but by common agreement.

Following the institution of the provincial synod by the Council of Nicaea, the election of bishops would no longer take place within the local church, by the local assembly, but by regional synods consisting of all the bishops of the province or, in case of necessity, by at least three bishops, with the written consent of those absent, as implied by canon 4 of the Council of Nicaea:

It is by all means proper that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops in the province; but should this be difficult, either on account of urgent necessity or because of distance, three at least should meet together, and the suffrages of the absent [bishops] also being given and communicated in writing, then the ordination should take place. But in every province the ratification of what is done should be left to the Metropolitan.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> P.-P. Joannou, *Discipline Générale Antique*, (Fonti, fasc. 9), vol. I/1 (Rome: Tipografia Italo-Orientale, 1962), 27–28. See the text of *The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nice, in Bithynia* in the appendix.

<sup>9</sup> P.-P. Joannou, *Discipline Générale Antique*, 26.

The principle of synodality promoted by the Council of Nicaea is also remarkably described in canon 34 of the so-called apostolic canons, the composition of which in Antioch does not predate the end of the fourth century:

The bishops of every ethnos [i.e. the population of a particular region] must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent; but each may do those things only which concern his own parish, and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity (*homonoia*), and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The reference here to the Holy Trinity is very significant. It shows that the principle of synodality, which should normally result in a decision taken by consensus, is modeled on the concord that exists between the three divine persons and must reflect harmony and unanimity (*homonoia*). Indeed, the unity of the Triune God is the model of ecclesial unity.

The Council of Nicaea of AD 325 was later recognized by the entire church as the first of a series of seven so-called ‘ecumenical’ councils, all held in the East, between the fourth and eighth centuries. It is a mistake to think that an ecumenical synod was an assembly bringing together all the bishops of the ecumene, that is to say, of the entire inhabited earth. Indeed, not all the bishops, even from the entire Roman Empire, were ever present. These synods were essentially Eastern synods, but they received the designation ecumenical because of their subsequent reception by the entire church.

Thus, the ecumenicality of a council comes from its reception by the whole church, and this process of reception is in itself a manifestation of the culture of synodality. To be truly ecumenical, a council must express not only the consensus and concord of its participants, of those who were present, but also the consensus and concord of the *pleroma* of the church. To this end, the seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II, AD 787) attempted to define the criteria of ecumenicality of a council: to be received as ecumenical, a synod had to obtain the agreement (*symphonia*) of the bishops; it had to reflect the cooperation (*synergieia*) of the bishop of Rome and the agreement of the other Eastern patriarchs. Thus, the representation of the five patriarchal seats (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem) and the presence of the Eastern Emperor

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<sup>10</sup> P.-P. Joannou, *Discipline Générale Antique*, 24.

were considered determining criteria for recognizing the ecumenical nature of a council.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the ecclesiastical rupture between the Christian East and West, the culture of synodality promoted by Nicaea has been maintained within the church, particularly in the East within the Orthodox Church, but also in the West, notably in the Roman Catholic Church. The recent Alexandria Document of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church showed that the so-called Gregorian Reform (eleventh-century) re-established canonical elections of bishops by cathedral chapters instead of their appointment by secular powers and that until the fifteenth century. Popes continued to govern the Latin Church with the Roman synod, gathering the bishops of the Roman province and those present in Rome and this synod normally met twice a year, or later by the consistory, the gathering of the cardinals, which the pope consulted on a regular basis, and provincial synods and general councils were convoked to make decisions about the administration of church life in the West. The Alexandria Document also reminds us that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) prescribed that provincial synods should be set up and should send a list of three names to Rome, so that the pope could choose and appoint bishops.<sup>12</sup>

The Alexandria Document reminds the readers of the existence of the Endemousa Synod at the Ecumenical Patriarchate throughout the second millennium. This synod was formed with the bishops present in Constantinople and expressed a permanent form of synodality. Synodality was strengthened during the nineteenth century by convening the Holy and Great Council in Constantinople in 1872 to condemn ethnophyletism. Later, during the twentieth century, after long preparation, in a synodal way a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church was convened, which finally took place on the island of Crete in June 2016.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, one can see how the new culture of synodality promoted by Emperor Constantine at Nicaea has endured and can still inspire divided Christians today in search of visible unity.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et Amplissima Collectio*, Vol. XIII, (Florence: Expensis Antonii Zatta, 1767), 208D–209C.

<sup>12</sup> Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, “Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today: The Alexandria Document,” *Alexandria, Egypt, June 2023*. §1.2, 1.5–1.7, 2.2. Available at: <https://www.christianunity.va>.

<sup>13</sup> “*Synodality and Primacy*, §1.11, 3.4, 4.5–4.6.



# **Sovereignty, Self-limitation, and *Status Confessionis* – God, the People and Covenant in the Midst of Ambiguities**

*Rudolf von Sinner*

## **Introduction: A Solidary and Communitarian God**

The Council of Nicaea was assembled by a sovereign emperor, Constantine, known as ‘the Great’. It was the time when the church was transitioning from a persecuted minority to a dominant majority, becoming crucial to the unity of the Empire. The unity of the church was, therefore, not alien to politics and political strategy. Yet it was also about a greater loyalty – the one to God who had truly become human in Jesus Christ. To affirm this and to say that Jesus Christ is «True God from True God [...] of one being [*homoousion*] with the Father» and not only ‘similar’ to God or a subordinate creature was to state that God submitted Godself in Jesus Christ to human conditions while remaining the *pantokrator*, the Almighty, the sovereign. The first element is central in affirming that «for us humans and for our salvation he came down from heaven», as the Nicene Creed affirms, and connected to human life until death on the cross, suffering what so many others were suffering, sharing bread, healing, and keeping company with those society had marginalized. While not articulating an uprising in the common sense, he was condemned and crucified as a contestator to the installed power for announcing a kingdom that was «not from this world» (John 18.36, NRSV). With *parrhesia* – risk-assuming courage he spoke truthfully in public (John 18.20) and suffered public execution. In Christ, God reveals Godself as a solidary and suffering God. God in Christ is a God of solidarity.

The second element is also important. Christians confess with the Nicene and other creeds, and thereby commit to and publicly announce and assume their faith in the creator and the one who will make «all things new» (Rev 21.5), the one «who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty» (Rev 1.8), the one who is always there, beyond time and space but subtly present in time and space, the one who offers an alternative interpretation of the world – often against the grain. God in Godself is the creator, the redeemer, and the life-giver, as the Holy Spirit was rightly called in the Constantinopolitan expansion (AD 381) of the Nicene Creed. Although such categories as we use them in human language and experience can only metaphorically be applied to God who is beyond our reach and understanding, it is in this sense appropriate to speak about God as a loving, interrelated community. Later Trinitarian theology would deploy the notion of *perichoresis*, the interrelatedness of the three persons of the Trinity, which makes them being one God in a triunity and not three gods. God's sovereignty is, therefore, a different model from human sovereignty, and always stands as a critical horizon to any exacerbation of human or divine power. While these can be related, they never coincide.

## Two Human Models of Sovereignty and the Exercise Thereof

In light of recent events, and bearing the type of godly sovereignty in mind that I laid out in the introduction in dialogue with the Nicene Creed, I would like to start my reflection by bringing to the fore two highly visible human models of sovereignty whose exercise of sovereignty could not be more different: the one practiced by US President Donald Trump and the one practiced by the recently deceased Pope Francis, each in their own way. In my opinion, both bring the issue of sovereignty – in its political mode, with religious connotations – and its implications very clearly to the table.

Trump often says 'I' or 'me' unabashedly, and thus presents himself as a personified power rather than a representative of a constitutional democracy. The presidential ritual in the USA has always had traits reminiscent of a royal ritual: the oversized personal protection, the oversized presidential plane carrying the armoured car, the visible centre of power in the equally highly protected White House, the many movies in which the US president takes centre stage – usually as a hero of patriotism, morality, and family – and embodies not only the abundance

of power, but also the missionary qualities and values that America wants to convey to the world and, if necessary, enforce with power – or at least used to promote: Freedom, democracy, family, individual rights. As commander-in-chief of a nuclear power with probably the most powerful army in the world, Mr President does indeed have an enormous amount of power. However, the fine system of checks and balances based on people's sovereignty («We, the People», as the US Constitution famously opens) is designed not simply to allow the president to do as he pleases, but temper his power through constitutional conformity (which to protect he pledges during his inauguration) and democratic decision-making. Although he is not entitled to do so, all Trump wants seems to be exactly that: do as he pleases, with the standard of values being his own convictions, his person, and his will, which he sees as being in harmony with America's interests – like a sovereign, absolute monarch. He wants to exercise and even increase a power that he is not actually entitled to under constitutional law in the name of the greatness of the nation as he understands it. «Make America Great Again», is a line not originating in, but strongly supported by Christian nationalism.<sup>1</sup> It is focussed on a certain narrow understanding of who constitute 'native' (ignoring the truly indigenous!) Americans and their interests. This understanding draws clear boundaries to the 'outside world,' and who belongs to the 'inside,' as has become more than evident in practice through the massive deportations, imprisonment, and intimidation of (real or supposed) foreigners. Added to this are Donald Trump's as yet unrealized threats to incorporate Canada, invade Greenland or 'take back' the Panama Canal, as well as the idea of creating a resort in Gaza. All of this has revived the debate about the sovereignty of nation states and peoples under precarious state conditions. Trump also speaks of reclaiming «sovereignty and national and economic security»<sup>2</sup> through his tariff policy, with which he has shaken up the global economy and intends to put an end to the global economic order that the USA played a key role in shaping. To sum up: Trump is not legally a sovereign, but he acts like one, in line with God's sovereignty as he and his followers understand it.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent take it by Force. The Christian Movement that is Threatening our Democracy* (Abergavenny: Broadleaf Books, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase our Competitive Edge, Protect our Sovereignty, and Strengthen our National and Economic Security," April 2, 2025, accessed May 8, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/>.



Pope Francis (1936–2025), on the other hand, presented a very different picture. Formally, the Pope is indeed an absolute monarch, the last in Europe, sovereign of the Holy See and head of state of the Vatican state, politically, and, religiously. Among other titles, he is also vicar of Jesus Christ, successor of the Prince of the Apostles, and Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church. Francis' reform of the Vatican Constitution has done nothing to change the former. It is a clerical state, which is why its inhabitants are predominantly male. There is no separation of powers, no freedom of the press, no democracy, and no clear distinction between secular and spiritual matters.<sup>3</sup> Although there is the Swiss Guard, the oldest and smallest army in the world, and the gendarmerie, it could never pose a threat to other states. Thanks to the charismatic and widely respected figure of the Pope, who is not concerned about re-election and votes, and his very well-informed and globally present diplomatic apparatus, the Holy See has great weight in international politics, which it can use to mediate – something that the popes of recent times have repeatedly endeavoured to do. At the same time, using his sovereignty and monarchical position as head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis sought to decentralize, share power, and appoint women to leadership positions like no one before him. In contrast to Trump, he thus wanted to reduce a power that is legally his in favour of a synodal division of power. It seems the new Pope, Leo XIV, may follow this line.

Decentralization was Francis' wish, but also forced upon him by the attitude of national and regional organizations, for example by the German Catholic bishops' rejection of a moratorium on the synodal path they had taken, which meant that the «Vatican veto [...] was broken», as the Vatican expert Marco Politi affirms. He further concludes: «Since that day in November [November 18, 2022 when the seventy German bishops were received in Rome by Curia cardinals Ladaria, Ouellet and Parolin, but not by the Pope], the omnipotence of the Roman Curia is history».<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, «the international isolation of the German reform wing is already becoming oppressively noticeable»<sup>5</sup>; criticism also came from the German-speaking Cardinals Kasper, Koch and Schönborn. Another example is the special path eventually accepted by the Pope for the African Church, which oppos-

<sup>3</sup> Jörg Ernesti, *Der Vatikan. Geschichte, Verfassung, Politik* (München: Beck 2025), 116ff.

<sup>4</sup> Marco Politi, *Der Unvollendete. Franziskus'Erbe und der Kampf um seine Nachfolge*, trans. Gabriele Stein (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2025), 109.

<sup>5</sup> Politi, *Der Unvollendete*, 100.

es the authorization of blessings for homosexual couples.<sup>6</sup> The Tridentine church constitution and thus the absolute monarchy of the Pope continues to exist *de iure*; *de facto*, however, it has been undermined both by the Pope himself with the intention of decentralisation and synodalisation, and also by the self-confident appearance of national and regional bishops' conferences. To sum up: Although the Pope is legally a sovereign, Francis preferred, in many aspects, not to act like an all-powerful sovereign. Instead, he exercised it as, with respect to God's sovereignty, empowering people's sovereignty, as he understood it.<sup>7</sup>

This leads us into a timely reflection on the relationship between divine and human sovereignty, a sovereignty that, as indicated, has received a Trinitarian shape by the Council of Nicaea potentially modifying that very notion even while being summoned by an absolute sovereign, the emperor Constantine, a successor of emperor Augustus, seen by Eusebius and others as the true representation of the heavenly sovereign as they understood God.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I shall present and discuss the issue of God's sovereignty and its relationship to human sovereignty in three steps: on monotheism, sovereignty, and loyalty; then, more specifically I will focus on sovereignty, the people and their sovereignty, and sovereignty and theology; to finally assess *status confessionis* and the ambiguous power of God's people.

## On Monotheism, Sovereignty, and Loyalty

The late German Egyptologist Jan Assmann has become famous for his critique of Judeo-Christian monotheism in what he called the 'mosaic distinction':<sup>9</sup> through Moses, raised as an Egyptian, the chosen people of God adopted a radically new way of believing that desacralized government and put the one and only God in charge, based on a clear-cut distinction between true and false, thus creating exclusion and violence. The thesis has been discussed extensively not least with theolo-

<sup>6</sup> See Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings," December 18, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_dff\\_doc\\_20231218\\_fiducia-supplicans\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dff_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html)

<sup>7</sup> See Rudolf von Sinner, "*Vox populi (Dei), vox Dei*: Pope Francis' Theology of the People of God, the Priesthood of All Believers and Democracy," *Religions* 15 (2024): 1347, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111347>.

<sup>8</sup> See Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," in *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011): 68–105.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

gians, especially Old Testament Scholars and ethicists, as well as scholars from other fields, Jewish and Christian.<sup>10</sup> In one of his last books, called *the Invention of Religion* (the German original title ‘Exodus’ seems more appealing and more precise, although the impressive volume does indeed speak of a new religion *sui generis*), Assmann modified his thesis to a certain extent and distinguished between an earlier ‘monotheism of loyalty’ based on God’s revelation and the covenant between a liberating God and God’s chosen people, and a later ‘monotheism of truth’. This change was certainly helped by the quite radical reformulation of Pentateuch exegesis.<sup>11</sup> The two main tendencies that produced and organized the Pentateuch during and after the Babylonian exile – the Priestly Document with Genesis and Exodus, and Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school – maintained a monotheism of loyalty through God’s covenant with his people, standardized by quite an original legal corpus. There is this very important triangle, then:

- 1) God, after all the only ruler, is only precariously represented by the king, but also by other offices like judges, and eventually by priests;
- 2) the people, with whom God establishes his covenant and who have to consent to it; and
- 3) the law, which God gives for orientation and good organization, so that the people recognize «I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery» (Exod 20.2, the introduction to the Ten Commandments).

Historically, a strict monotheism only comes about in and after the Babylonian exile. Before that there are numerous signs of tacit or even explicit recognition of other gods, even if YHWH is the strongest of all and the one with whom Israel is in covenant.

Like the Jews, Christians are bound to the God of the covenant, and it is, therefore, logical that covenantal theology, namely through the Calvinist tradition, has

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Rolf Schieder, ed., *Die Gewalt des einen Gottes: Die Monotheismus-Debatte zwischen Jan Assmann, Micha Brumlik, Rolf Schieder, Peter Sloterdijk und anderen* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible. A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Wolfgang Oswald, *Staatstheorie im Alten Israel. Der politische Diskurs im Pentateuch und in den Geschichtsbüchern des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009); Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History. A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Konrad Schmid, *The Scribes of the Torah. The Formation of the Pentateuch in its Literary and Historical Contexts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023).

influenced politics considerably.<sup>12</sup> For Christians, their prime loyalty is with God who binds Godself and God's people to the covenant. As we remember the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the Belhar Confession (1982/86), and even most recently the declaration of Orthodox theologians against the Russian world (*Russki mir*) in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which follows Barmen's style and logic, this is reinforced.<sup>13</sup> In a strongly Christocentric mode, the goal at Barmen was to preserve the church from being compromised by neopagan Nazism, and for some – note there is no Barmen thesis that directly addresses it – the defense of the Jews against their systematic destruction by the Nazis. The goal of Belhar was to denounce apartheid as sin, with a more refined and less exclusive Trinitarian theology, and especially with an emphasis on visible unity, justice, and reconciliation.<sup>14</sup> The goal of the *Russki mir* declaration was to denounce too harmonious a symphony with the authoritarian state as heresy. These are all noble and, indeed, necessary intentions that seek to protect victims of exacerbated state action by invoking God's sovereignty against the ruler's sovereignty as configuring the ultimate loyalty Christians are called to obey to. While these declarations are directed toward the church and its heresies, affirming primary and ultimate loyalty to God, they do have a political situation in mind, although it is not explicitly mentioned in either case.

However, in these times in Brazil and elsewhere, the *status confessionis* seems to be, in my view questionably, invoked by religious groups and communities for much more complex and controversial issues in a plural, albeit polarized society. The agenda of such religious groups and communities is moralistic and the intention is not to engage in issues of social and environmental justice. In fact, they are rather indifferent, complacent, or even positive about inequality and the 'free market' One can find such an agenda today not only in Brazil and the US, but also in many places in Africa and in Eastern Europe, in Russia and, to a lesser degree,

<sup>12</sup> See John De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy. A Theology for a Just World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Witte Jr, *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> "Declaration on the 'Russian world' (*Russkii Mir*) Teaching," *Public Orthodoxy*, March 13, 2022, accessed June 7, 2024, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>.

<sup>14</sup> Both texts can be found in: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016), accessed June 5, 2024 <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions/>

also in Ukraine. The positions rejected by religious groups are seen as a Western, decadent, post-Christian agenda even when held by churches. According to these groups such post-Christian agenda is to be resisted in the name of Scripture, church tradition, and Christian morality. The problem I see here is not with a theological and political controversy, which has its place in any pluralist and democratic setting, and also in the churches, but with the authoritarianism implied in many of such positions that become absolutized and might create or enhance violence to those who already are victims in society, like the LGBTQIA+ population. They also link up dangerously with authoritarian governments and say it is them that show loyalty to God, the true sovereign. Did not Barmen, Belhar, and the *Ruski mir* declaration remind us of God's sovereignty resisting human totalitarian and dictatorial authoritarianism?

## On Sovereignty

The Old Testament, especially in the exilic and post-exilic period, portrays God as the absolute – in fact, the only – sovereign. In the NRSV, 'sovereign' is used in relation to earthly or divine powers, to translate as '(our) lord' (*adonenu*, as in Ps 8.1; *haadon* as in Isa 3.1; *kyrios* LXX); and 'sovereignty' to translate as *shaltan* (as in Dan 3.33) or *mamelecheth* (as in Mic 4.8). The concept is older, but was reformulated and famously developed by Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In its traditional acception, the term indicates supreme power, which for Bodin was indivisible and absolute. As Old Testament scholarship and also Jan Assmann affirm, it was an innovation in religious history to adapt, even in its formulation (cf. Deut 13; 28) the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties in terms of God's covenant with God's people. The innovation is precisely that Godself is the subject of the covenant, which is not mediated by a king. God is, then, the ultimate sovereign, the supreme authority and power to whom all loyalty is due. After all, only God is king and governs God's people by justice and good laws, a «priestly kingdom and a holy nation» as formulated in the book of Exodus (19.6) and reflected in 1 Peter 2.9, from where the

<sup>15</sup> Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty* [1576], ed. and trans. Julian H. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). The word was already used by Philippe de Beaumanoir in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, however, and the content had been present and under debate long before its conceptualization by Bodin, as argued by Raquel Kritsch, *Soberania: a construção de um conceito* (São Paulo: Humanitas – FFLCH/Universidade de São Paulo; Imprensa Oficial do Estado, 2002).

priesthood of all believers takes its basis. Interestingly, it is explicitly mentioned that the people give their consent to the covenant: «Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, (All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient)» (Exodus 24:7). This is a remarkable register, although we know nothing about a process that had actually established the people's consent with some formal procedure. On the basis of the covenant offered by God and accepted by the people, a law is established that organizes life in community. The protection of widows and orphans, slaves and foreigners now become a central part, not of any king's decree, but of the law and covenant. In a seminal article published over thirty years ago, Old Testament scholar Frank Crüsemann affirmed that while thus a kind of 'theocracy' (he always uses quotation marks) is established, 'democracy' is founded at the same time. Both go together: 'Theocracy' guarantees that the law is not subject to human (re-)formulation. This finds an analogy in the immutability of fundamental rights as established by the Brazilian and South African constitutions, among others. «They are basic rules to preserve given freedom. Within this framework, all political power lies with the people», Crüsemann affirms.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, 'theocracy' constitutes 'democracy.' Matter-of-factly, as Crüsemann shows, there never was a non-mediated government by God. However, beyond the king there were other offices like judges, elders, and priests which were elected by the people. Today, we know monarchies, like the British, which are constitutionally bound and to which the saying fits well: *le roi règne, mais il ne gouverne pas* – «the king reigns, but does not govern». The function of such a sovereign is to symbolically provide unity, consistency, and the defence of the faith, more as a figure than as an individual, and not mingling with concrete political decisions, which are reserved for the Prime Minister and the government. In Germany, the President of the Federation has a similar function, and it may be no sheer coincidence that many of the last ones were deep believers and served as a kind of national conscience. One, Joachim Gauck, was even an ordained Protestant minister. Of course, in Germany the president is not a sovereign, but symbolically exercises an analogous function, being the nation's highest representative. Independent Brazil was, for sixty-five years, an Empire. The sovereign was said to exercise a 'moderating power,' above party distinctions and disputes. That means he or she moves more towards the traditional term of *auctoritas* than *potestas*, to-

<sup>16</sup> Frank Crüsemann, "'Theokratie' als 'Demokratie'. Zur politischen Konzeption des Deuteronomiums," in *Anfänge politischen Denkens: Die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen*, ed. Kurt Raaflaub, 199–214 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993), 214.

wards authority rather than (concrete) power. Such sovereignty is clearly different from a dictatorship.

In ecclesiastical and political terms, it is interesting that, the Pope exercises a double function: he is the head of a state in an absolute monarchy, and he is also sovereign as the primate of the Church in quite, but not totally absolute way. After all, even the Pope is subject to God and the Gospel as witnessed in Scripture, and he is bound by Apostolic tradition and also by ‘natural reason’ according to the Vatican I decree *Dei Filius*.<sup>17</sup> Even the Pope’s infallibility as defined in the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* is not unrestricted, being limited, for example, to matters of ‘faith and morals’, and in fact has been properly exercised only twice in recent history. Also, Pope John Paul II’s apparently definitive pronouncement on the church’s lack of authority for ordaining women to the priesthood seems – wisely – to not properly fulfil the criteria for a teaching *ex cathedra*.<sup>18</sup> As indicated above, exercising this very sovereignty, Pope Francis sought to at least partially overcome or redefine sovereignty in terms of synodality. In the corresponding documents, the notion ‘people of God,’ the *laos theou*, and therefore the laity, is a recurring category – a biblical one, obviously, but also strong in documents of the II Vatican Council. This brings me to the next section: the people.

## On the People and Their Sovereignty

The qualification for being part of the people of God is baptism: *Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum*, as Nicaea confessed it, «one baptism for the remission of sins». This is the first and possibly foremost *character indelebilis*, the indestructible character of one’s incorporation into the people of God. Especially when infant baptism is still the norm in many churches, there is not and cannot be anything presupposed from the baptismal candidate in order to receive the visible

<sup>17</sup> See Sebastian Pittl, “The Spectres of Schmitt. Identity, Decision, and the Name of YHWH,” *Louvain Studies* 42 (2019), 211–239.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,” May 22, 1994, accessed June 5, 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html), nr. 4, states: «Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.»



sign of God's gift of redemption. However, the life that follows, the path of Christian initiation and discipleship, is fraught with expectations, from the baptized, the congregation, and God. As human life is permeated by error and sin, so is Christian life.

'People' is a precarious category which needs constant reconstruction. This is similar to Ernesto Laclau's comprehension of 'the people' in what he understands to be a necessary 'populism' as a discursive strategy, a political logic oriented not by a specific content, but by an 'empty signifier'.<sup>19</sup> In my view, two things are very important here: the formation of a people as a constant process, and the taking seriously of popular articulations where people are subjects and not simply a manoeuvrable mass. Maybe astonishingly, Laclau was inspired by Carl Schmitt. This influence is evident in his criticism of liberalism, especially in its association with economics and technology. Laclau also draws on Schmitt's view of 'the political,' i.e., the view of public sphere as a field of conflict. For Laclau, once God as warrant-er of universality and the incarnate Son as mediator between universality and particularity has been lost in secularization, there is only particularity left which has to be articulated by hegemony. Neither can it be substituted by an actor «pure and universal human essence»,<sup>20</sup> which for Marx was the proletariat. Like Schmitt, Laclau and also his partner Chantal Mouffe are sceptical as to conversation and discourse in seemingly endless conversation – we can hear a criticism of Jürgen Habermas here, as well as of Richard Rorty and John Rawls. «Too much emphasis on consensus [...] leads to apathy and to a disaffection with political participation», Mouffe affirms.<sup>21</sup> While I believe she has an important point here, it seems to me that in order for a populist dynamic to occur in productive ways, more than a leader and hegemonic group of people are needed, i.e. a body of law and fundamental rights with a state to guarantee it. Also, society and the state need a 'torah' in the sense of orientation and guidance. Politically speaking, the people are – at least in theory – sovereign, but not absolute. As the saying goes since the Roman politician and philosopher Cicero: *Vox populi* is not always *vox Dei*. Theologically speak-

<sup>19</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007); see also Rudolf von Sinner and Celso Gabatz, "Populism and 'People': Precarities and Polarizations as a Challenge and Task for a Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology* 15, no. 3 (2021), 349–368, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-01530004>.

<sup>20</sup> Ernesto Laclau, "Beyond Emancipation," *Development and Change* 23, no. 3 (1992):121–137, at 131.

<sup>21</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 7; Pittl, "The Spectres of Schmitt," 227.



ing, the people of God are not sovereign, but they participate in God's representation on earth, sharing in the government of God's church. I am aware of the dangers and shortcomings of such a concept, not least because of Carl Schmitt's use of it. While the people of God can do this together with their ordained ministers and those who have oversight, it is not simply by majority vote that truth is established and the right policy elaborated. The people of God have rights which can and should indeed be exercised, but they are also constrained by God's covenant and law. Sovereignty can be collective, and indeed shared, and is never absolute. Human sovereignty is to be demystified and tamed by the Lord over the powers, as Karl Barth affirmed.<sup>22</sup> The sovereign leader is 'dehydrated,' as Brazilian common political language would have it, i.e., stripped of much of his power. In contrast, we could say God's sovereignty is absolute, but I am not sure this brings us much further, given that it is always mediated – by Christ the mediator and by the baptized people of God as Christ's representatives. Therefore, I contend that the transcendent reference to a Trinitarian not monarchical, but relational God as supreme power, needs an immanent reference to the whole people of God, qualified by the common binding to a covenant, with a corresponding set of laws. As Assmann underlined, it is from God's covenant that a notion of 'people' emerges that is founded «not on common descent, land, language, or sovereign rule but on divine law: the Torah».<sup>23</sup>

## Sovereignty in Theology

The topic of sovereignty has been very present in discussions and publications in recent years. There are several discourses on sovereignty that take place independent of each other, but that also overlap to some extent: a theological, a biblical-political, a theological-political, a philosophical and a legal-political. I here restrict myself to the first and third.

A theological discussion in the narrower sense is about the sovereignty of God in relation to creation and human history. The main question is whether and how God is influenced by creation and history, and whether, and to what extent, God intervenes in them. In 2009, an edited volume was published on this topic, spon-

<sup>22</sup> See Sabine Plonz, *Die herrenlosen Gewalten. Eine Relektüre Karl Barths in befreiungstheologischer Perspektive* (Mainz: Grünwald 1995); Martin Hailer, *Götzen, Mächte und Gewalten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Assmann, *The Invention of Religion*, 188.

sored by the Forum for Evangelical Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, with strong positions on both sides of the divide, drawing on biblical narratives, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and Jürgen Moltmann, among others.<sup>24</sup> It also raises the question of what kind of sovereignty could and should be ascribed to God – a monocratic, authoritarian one, or a sensitive, dynamic one in a more Trinitarian view? An important contribution to this is David Kelsey's *Human Anguish and God's Power* from his 2011 Warfield Lectures at Princeton.<sup>25</sup> Kelsey attempts to understand sovereignty not primarily in terms of power, and certainly not in terms of God as absolute power, but in terms of God's twofold self-commitment: to that which is not God, through God's 'creative blessing' *ex nihilo*, and to Godself as a triune, relationally eternally generating God. 'Sovereignty' is therefore self-regulating, which includes both self-commitment and self-limitation. These seem to me to be two very important categories when it comes to qualifying God's sovereignty, and from there also God's position in relation to human sovereignty.

The theo-political discourse combines the sovereignty of God with human sovereignty, in agreement, tension, opposition or dialogue. Eusebius of Caesarea is a famous witness for the first case and in his line Carl Schmitt, Erik Peterson for the second. Modernity, with its progressive removal of God from the equation, did not reduce the concentration of power in a human monarch, at least initially, but rather increased it, as there was now no longer a universally recognized divine power and law for the monarch to follow. Some authors see the problem in the shift from natural theology and realism to nominalism and voluntarism<sup>26</sup> and want to reclaim Thomas Aquinas via Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. I see that a public theology following Abraham Kuyper and the neo-Calvinist movement follows a similar logic. It is a harmonization of the sovereignty of God and humankind through a general principle that binds both. On the other hand, Karl Barth and those who emphasized the *totaliter aliter* of God and the primacy of God's sovereignty over human sovereignty were able to configure an opposition to the authoritarian power installed in the Nazi era. This opposition to authoritarian power went hand in hand with a reformulation of sovereignty, that confronted changes both in the understanding of a divine endowment of earthly rulers – discarded or modified – and in the image of God as weak and vulner-

<sup>24</sup> D. Stephen Long and George Kalantzis, eds., *The Sovereignty of God Debate* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> David H. Kelsey, *Human Anguish and God's Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self. The Gifford Lectures* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

able rather than as a monarchical superpower. This stronger hiatus between God and human beings ensures greater freedom for God, but also for human beings.<sup>27</sup> In the famous essays *Rechtfertigung und Recht* (1938) and *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (1946), Barth himself also focused more strongly on the subject of the citizen and did not leave it at radical opposition. However, the loyalty of citizens depends on whether the state fulfils its mandate to guarantee justice. The idea of ‘people’ in the ethnic sense was discredited. Perhaps for this reason, the concept of the people (*Volk*) – including the ‘people of God’ (*Volk Gottes*), as used by Vatican II and emphasized by Pope Francis – remains largely absent from Protestant theology. Instead, Protestant theology tends to promote a theologically inspired, participatory popular sovereignty understood in terms of citizenship. Finally, a distinctly German-speaking Catholic perspective attempts to incorporate theologically underpinned sovereignty into the democratic-plural state. This attempt takes different forms: some engage in dialogue with Jürgen Habermas emphasizing the need for translation services that make religious language accessible in public discourse.<sup>28</sup> Others develop a broad treatise on ‘fragile sovereignty’,<sup>29</sup> which deals specifically with popular sovereignty – a topic traditionally neglected in the Roman Catholic Church. (Popular) sovereignty is ‘fragile’ because the democratic constitutional state based on it is dependent on the loyalty of its citizens, which it cannot enforce. The book’s argument is about mobilizing intra-theological resources to strengthen loyalty to the liberal, democratic state by emphasizing the concept of freedom. Questions such as justice, the contributions by Pope Francis on the ‘people of God’, solidarity, peace and justice are not considered here, apart from the fact that these contributions are focused on the German context and do not take into account the wider world situation or its specific theological and legal resources.

## Sovereignty, Loyalty, and the Ambivalence of the Power of God's People

A considerable number of Christians – both individuals and churches or ministries, mostly evangelical but also Orthodox, Catholic and other denominations – are

<sup>27</sup> See for instance Georg Essen, *Fragile Souveränität. Eine Politische Theologie der Freiheit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Klaus Viertbauer, *Religion und Lebensform. Religiöse Epistemologie im Anschluss an Jürgen Habermas* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Essen, *Fragile Souveränität*.

strategically active in many places and sometimes globally networked to defend and politically implement a moralistic agenda consisting of the rejection of abortion, same-sex marriage, 'gender ideology' and the liberalization of certain drugs, as well as the defence of the 'Christian family'. At the same time, they tend to play down social and environmental issues. The aforementioned moralistic agenda has become so central to them that it is tantamount to a *status confessionis*. The attempted and actual exclusion of clergy who disagree, the polarization of discourse within the church and a clear political option, as well as the adoption of attitudes and acts of civil disobedience towards democratically elected, liberal to progressive governments, and their policies, are a clear indication of this. The *status confessionis* has historically been asserted by minorities against the majority in church and society – majorities that have taken on characteristics of an authoritarian regime with tendencies towards violent repression. Theological declarations and confessions such as the aforementioned Barmen (1934), Belhar (1982/86) and against the *Russki mir* (2022) invoke the sovereignty of God and the claiming of God's church primarily as a criticism of a church that they consider heretical and contrary to the gospel. They do not name a specific political situation, although such a situation is implied and is clear from the context. Moreover, none of them were voiced in a democracy, but in an (increasingly) autocratic, even totalitarian context.

Today, however, a new form of resistance is emerging within democracies that invokes God's sovereignty. The democratic system as such and its institutions are increasingly seen as dispensable if they oppose the line of the supposed majority, which is characterized by Christian exclusivist convictions. This 'majority' assumes that their positions should be valid and legally binding for the whole of society, creating positions that are at odds with the secular, constitutional, democratic state, which must guarantee fundamental rights to all its citizens and grant special protection to minorities. Part of the reaction against such a position and against 'liberal' regulations can be explained by the lack of understanding and resentment towards minorities, who are seen as overly protected while the 'majority' (in reality usually a minority or a very specific part of the majority, such as white men) is supposedly disadvantaged. This is a recurring argument of the right, especially right-wing populism. Reference is often made to a religious heritage that is only sketchily outlined, such as the often rather diffuse idea of a 'Christian West,' which must be defended against the religious and cultural 'other,' namely Islam. In contrast, the positions of Christian nationalism in the USA and at least to some extent in other countries such as Brazil, which can count on the support of potent donors,

argue that the sovereignty of God must be implemented and enforced in society with their moral – but not social or environmental – principles. In the USA, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of all people, has been invoked for this purpose: In a talk show called ‘Flashpoint’ on the Christian television channel Victory Network, Eric Metaxas, author of a controversial biography of Bonhoeffer and a book in which he repeatedly referred to Bonhoeffer as God’s answer to evil, joined the moderator in describing the then ongoing 2024 election as a ‘Bonhoeffer moment’, urging Christians to rise up to oppose evil – evil being the Democrats who had ‘stolen’ the 2020 election and whom he even compared to the Nazis.<sup>30</sup>

This situation requires a renewed reflection on what the sovereignty of God means, how it relates to political sovereignty – of the state, the nation, the people – and what an appropriate presence of religion in the secular state should look like. I assume that the constitutional, democratic and secular state is the most suitable political system today to enable and protect the political participation and rights of all people living in the territory of the state. It can continue to honor the presence of religion, but also hold it accountable and reconcile it with democracy and pluralism as well as the protection of minorities, for which intra-religious resources must also be harnessed. At the same time, one should not shy away from looking at dissenting opinions in the population that call for a strong hand and national identity and trying to understand their reasons. I reject the traditional disdain for public opinion, and the intelligence and motivation of the people. However, I do not deny their ambivalences and the potentially violent and anti-pluralistic attitudes and actions that can result from public opinion as well. Finally – and here I adopt a Lutheran theological position characterized in particular by Luther himself, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Vitor Westhelle – the world is profoundly ambivalent and ambiguous, and while evil is present in the midst of good, the opposite can also be the case.

Thus, rather than abandoning the notion of sovereignty – despite its usually connoted and problematic affinity with power – or scorning ‘the people’ as supposedly ignorant, alienated and/or manipulated, it seems to me to be necessary to develop an understanding of God’s sovereignty as relational and thus Trinitarian, as something that empowers the weak and binds the powerful (and also Godself).

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ9Fvgr8nw>, last accessed June 9, 2025. «The Lord called me prophetically to write that book», Metaxas affirms repeatedly in that program. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010); *Religionless Christianity: God’s Answer to Evil* (Washington: Regnery Faith, 2024).

While people's sovereignty is necessary to legitimize fundamental rights, welfare, and democracy, it must be limited both by its intrinsic ambiguities and by its inherently finite human character. While God's sovereignty is self-limited, it maintains the protological and eschatological framework of history that grounds memory and hope.

On the people's side, what is needed is a deep sense of belonging, commitment, and trust, and therefore loyalty – precisely what is lacking in precarious countries, but also increasingly in established and prosperous democracies. A motivating – and limiting – force is needed to guide citizens to live their faith in private and in public. Affection, love, and passion are important categories to describe such motivating forces that drive at least Christian citizens. In addition, shame – in its restrictive form – as an affective-ethical warner and brake against the destruction of others and the violence done to them is also required. This is about a sense of shame as an *ethical* category, not to be confused with the tragic and toxic shame that people feel because their being is rejected and marginalised by others.<sup>31</sup> This should positively evoke doubts and restraint in believers so that Christians would not give themselves over-enthusiastically to power. Such a sense of shame would encourage a thorough ethical and critical evaluation of those who exercise power and the way in which they exercise it. While the *parrhesia* of Jesus and the clear word of the prophets encourage resisting the ambiguities of life without pretending to be able to overcome them, the power of shame would act as a restraining force that is aware of *kenosis* and imperfection. With courage and shame, boldness and humility, Christians can make a difference in politics and business and contribute to society as a whole (without imposing themselves on it!).

Finally, I come back to the central concept. When I speak of 'sovereignty', I am not limiting myself to positions that explicitly use this term – Lutherans, for example, generally do not – but to the relationship between God's rule and power, and human rule and power in the midst of ambiguity, i.e., the ambiguity and contradictions of life. It is precisely these ambiguities that many Christian groups cannot tolerate and want to eliminate, be it by negotiating with God for health and prosperity, by leaving the evil world to God alone, by seeking purity through separation from the world or by forcing the establishment of God's kingdom here and now. This also cancels the – theologically so necessary! – eschatological reserve. But it

<sup>31</sup> Rudolf von Sinner, "Shame as an Ethical Category for an Integrative Diaconia in Brazil," *Religions* 14 (2024): 952, <https://doi.org/10.3390/REL14070952>.

is precisely this that I want to emphasize and continue to assert: that tolerance of ambiguity is part of a faith that seeks its place and understanding in the midst of life's uncertainties. Overall, I argue that there is a Trinitarian, relational, communal God who exercises God's sovereignty through self-restraint and binds the loyalty of God and Christians to a covenant whose primary purpose is to relate God to the world and create points of reference for human coexistence that do not seek a false purity but recognize the deep ambiguities of life to which the understanding and practice of faith are not immune, but in the face of which they are also not left without an orienting horizon. A Trinitarian God who creates and consummates, but also becomes vulnerable in Jesus Christ who is «God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God», is whom the Nicene Creed and those who have it as part of their confessional basis publicly affirm and proclaim.

# Church Polity from a Nicaean Perspective

*Leo J. Koffeman*

No early church symbol is better known in churches all over the world than the Nicene Creed. In the ecumenical movement it has been recognized as vital to expressing the faith that churches from very different backgrounds worldwide share. In this contribution I intend to outline the importance of this ecumenical document for church polity and attempt to answer the question: How can it be related to the issues that play a role in daily church life, in terms of church government?

Particularly in Western traditions, only insiders are aware that the Council of Nicaea AD 325 also confirmed a number of canons, i.e., rules regarding church polity<sup>1</sup>. However, the relevance of the Council of Nicaea in terms of church polity goes far beyond these canons; it lies in the ecclesiology as expressed in the Nicene Creed, in the four Nicene attributes: the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

## The Nicene Attributes

Initially, these attributes (Latin: *proprietaes*) were not part of the Nicene Creed. They were added by the Council of Constantinople (381) and are only known thanks to the Acta of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). Nevertheless, churches all over the world commonly speaking of the ‘Nicene Creed’ include these words:

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<sup>1</sup> See: *The Canons of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE)*, trans. and ed. Roger Pearse, *Early Church Texts*, accessed July 12, 2025, [https://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/nicaea\\_canons.htm](https://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/nicaea_canons.htm).



*Credimus... unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam*. The unity, the holiness, the catholicity, and the apostolicity of the church are part of our common confession. But can these attributes be transferred or translated into the field of church polity? It is a question I have dealt with extensively in my book *In Order to Serve* (2014).<sup>2</sup>

In the teaching of the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) and in the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943) the Nicene attributes function as visible evidence of the Roman Catholic Church being the one and only true church. Cautiously, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) took another direction. Its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, says that «the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic [...] subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him» (LG, § 8)<sup>3</sup>. The wording ‘subsists in’ (Latin: *subsistit in*), although open to different interpretations as the post-Vatican history shows, introduces a distinction between the church we confess and the Roman Catholic Church in its hierarchical structures. This is an intentional farewell to the exclusive identification of the «one Church of Christ» with the Roman Catholic Church.

The traditional Reformed position in this respect is often expressed in the adage *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est (secundum verbum Dei)*: a Reformed church is always in need of reform. It is a well-known and popular rallying cry in the Reformed tradition, emphasizing the self-critical self-understanding of Reformed churches: «The church must continually re-examine itself, reconsider its doctrines, and be prepared to accept change, in order to conform more closely to orthodox Christian belief as revealed in the Bible».<sup>4</sup> Or, as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) puts it: «The Reformed tradition calls the church for continuous self-examination according to God’s Word».<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Leo J. Koffeman, *In Order to Serve: An Ecumenical Introduction to Church Polity*, (Münster: LIT-Verlag 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 21 November 1964, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: America Press, 1966), §8.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paul Haffner, *Mystery of the Church*, (Leominster: Gracewing Publishing, 2007), 117. Cf. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/2 (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1964), 713f.

<sup>5</sup> WCRC, *Workbook for the 27<sup>th</sup> General Council of the WCRC, Chiang Mai 2025*, (Hannover: WCRC, 2025), 7.

## Invisible and Visible Aspects of the Church

There is a long theological tradition of structuring ecclesiology from the perspective of a distinction between invisible and visible aspects of the church. It is a distinction that has been interpreted in different ways, and it has certainly caused misunderstandings, but it can also be helpful.

Invisible is the church as *ecclesia credita*, as the church we believe, the Church (with capital C) of the Creeds. It is the Church as founded on the Word of God, or as *creatura Verbi* as Protestant theology puts it. As to the visible aspects, we can first distinguish the ‘marks’ of the Church. How can we be sure that in a specific church we meet ‘the Church’? The Reformation developed two such ‘marks’: the pure proclamation of the Word of God, and the pure and scriptural administration of the sacraments. Calvinism added a third mark: the exercise of church discipline. The visible aspects of the church include the dynamics of history, society, and institution. Now, how can invisible and visible aspects be related, and how does it work in ecclesiology and church polity? How can what we believe the church to be, become visible in terms of church structures, mandates, policies, and other aspects of daily church life?

Here, the image of an electrical transformer which e.g., transforms an electric current of 220 volts to 12 volts (as for your mobile phone) can be helpful. In such a transformer, in its basic form, there are two different copper wire coils side by side, without direct contact, but as close as possible. However, they should not touch each other (otherwise a short circuit may cause damage). The electromagnetic field of the larger coil gives rise to a weaker current in the smaller one. How that comes about precisely is dependent on the specific properties of the two coils. If I apply this to the relation between ecclesiology and church polity, it means: the ecclesiological debate and the debate in church polity are closely related, but they should be kept apart at the same time: an ecclesiological argument is not directly applicable as a church polity argument, although what takes place in the first debate has its consequences in the second. Ecclesiology and church polity have their own particular logic, the former being systematic-theological in nature, whereas the latter is juridical in nature. This image of a transformer might suggest a one-direction dynamic, but the relationship between ecclesiology and church polity is clearly dialogical: our experience and practice in church life also influence our ecclesiological views – or, at least, they should.

## Four Quality Markers

How can the four attributes of the church we believe in become operational in the churches we live in? It is at this point that I introduce the term ‘quality marker’. A quality marker is meant to be relevant to the question as to what extent the *una sancta* can be expressed and recognized in church life, as it is regulated in church polity: it serves as one of the parameters that can play a role. I distinguish four such quality markers of the church, i.e., its inclusivity, its authenticity, its conciliarity, and its integrity, directly related to the catholicity, the apostolicity, the unity, and the holiness of the church respectively.

1. The inclusivity of the church refers to the *goal* of the church. As a community it is called to, and it longs to embrace all people. If a church tries to live up to its destination, it cannot accept any limitations beforehand. So-called ‘self-evident’ boundaries, like social, cultural, and economic dividing lines, cannot be decisive. A church knows of the relativity of its own historical limitations: it reaches out, beyond borders, and it is missionary and diaconal in nature.
2. The authenticity of the church refers to its *source*. It is founded on God’s revelation in human history, in Jesus Christ. Therefore, its connection with tradition, and more specifically with Holy Scripture, is decisive. Its quality is determined by the way it lives up to the gospel, including the way in which this is facilitated and – as far as possible – safeguarded.
3. The church’s conciliarity refers to *relations* within the church, and between churches. True commitment of the parts to the whole body is of fundamental importance. In its institutional life the church enhances sustaining mutual relations between people, groups, as well as between ecclesial communities, in order to let the gifts of each of them serve the vocation that all share.
4. The integrity of the church refers to the *boundaries* of the church. Its way of living is inspired by what it has understood about God’s views of ‘good life’. Although no limitation can be accepted at the outset, not ‘everything goes’ within the church. The gospel implies limitations. Sometimes a clear ‘no’ has to be there, most of all in its internal life.

The quality markers are pivotal in terms of the possibilities of any church to «manifest the *una sancta*», in daily church life, and, therefore, also in church polity.

They are of overriding importance as to the quality of church life, although their significance and value may vary, depending on time and circumstances.

Church polity is about structures and resources, and thereby it makes distinctions, and it sets conditions and limitations. Not everybody is authorized to do everything. Conditions for certain actions are formulated. The basic question underlying this contribution is how such limitations and conditions can be theologically legitimate. As we will see, these quality markers can help us to deal with this question. Each of them is complementary to the others: specific church order questions can be seen from different perspectives.

## Inclusivity

The catholicity of a church, referring to the *goal* of the church, can be expressed in its inclusivity. It is a view that already can be found in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) document *Seven Theses on the Meaning of Catholicity* (1961). Legitimate diversity is key to churches. A church that intentionally secludes itself from certain people – e.g., for reasons of ethnicity or social position – lacks all credibility. A congregation that in fact withdraws from society in complacency, enjoying its ‘own’ rituals and habits, fails in a fundamental way. Inclusivity means that it is a goal of the church to ‘embrace the world’, and the degree to which it really does so is an important indicator of its ecclesial quality. Nevertheless, social, and cultural factors do play a selective role here: they give color to a community and make it attractive for some, but also less attractive for others. Every church has to find its own path between its being sent to the whole world and its limited capacities to act accordingly.

So, inclusivity is key to the quality of a Christian community. It should be visible in actual church life that a particular community sees itself as missionary, called from the world and at the same time sent into the world. In present ecclesiology and missiology ‘mission’ is a comprehensive term, with a wide range of aspects. It refers to the total of the church’s commission for the benefit of the world, to all the church knows itself to be called to be and to do in its relation to human society. Recent ecumenical ecclesiological thinking shows a major convergence in this respect.<sup>6</sup> The term ‘missional’ is used in two quite different ecclesial contexts.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Koffeman, *In Order to Serve*; Here, I refer to many reports of multilateral (Faith and Order) and bilateral ecumenical dialogue.

i.e., not only in the discussions within historical churches about the need to adapt church life to new cultural circumstances in Western society ('fresh expressions'), but also in the circuit of new emerging churches: ('cell church', 'new monasticism', etc.), in both cases in order to better connect with a postmodern, post-denominational or post-Christendom culture.

Because the Reformation itself is entirely determined by the context of the *corpus christianum* in traditional Western society, mission and church planting do not play any role in the confessional documents – or, for that matter, the church orders – of the Reformation. It is only after the founding age of the Reformation that such themes gain importance within European churches, mainly due to colonialism.

The disintegration of the *corpus christianum* in secularization cannot but have consequences in terms of the way churches understand and organize themselves. Increasing attention for the missionary mandate of churches in a Western context is at least part of the challenge. A decisive criterion for the pure preaching of the gospel – and, therefore, for its inclusivity – should be the willingness, the resolve and the ability of the church, its members and its ordained ministers to communicate with their respective contexts, and to proclaim and witness to the gospel in a way that at least intends to bridge the gap between the faith convictions of those 'inside' and the (religious or non-religious) beliefs, hopes, fears and concerns of those 'outside'. Since cultures are not static entities, but marked by processes of continuous change, there is an ongoing, dynamic, challenging, and inspiring dialogue between gospel and cultural context. Faith is not a matter of 'having', but of 'sharing' with others, inside and outside the boundaries of the visible faith community.

In the Reformed family, it is particularly in the experiences in South Africa under apartheid that a new awareness of the sensitivity of the issue of inclusivity was raised. It resulted in the birth of the *Belhar Confession* (1986), which became basic to the merger of two racially separated churches into the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), in 1994. The document focuses on three key concepts, i.e. unity, reconciliation, and justice. It says:

We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; [...] Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Belhar Confession*, (Dutch Reformed Mission Church, 1986), art. 3, <https://wcrc.ch/belharconfession>.

Of course, apartheid was not just a matter of ethnicity; cultural aspects, like languages and customs, as well as economic inequality were, indeed, as divisive.<sup>8</sup> Basically, the same issues are on the agenda of churches in the West. How to preserve unity? How to do justice to a legitimate wish to maintain a certain identity, and at the same time prevent new injustices in terms of power and resources? Many such churches struggle with a history of being 'the national church'. It is hardly attractive for Protestant (Reformed or Lutheran) Christian communities from other backgrounds to join them.

Among the most difficult issues regarding inclusivity are those regarding gender and sexual orientation. In many Western contexts, the question is whether churches can and should accept moral standards that have been accepted in society. This produces a different dynamic. Still many churches struggle with the issue of the ordination of women. Even if a church order, for instance, does not use the criterion 'male' for the eligibility for the offices, practice at the local level can be different. Even more difficult is the issue of the unconditional acceptance of homosexual Christians in all respects of civil life and church life.

Discussion on inclusivity has to go on, in order to make gradual progress. It is first of all the responsibility of those in leadership to keep such issues on the agenda. We have to be aware that it is a matter of boundaries rather than borders. Borders are sharp and dividing lines between different groups. Boundaries are areas where people are able to really meet in spite of existing diversity, and to seek actively for mutual understanding and acceptance.

In issues like the ones discussed above different views of the impact of tradition (Scripture, confessional standards, as well as age-old customs) play a decisive role. This is where real encounters start, in the field of hermeneutics. The fact that truth is at stake enhances emotional involvement. If we do not agree with other Christians in such discussions, the temptation is to include a strong negative moral judgment: for instance, either homosexuality or homophobia should be called 'sin'. There seems to be no in-between. However, for the sake of truth and justice it might be better to refrain from such judgments, and to seek to continue our conversations on how to listen to tradition in our mutual discussions.

The very fact that many churches have to deal with increasing diversity – in terms of language, culture, but also in terms of views regarding issues like the

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<sup>8</sup> See: *Workbook*, 62–70.

ones above – implies that church order legislation needs additional instruments. Regulations tend to be uniform, but uniformity currently creates problems rather than solutions. Simple binary positions cannot respond to complex questions. The more complicated society is, the stronger the need for regulations that take such complicatedness into account. Less detailed legislation, focusing on general principles, might seem to be adequate, but might lead to certain inconsistencies and, worse, to legal inequality. However, more nuanced and detailed regulations – including exceptions under specific circumstances, the authority with those in charge to grant dispensations, and the delegation of powers to lower levels – easily lead to inconveniently arranged church orders.

## Authenticity

The apostolicity of a church can be expressed in its authenticity, referring to its *source*. A church may be expected to live out of the gospel message, and to be transparent in this respect. A church that is not ready to be accountable as to the way it understands its spiritual sources – for instance, out of fear that because of its ethical consequences its message might reduce the church's popularity – lacks all credibility. A congregation that seeks its strength in a sophisticated presentation, ignoring its roots in tradition, fails in a fundamental way as well. Nevertheless, also a church that argues with an appeal to Holy Scripture can be wide of the mark. Referring to the biblical message, churches too often have supported oppressive powers, or opposed social and cultural developments which in the end proved to be not only unavoidable but also salutary. Again and again 'ordinary' people have been the ones to suffer. In other words, every church has to find its own path between its being rooted in the Word of God and its limited capacities to entirely understand the significance thereof. According to the principle of the *ecclesia semper reformanda*, truth claims can never demand ultimate authority.

We believe that the Holy Spirit has entered our human history. The church is *en route*, even in its polity, oriented towards the Kingdom of God to come. The Holy Spirit creates historical visible forms. The administration of word and sacraments is a recurring instance of this fact. So, the church is dependent on the Holy Spirit, first of all where the gospel is proclaimed and where the visible signs of God's covenant with us are being shared. It is neither synodical decisions and declarations nor theological handbooks that are decisive of the way a church relates with

its tradition, but it is the *viva vox evangelii*, as present in a community that knows about epiclesis. Liturgy is, first of all, where the church lives from the sources of tradition.

A consideration of the role of confessions, including the role of (the abolition of) mutual condemnations, as well as an interpretation of what the 'teaching office' of the church could mean, might help us to find a framework for dealing with some related more practical church polity issues. Many Reformed churches regard the formal adoption of confessional documents as vital to the authenticity of the church. Often, a distinction is made between the ecumenical symbols, like the Nicene Creed, and the confessions from the Reformation era. This distinction qualifies the common history of the early church as a formative and constitutive period in the birth history of the church, in which decisions were taken on a level different from that of, for instance, the doctrinal decisions of the Reformation. In formulating its dogmas, the early church was in a way more of «a manifestation of the *una sancta*» than any church in any century afterwards. The connection with Reformed tradition is different in character. Confessional standards represent a split with a major part of world Christianity, as deemed necessary at that time, because of a *status confessionis*. But this cannot represent more than a provisional identity of a Reformed church: till further notice it is Reformed in character.<sup>9</sup> From a Reformed perspective confessing witness «requires commitment to the authority of scripture and the continuous willingness to put propositions and actions under God's judgment».<sup>10</sup> There is a fundamental possibility in the Reformed tradition to rephrase the contents of faith in new contexts. However, intensive discussions on this issue in many churches have shown that it is much easier to recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in the Creeds of the early church and in the Confessions of the Reformation than it is to discern the Spirit in the struggles of modern times.

Being a confessing church is not only a matter of maintaining historical standards, but it implies a mandate to give an authentic interpretation of tradition with a view to current questions. Indeed, most confessional traditions recognize some form of teaching office of the church, although terminology may be quite different. Reformed Christians

<sup>9</sup> The *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973) is illustrative of the provisional character of the confessional standards inherited from the Reformation. See: *Leuenberg Agreement: The Common Statement of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship* (1973), in *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 420–27.

<sup>10</sup> *Workbook*, 17.



know that all ecclesial statements are subject to revision and all institutions are subject to reform, because of the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit through history. This is precisely the reason why all believers are called to become mature in their own faith and able to discern and judge for themselves in all spiritual matters. Ultimately, this is the rationale behind the Presbyterian system of church governance.<sup>11</sup>

Church orders cannot safeguard the authenticity of a church, but they certainly have possibilities to at least enhance it. One of them regards the way candidates (ordinands) are admitted to ordained ministry. Most Reformed churches distinguish at least two formal procedures in this respect. The first step is to be made within the context of the denomination as a whole, be it in a meeting of, for instance, a classical assembly, or in a specific ceremony under authority of the board of synod. The procedure may include a requirement to sign a form of subscription in order to confirm allegiance to the confessional basis of the church, concluded with a vow. The second step is situated in the liturgical context of a congregation that has called the ordinand. In their worship books most churches have a prescribed liturgical form – or a set of such forms to choose from – for the admission of ordinands. Again, the ordinands will express their allegiance to Scripture and confession.

Finally, there is the issue of doctrinal discipline. If the true proclamation of the Word of God is at the heart of ordained office, it cannot be excluded that at some stage a judgment has to be made about the way an ordained minister proclaims the gospel. Doctrinal discipline may be regarded hardly possible, but it cannot be abandoned at the outset. It requires a sound understanding of the significance and limitations of ecclesial decision-making, a core issue in the next point, on conciliarity.

## Conciliarity

The church's conciliarity, based on unity as an attribute of the church, refers to *relations* within the church, and between churches. A church may be expected to truly connect people in the way it functions. A church that does not give a voice to those who participate in its communal life and, therefore, does not give them their due – e.g., for reasons of church politics or for the sake of peace and quiet – lacks all credibility. A congregation that only allows a specific category of its

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue*, in *Reformed World* 57 no. 2–3 (June–September 2007): 105–207, § 136.

committed members to contribute to its policies fails in a fundamental way as well. Nevertheless, dealing with diversity in working towards unity can be too much for an ecclesial community. The practical need to make choices easily leads to feelings of alienation with those who cannot identify with the choices made. In other words, every church has to find its own path in seeking a healthy balance of unity and diversity, without ending up in either uniformity – if not coercion – or a total lack of identity.

Conciliarity brings us closer to particular challenges churches and congregations are facing when they try to facilitate diversity without compromising ecclesial unity. The concept refers to the classical notion of *concilium*, i.e., ‘council’, including the entire range of denotations this term has in English. It, therefore, raises questions regarding ways of connecting what is diverse, its church polity implications included.

The fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches (Nairobi 1975) spoke of «the one Church» as «a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united».<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, the goal of the ecumenical movement is the creation of «sustained and sustaining relationships [...] expressed in conciliar gatherings». The seventh assembly (Canberra 1991) recognized the need for conciliar forms on all levels as an aspect of the overarching idea of the unity of the church as a *koinonia*.

The implications of conciliarity for ecumenical life can be clarified in steps of intensifying church unity, or ‘stages of conciliarity’. The first stage is given with recognition, in the sense of: seeing, knowing, understanding, and identifying. A church may identify certain elements in another church (for instance baptism) that remind it of what the Church of Christ is all about. A next stage might be recognition in the sense of acknowledgment and legitimization: one church sees another church as a legitimate expression of the Church of Christ, in a context of legitimate diversity. Then, the relationship between churches may be given shape in such a way that churches are ready to answer to each other for choices made, both in history and in present life: mutual accountability, which includes the willingness to change existing power positions and privileges. Such a relationship can thereupon produce mutual structures that give room to common decision-making.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. David M. Paton ed. *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi, 1975. The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November – 10 December, 1975.* (London: SPCK/ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 60; Günther Gassmann, *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963–1993* (Geneva: WCC 1993), 3.

Full organic unification of churches can be a final step, expressing conciliarity in its most intensive form.

The late Pope Frances stimulated discussion on synodality within his church. Also in ecumenical theology, synodality is introduced as a synonym and concrete expression of conciliarity, emphasizing its pneumatological character: everything depends on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is relevant in different aspects of church life. It refers to the place and responsibility of each member of the body of Christ in the communion of the church, by virtue of baptism, and it plays a role at all levels of ecclesial life: local, regional, and universal. On supralocal levels it stands for the convening in synods, and sometimes, in the ancient church, even in ecumenical synods like Nicaea, afterwards recognized by most historical churches. The WCRC also rightly speaks of «the spirit of the Reformed synodal tradition».<sup>13</sup>

This ecumenical reception of synodality should certainly also be interpreted as a recognition of the strengths of what is known as the presbyterial-synodical system of church polity, as it is based on the conviction that a system of checks and balances is needed to enhance the integrity of church life. From a church polity perspective, two connotations of synodality that have played a role in ecumenical debate over the last decades are worth mentioning, i.e., ‘common decision-making’ and ‘mutual accountability’. ‘Common decision-making’ has a strong church polity connotation: the procedures that facilitate decision-making and that determine the way people are involved are an important part of any church order. ‘Mutual accountability’ is a matter of church polity structures, but no less a matter of ethos. It is – like participation, consensus, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, equitability, inclusivity, and the rule of law – among the main aspects of ‘good governance’, an issue that has become increasingly important in modern life, both in the political arena and in, for instance, corporate life, through the development of good governance codes. In terms of church polity synodality presents a challenge at different levels.

Reformed churches emphasize the just participation of all in ecclesial decision-making, challenging all traditional forms of the exercise of hierarchical power: «Since the Uniting General Council in 2010, the WCRC has abolished majority decision-making and adopted a consensus methodology that aims at unanimous decisions».<sup>14</sup> Although majority decision-making is still a common practice in many

<sup>13</sup> *Workbook*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Workbook*, 14.

Reformed churches, the presbyterial-synodical church polity system shows its strength here, as it offers the best options both in terms of common decision-making and of mutual accountability. Its basic structure implies that all congregations within a particular denomination have a say, either by a direct representation at a synod on a denominational level, or in an indirect manner, through representatives in a regional body like the classical assembly or the presbytery. Common decision-making is the norm: within the framework of the church order regulations the assemblies have the power to take binding decisions. Mutual accountability is a self-evident effect: whenever appropriate, the delegates have to answer to the broader assemblies for decisions taken at a congregational level, and vice versa. It is also characteristic of this system that rules that affect all congregations, cannot be changed if all congregations have not received the opportunity to give some input. The presbyterial-synodical system allows for a degree of freedom and diversity, as long as those involved are ready to recognize the responsibilities of others.

Ordained ministers play a key role in shaping mutual accountability and common decision-making on all levels. The mutual recognition of ministries, therefore, is an obvious bottle-neck on the road to increased unity. Unfortunately, there is no reason whatsoever to be optimistic about the near future in this respect. But the challenge is still before the churches.

## Integrity

In light of the holiness of the church, the quality marker of the integrity of the church refers to the *boundaries* of the church. The Canons of Nicaea 325 mainly deal with issues of integrity. Although from the perspective of inclusivity no limitation can be accepted beforehand, not everything is acceptable within the church: the gospel itself implies limitations. This requires collective, collaborative discernment at all levels. A church may be expected to require from its members, and particularly from those who bear representative or ministerial responsibilities, that they meet the highest standards of ethical behavior. If not, it cannot acquire any moral authority in society. A church that tolerates injustice in its internal life, or that is not characterized by deep respect for human dignity in its external relationships, lacks all credibility. A congregation that does not first show reliability fails in a fundamental way. Nevertheless, every church community consists of vulnerable people, moral vulnerability included. Every church lives in a tension between its

vocation to be different from the world and its limited possibilities to really make a difference.

For Protestants, the old maxim *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* has a fundamental significance here also. Synods can severely hurt people through wrongful disciplinary procedures that result in schism. Or they can let injustice drag on endlessly, for instance, by turning a blind eye to sexual abuse of children. In such cases it is the church as an institution that commits injustice. Keeping this option open also serves to legitimize the sixteenth century Reformation, because its core was the restoration of a church that as such, its institutional form included, was seriously corrupted. The divergence between Roman Catholics and Protestants with respect to our understanding of the nature of sin in the church is related to the issue of continuity and discontinuity in church history.<sup>15</sup> From a Reformed perspective, a visible church can become a false church – although even in a false church God is able to reach people through the Word and Spirit. In that respect the institutional church is not decisive.

Whereas the Roman Catholic tradition is in danger of putting the instrumentality of the church beyond discussion, the Reformation runs the risk of rendering this instrumentality irrelevant. Calvin, however, is aware of the necessary instrumentality of the church as such. This is the background of his emphasis on the holiness of the congregation, as visible in his appreciation of ecclesial structures and, particularly, church discipline. Against this background we will now deal with several issues that are related to the integrity of the church.

It is, of course, no coincidence that many of those Christian churches that emphasize the moral aspects of Christian life – including fast-growing communities like the Evangelicals and the Pentecostals – reject infant baptism. This fact as such implies that those churches that have adopted the practice of infant baptism are once again challenged to rethink it, in the context of their ecumenical commitment. In my view, the strength of infant baptism still is its point of departure in God's love and grace, which precedes all human expressions of faith and commitment. Salvation and holiness of life can only be received in dependence on God's grace in Christ through the Holy Spirit. However, it cannot be denied that infant baptism has also been possible for centuries as a correlate with the *corpus christianum*, in which church and society were strongly interwoven. Infant baptism was a

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<sup>15</sup> See: *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), § 93, 122f.

manifestation of belonging to that society, too. Moreover, for centuries individual choices were by far less prominent in human self-understanding than they are now, at least in Western society. I can imagine that in certain communal cultural contexts in the global South, infant baptism is still hardly controversial, but this is no longer true for Western society. In order to avoid a «practice of apparently indiscriminate baptism»,<sup>16</sup> church orders should not only promote infant baptism, but also include adequate procedures – in terms of pastoral guidance – in order to keep the sacrament holy, indeed.

It is only from the perspective of mutual responsibility for the integrity of church life that the slightly controversial subject of church discipline can be dealt with adequately. If considered in and of itself, misunderstandings can easily arise. Church-historical studies of the practice of church discipline do not offer a very positive picture of the capability of churches to use this church orderly instrument. Discipline was and sometimes still is used to reinforce existing powers, both in church and in society. Offenses in the area of sexuality have often been high on the list of practices to be the subject of church discipline, but, for instance, corruption of those in economic or political (or, for that matter, ecclesial) power, or other forms of abuse of power have not been featured very often. At least in the Western world, many churches currently hardly use the instruments of church discipline – or at least they do so much less frequently than before. This is not only due to a certain degree of embarrassment about the past, but also due to cultural aspects like individualization (with an increased appreciation of personal freedom), and moral pluralism: on many pivotal ethical issues hardly any consensus exists. At the same time, some specific kinds of immoral behavior seem to meet more aversion and rejection than ever before: the disclosure of sexual abuse of children and women has discredited churches, including Reformed churches, in the eyes of many contemporaries. In this situation a differentiated set of church order regulations is required. On the one hand, churches should maintain clear church order procedures that make it possible for those involved to file complaints against those who act against a Christian lifestyle, particularly when they are office-bearers. Those responsible for the well-being of the church should not hesitate to address such issues, to investigate any complaints, and to deal with them in an effective way. On the other hand, it is pivotal to apply broadly accepted standards of ‘fair trial’ in this respect, in order to prevent any abuse of power by those responsible for church

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<sup>16</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), B/§ 16.

discipline procedures. The Reformed view of the exercise of church discipline as a «mark of the (true) church» reflects a valuable insight. The integrity of church life can make it necessary to discipline or even to expel certain members of the church, but any final judgment on the heart of people should always be left to God.

The exercise of discipline is a key responsibility of (ordained) ministry. In most churches of the Reformed tradition this responsibility lies with assemblies consisting of office-bearers or independent courts. It can only function as an aspect of pastoral guidance, and, therefore, should be closely linked to the responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of sacraments. In other words, it is an integral aspect of oversight, *episkopé*. Oversight is not about a kind of administrative supervision, which would naturally include a certain degree of hierarchy; it is rather meant to enhance sanctification, which is one of the main responsibilities of ordained ministry in the Reformed tradition as well. Its core is the unity of the congregation, in its continuity, its faithfulness to its confession, and its vocation in the world.

Maybe the most difficult aspect of integrity regards ‘church politics’. Transparency of decision-making processes is pivotal, both with regard to the rules in place as with regard to the way they are applied. But it is no exception that sometimes arguments play a role without being brought forward explicitly – it can be about peace in the church, about the need not to offend certain (powerful) groups or people in the church, let alone the sum total of major and minor personal interests (like status and position) of those involved in decision-making. Sometimes, church politics seems to be inevitable. Church order regulations cannot prevent them from playing a role: at best, risks in this respect are limited through rules regarding the public nature of assemblies, transparent rules for decision-making, and a balanced system of administrative law which gives those subject to the decisions adequate options to challenge the validity of decisions taken.

# Confessions and Contemporary Witness

## Introduction

In the long shadow of empire and dogma, the Nicene Creed has endured – not merely as a fixed text of doctrinal fidelity but as a living, contested, and reinterpreted symbol of the Christian faith. This section gathers seven distinct voices that return to Nicaea not as triumphalists guarding sacred ground but as pilgrims, prophets, and reformers engaging a tradition whose meanings are still unfolding. Their chapters do not rehearse the creed’s history to preserve its authority. Instead, they seek to re-member Nicaea – reconstructing its fragments from within the cracks of marginalization, colonial encounter, ecclesial struggle, and the radical hope of reform. What emerges is a deeply liberative, polyphonic, and contextually engaged re-appropriation of the creed – one that refuses the empire’s logic of exclusion and turns instead to solidarity, ecological consciousness, and justice-infused communion. In their act of *receiving Nicaea today*, the authors embody a global Reformed commitment to confessing in a dynamic and dialogical tradition that embraces diverse cultural contexts and prophetic critique. This section invites the Reformed and wider ecumenical community to acknowledge the ongoing vocation of confession as a shared and transforming act across the global body of Christ.

**Piet Naudé** opens the section with a robust theological grounding of Nicaea’s enduring significance within the Reformed tradition. Drawing on Scripture, Calvin, and Barth, he shows that the Nicene faith undergirds the confessional identity of Reformed churches – not only through early Protestant documents like the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism but also in the radical witness of the South African Belhar Confession. His chapter challenges the post-Reformation suspicion of creeds as imperial relics, offering instead a vision of confessing as a liberative, ongoing process rooted in both catholicity and prophetic justice.



From South Asia, **Allan Palanna** retrieves and reclaims the Nicene Creed's opening «We believe» (*pisteúomen*) as a radical act of communal faith and resistance against the fragmented individualism of Western Christendom and the violence of global capitalism. Situating the creed within the Capitalocene – a world marked by ecological collapse and economic injustice – Palanna argues that Trinitarian faith must become a grammar of liberation. In the hands of Dalit and tribal communities, the creed is not a relic to be recited but a theological act of witness: a naming of God in the face of empire, a cry for justice, and a liturgy of resistance.

In a powerful re-reading from Indonesia, **Joas Adiprasetya** critiques the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed for its striking omission of Jesus' public ministry. Centring the 2014 *Konfesi GKI* of the Indonesian Christian Church, he explores how a contextual, holistic confession must recover Jesus' embodied life – his healing, befriending, liberating actions – as a sacrament of everyday justice. His chapter insists that Christological confession must not skip over lived human suffering, for it is precisely in the spaces of hunger, touch, and friendship that the kingdom draws near. For Adiprasetya, creed and life must kiss; doctrine must walk the dusty streets of Galilee.

**HyeRan Kim-Cragg** and **Don Schweitzer** then guide us into the Canadian landscape, where the Nicene faith intersects with the ecclesial imagination of The United Church of Canada (UCC). They trace how the UCC has reinterpreted Nicene affirmations in two doctrinal statements – *A New Creed* (1968) and *A Song of Faith* (2006) – each reflecting contextual, justice-oriented reformulations of God as creator, Christ as liberator, and the Spirit as companion. The chapter does not reject Nicaea but stretches it, breathes into it a new grammar for today's church: one that centers ecological commitment, communal worship, and an eschatology that dares to dream of justice even while living it now.

In a Scottish key, **Liam Jerrold Fraser** chronicles the Church of Scotland's shifting relationship with the Nicene Creed, from Reformation-era marginalization to its 2023 incorporation into the church's *Book of Confessions*. Fraser carefully traces the ecclesiological and theological negotiations that made this possible – pointing to growing pluralism, ecumenical urgency, and the need for doctrinal clarity amid moral debates. Yet this inclusion is not without tension. Evangelical and diaspora communities often resist the creedal form, and experiential faith practices challenge doctrinal norms. Still, Fraser's analysis reveals a hopeful synthesis – where the Nicene Creed anchors the church's witness while allowing space for contextual embodiment and ongoing reformation.

From within the Wesleyan tradition, **Richard Clutterbuck** proposes a ‘generous orthodoxy’ rooted in the co-inherence of *orthodoxy* (right belief), *orthopraxis* (right action), and *orthopathy* (right affection). For him, the creed is not a boundary marker but a gift – one that invites praise, justice, and transformative encounter with the Triune God. Drawing on Charles Wesley’s hymns and the Methodist emphasis on the social gospel, Clutterbuck reclaims Nicaea as a resource for communities seeking to embody faith not only in their theology but also in their worship, compassion, and prophetic imagination.

Finally, **Bernhard Knorn** confronts the ambivalent status of the Nicene Creed in contemporary Catholic theology. While the creed remains foundational, its language, categories, and epistemologies increasingly feel distant from today’s faithful. Knorn explores how liturgical, pastoral, and ecumenical contexts breathe new relevance into the creed – proposing that its authority now rests not merely on conciliar decree but on its ongoing reception by the believing community. The creed’s future lies in its re-appropriation: as a flexible, Spirit-infused narrative capable of uniting rather than silencing, inspiring rather than controlling.

Together, these chapters do not merely comment on the Nicene Creed. They reclaim, critique, and broaden it – not only emanating from established institutions of church and academia, but also from the underside of history, and from the margins of ecclesial power. They turn creedal memory into a site of resistance, hope, and prophetic reimagination. This is Nicaea decolonized, pluralized, and re-membered. In receiving Nicaea today, the authors of this section do not understand the creed as a weapon of conformity, but as a dance of shared faith – rooted in justice, shaped by suffering, and sung in the many tongues of God’s people.



# The Enduring Influence of the Nicene Faith on our Reformed Confessions

*Piet Naudé*

This Creed has been more universally received than any other symbol of the faith, as normative expression of the essential content of the apostolic faith.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The first part of this essay draws on biblical sources as well as the work of John Calvin and Karl Barth to explain why confessions and continued confessing are inherently part of faith communities and distinctive features of the Reformed tradition. The second part tracks the foundational influence of Trinitarian theology in the Nicene Creed on the Reformed confessions. Short references are made to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt with a more expanded discussion of the Belhar Confession. In the short concluding section, the foundational role of the Nicene faith in shaping the Reformed tradition is recalled and confirmed despite valid criticism against aspects of the creed itself.

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<sup>1</sup> World Council of Churches, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 4

## Why is Continued Confessing a Mark of the Reformed Tradition?

### The Confessional Aspect of the Creeds in the Biblical Traditions

Confessions of faith or creedal statements expressing core beliefs in God occur in both the Old and New Testaments. They played a significant role in shaping the identity and liturgy of the people of Israel and the early Christian church.

Probably the most famous expression of faith in the Old Testament is the well-known *Shema* as recorded in Deuteronomy 6.4–5: «Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength». This creedal expression is later confirmed by Jesus in Mark 12.29–30: «The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength». This is a clear expression of the continuation of the faith between the two Testaments with a focus on the oneness of God and a call to complete devotion to God.

The New Testament creedal expressions mostly relate to the Lordship of Jesus and the significance of his earthly ministry. It is the core task of the apostles to pass on this tradition as stated by Paul: «For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve» (1 Cor 15.3–5). The translation of this core faith is set into what is considered to be a baptismal formulation: «If you declare with your mouth, (Jesus is Lord), and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved» (Rom 10.9). Perhaps the most elaborate of these expressions is the beautiful hymnal in Philippians 2.5–11 which is a ‘summary’ of Jesus’s ministry, ending with the confession that «[...] every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father».

Restoring the ultimate authority of the Scriptures for God’s revelation was one of the prime focal points of the Reformation. The two Testaments clearly demonstrate ‘the need’ for communal declarations of core beliefs *inter alia* for fostering a shared identity, use in liturgy and catechesis and for apologetic purposes. These were not ‘stagnant’ formulations, but were adjusted to different contexts and were

under continual expansion and renewal in line with the salvation history recorded in the Scriptures. When that tradition ‘closed’ with the established canon, this task did not end. The creeds of the early church as well as the manifold confessions associated with the Reformed tradition are a testimony to the ongoing confessing church.<sup>2</sup>

But how does the Reformed tradition understand this task? And where does Nicaea fit in? This is a complex question, and for the sake of simplicity, we turn briefly to John Calvin and Karl Barth to seek an understanding of the Reformed tradition’s continued confessing.

## Understanding Reformed Confessions: John Calvin and Karl Barth

### John Calvin: The Power of the Church to Deliver Doctrine<sup>3</sup>

After discussion in his *Institutes*<sup>4</sup> on the marks and government of the church, Calvin (IV.8.1) considers the spiritual power of the church in terms of doctrine, jurisdiction (legislation) and in enacting laws. It is the first of these powers that concerns us here: the authority to deliver dogmas and the power to interpret them.

Calvin enters into a broad discussion of the Old Testament prophets and makes clear that «[...] whenever they are called to office, they are enjoined not to bring anything of their own, but to speak by the mouth of the Lord».<sup>5</sup> Referring to the examples of Moses, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Calvin reiterates that «none of the prophets opened his mouth unless preceded by the word of the Lord».<sup>6</sup> Their power and

<sup>2</sup> There are many collections of creeds and Reformed confessions. Examples are Lukas Vischer ed., *Reformed Witness Today. A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches* (Frankfurt am Main: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle, 1982) and Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Calvin uses the word ‘doctrine’ in the general sense of ‘teaching’ and in the specific sense of ‘dogma’ or ‘confession’. For a discussion, see P. Opitz, *Calvins theologische Hermeneutik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> References are to John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.2.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.3

authority rests solely on their being «organs of the Holy Spirit» in that the prophets were «strictly bound not to deliver anything but what they received».<sup>7</sup>

The same holds for the apostles in the New Testament: Their authority rests on the fact that they do not speak «their own pleasure, but faithfully deliver the commands of him by whom they are sent».<sup>8</sup> Just as Christ relies on the Father for his doctrine (John 7.16), so the apostles are sent to teach the nations whatsoever is commanded by Christ, and «not what they themselves had at random fabricated».<sup>9</sup>

The power of the church to deliver doctrine is therefore a limited power. It is not infinite, «but is subject to the word of the Lord and, as it were, included in it».<sup>10</sup> The word of the Lord refers firstly to Christ as the only true manifestation of God. The Father appointed the Son as our teacher, «ordering us to seek the whole doctrine of salvation from him alone, to depend on him alone, in short, to listen only to his voice».<sup>11</sup>

But God was pleased to commit and consign his [sic] word to writing, and the Scriptures therefore serve as source and yardstick of all doctrine. Under guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the church is to remember the teachings of Christ. The supreme power that pastors of the church carry is to boldly witness to the word of the Lord, and not to coin new doctrine or design new decrees which are mere «fictions of men».<sup>12</sup> Yes, «God deprives man of the power of production of new doctrine, in order that he alone may be our master in spiritual teaching, as he alone is true, and can neither lie nor deceive».<sup>13</sup>

Calvin, however, does not deny that the church has the power to «deliver dogmas»,<sup>14</sup> but then such dogmas must be judged by the word of God to see whether «the word of the Lord is faithfully preserved and maintained in purity», or whether these are doctrines «extraneous to the word of God».<sup>15</sup>

He fiercely denies the Roman Catholic view that the promise of the Spirit to the Church automatically implies that the church cannot err. If a Council meets and acts in contempt of the word of God by coining dogmas contrary to the word of God, the church strays from the right path and misuses its authority to demand assent

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.3.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.3.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.8.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.4.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.7.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.9.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.9.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.12.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.13.

to those decisions.<sup>16</sup> In simple terms: «[...]we cannot concede to the church any new doctrine; in other words, allow her to teach and oracularly deliver more than the Lord has revealed in his word».<sup>17</sup>

The word of the Lord is thus the source of dogma that may never state more than the word, and the word is the measure by which dogma is to be interpreted. Calvin is clear: this restriction does not mean that no new words or phrases may be designed to express the truth of the gospel. In Nicaea we confess that the Son is «consubstantial»(*homo-ousios*) with the Father, and although this term does not appear in Scripture, it does «simply declare the genuine meaning of Scripture».<sup>18</sup>

If the measure of the word of the Lord, the only «sure law of discrimination»,<sup>19</sup> is applied to the Councils, not all pass the test. If measured by the authority of Scripture, the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I and Chalcedon are to be affirmed, as «they contain nothing but the pure and genuine interpretation of Scripture».<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from this exposition of Calvin's thought that Christ as attested to in Scripture is the only basis for the authority of the church to formulate doctrine. The limits of the Scriptures in the confessions of the church are twofold: Scriptures are the source of doctrine and such doctrine is in itself an interpretation of Scripture in a specific context. And when the church does accept or proclaim doctrine, only Scripture acts as judge of its orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup>

This tendency to 'relativise' dogma and subject it to the constant proviso of the word of God is one of the grounds for the multiplicity of confessions in the Reformed tradition. This is confirmed and further explained in Barth's discussion of the task of dogmatics and the nature of Reformed confessions.

## **Karl Barth: Confessions as the Insights Currently Given to the Whole Christian Church<sup>22</sup>**

In explaining the task of dogmatics Barth takes at least three factors into account that highlights the provisional nature of dogmatics and subsequently of confes-

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.14.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.15.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.8.16.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.9.9.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.9.8.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.9.9.

<sup>22</sup> There are three primary guiding texts from Barth's vast *oeuvre*. In historical order, they are: "The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed" (1925) published



sions. First, dogmatics as a science shares with all sciences the trait of always being «preliminary and limited» and merely an attempt at knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

For Christian doctrine this ‘attempt’ is specifically related to the gospel, which is «boundless, eternal and therefore inexhaustible», so that no doctrine is able to reproduce its fullness. The gospel of Jesus Christ relates to God’s own perfect work and – measured by it – our human descriptions are always imperfect.<sup>24</sup> Second, dogmatics does not fall from heaven nor does the Christian church exist in heaven, but amid earthly and human circumstances, so that dogmatics that studies the ‘what’ (content) of the church’s proclamation always reflects knowledge «as it has been given to us today» – knowledge that is relative and liable to error.<sup>25</sup>

Third – and more directly relevant to our topic – the guidance of the confessions, the «witness of the Fathers» has to be taken seriously, but always keeping in mind that the confessions stand under Scripture and have a relative and non-binding authority.<sup>26</sup> Holy Scripture and the confessions do not stand on the same level.

We do not have to respect the Bible and tradition with the like reverence and love, not even the tradition in its most dignified manifestations. No Confession of the Reformation or of our own day can claim the respect of the Church in the same degree that Scripture in its uniqueness deserves it.<sup>27</sup>

Let us cite the full definition with which Barth starts his 1925 address to World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches:

A Reformed Creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guid-

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in *Church and Society: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*, with an introduction by T.F. Torrance. (London: SCM, 1962), 112–135. The section on the nature of confession as discussed in Holy Scripture and authority in the church in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2: *The Revelation of God*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956); and the elaboration on witness and the *status confessionis* in *Church Dogmatics* III/4: *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951).

<sup>23</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 18.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> See Georg Plasger’s authoritative work, *Die relative Autorität des Bekenntnisses bei Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 2000) for an interpretation of Barth’s understanding of confessions.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 13. For a detailed and instructive discussion of Barth and the social context of these writings on confession, read Dirk J. Smit, “Social Transformation and Confessing the Faith? Karl Barth’s Views on Confession Revisited,” *Scriptura* 72 (2000), 67–85.

ance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures alone.<sup>28</sup>

From this rich formulation it is clear that for Barth one needs to hold on to the ambiguity of Reformed confessions: They are specific and local («within a geographically limited area,» providing «guidance for its own doctrine and life») and provisional («until further action») but at the same time universal («the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church») and always subject to the revelation of God in Christ and the Scriptures.

The corpus of confessions within the Reformed tradition shows a marked fluidity and openness derived from its lived context-dependency, the specificity of its content, and its provisional authority. The context-orientation refers to the fact that, if the church lives under the living word of God and is always being reformed according to the word of God, there will always yet again arise occasions where the proclamation of the church is directed at a new situation requiring the word of God to be spoken differently to be a word for that place and that time.

The question then arises: What impact did the Nicene Creed and faith have on the Reformed confessions with their open and dynamic character? For this we only select four examples: A short reference to the so-called *Three Formulas of Unity* and a slightly longer discussion on the impact of Nicaea on the *Belhar Confession*.

## What is the Enduring Influence of the Nicene Faith on Reformed Confessions?

Over the centuries, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed<sup>29</sup> (NC) has influenced the theological expressions of various Christian traditions, including Reformed theology. Among these expressions, the *Three Forms of Unity* – the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism (HC), and the Canons of Dordt – are significant texts that encapsulate Reformed doctrine. Each of these documents integrates the central tenets of the Nicene Creed in their theological formulations, especially concerning the nature of God, the person of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” 112.

<sup>29</sup> For the textual discussions below, the final Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed 381 (abbreviated as NC) version is used but – where appropriate – references are made to the earlier Nicaea 325.

These three confessions also illustrate the varied ‘motivating factors’ behind confessions: apologetics, catechesis, and defending orthodoxy. The Belgic Confession was – in the spirit of 1 Peter 1.15 – specifically formulated as part of the apologetics available to early Reformers against the prosecution from Catholic authorities. The HC grew from the need to teach newly converted believers the basic truths of the Reformation (catechesis), whereas the Canons of Dordt were aimed at refuting Arminianism. All three took the Nicene faith as reference point and uncontested assumption.

### **The Nicene Faith Shapes the Belgic Confession (1561)**

The Belgic Confession, written by Guido de Brès in 1561, was intended to provide a succinct summary of Reformed doctrine and a defence of Protestant beliefs against the accusations of Roman Catholicism. One of the central themes of the Belgic Confession is ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity’, a concept directly rooted in the Nicene Creed. Article 8 of the Belgic Confession, titled ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity,’ affirms the Nicene understanding of one God in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – emphasizing the co-equality and co-eternity of each divine person. It states:

We believe in one God, who is one single essence, in whom there are three persons; really, truly and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties, namely Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

This article directly reflects the Nicene Creed’s affirmation of one God in three persons, particularly in its emphasis on the unity of essence shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The language of «one single essence» mirrors the Nicene Creed’s use of *homoousios* to describe the full divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Confession’s reference to the three persons as «equal from eternity in one and the same essence», aligns with the Nicene Creed’s teaching that the Son is «eternally begotten of the Father» and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

Through these formulations, the Belgic Confession affirms the Nicene Creed’s crucial doctrine of the Trinity, showing its ongoing relevance in Reformed theology.

## The Nicene Faith Shapes the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The HC, published in 1563, is a teaching tool that aims to explain Christian faith in a question-and-answer format. It covers various aspects of Christian doctrine, including the Trinity, the person of Christ, and salvation. The Nicene Creed's influence is most apparent in the catechism's treatment of God's nature and the person of Jesus Christ. The first question of the catechism asks, «What is your only comfort in life and death?» The answer declares: «That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who[...]has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood». This answer implicitly reflects the Nicene Creed's affirmation of the divinity of Christ, particularly in its statement that Christ is «true God and true man». The Catechism's focus on Christ's work of salvation aligns with the Nicene Creed's declaration that Christ “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man.”

In question 33, the catechism elaborates further on the significance of Christ's dual nature: «Why is He called (the only begotten Son of God) since we also are children of God? Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God, but we are children of God by adoption, through grace, for the sake of Christ's merit». Here, the catechism emphasizes the unique and eternal sonship of Christ, drawing from the Nicene Creed's teaching on the eternal generation of the Son. By highlighting Christ's divinity and humanity, the HC mirrors the Nicene Creed's central assertion about the person of Christ, reinforcing the significance of the Incarnation in Reformed doctrine.

## The Nicene Faith Shapes the Canons of Dordt (1619)

The Canons of Dordt, formulated at the Synod of Dordt in 1619, were a response to the theological controversy sparked by the rise of Arminianism. The Canons addressed the nature of divine grace, election, and salvation, and they continue to serve as a foundational statement for Reformed doctrine. The Nicene Creed's influence on the Canons of Dordt is evident in their treatment of the doctrine of Christ, particularly in the Canons' emphasis on the sufficiency and necessity of Christ's atoning work for salvation.

The Canons affirm that Christ's sacrifice was «all-sufficient» for the salvation of the elect, a teaching that mirrors the Nicene Creed's assertion that Christ «suffered for us» and «was crucified under Pontius Pilate». In the second head of Doctrine,

the Canons explain the efficacy of Christ's atonement for the elect, emphasizing that Christ's sacrifice is both «sufficient» and «effective» for those whom God has chosen for salvation. This reflects the Nicene Creed's central affirmation that Christ, through his death and resurrection, accomplished the work of salvation for all who believe.

Furthermore, the Canons of Dordt echo the Nicene Creed's teaching on the Holy Spirit. In the third and fourth heads of Doctrine, the Canons affirm that the Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ to believers, working faith in their hearts. This connection to the Nicene Creed is found in the Creed's affirmation that the Holy Spirit «proceeds from the Father and the Son» and «gives life to the Church». The Canons of Dordt maintain that the Holy Spirit works through the preaching of the gospel, calling the elect to salvation by the power of God's grace.

Let us turn to the most recent Reformed confession and how – on the one hand– it was shaped by the Nicene faith, but also how – on the other hand – it dynamically reinterprets the creed.

### **The Nicene Faith Shapes and is Reinterpreted by the Belhar Confession (1986)<sup>30</sup>**

The Belhar confession<sup>31</sup> is named after the suburb in Cape Town where it was officially adopted by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986 to positively state the truth of the gospel in light of the false theology underlying the legally adopted system of racial separation in South Africa. The confession is structured around confession-rejection clauses and consists of five sub-sections and an accompanying letter: The first and last sections encompass the three middle sections on unity, reconciliation, and justice which are discussed below. It is argued that the Nicene faith both inspired and was reinterpreted by the Belhar confession as a contextual but universal expression of the apostolic faith.

<sup>30</sup> The text and accompanying letter is found here: Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, *The Belhar Confession with Accompanying Letter*, accessed July 15, 2025, [https://unitingpresbyterian.org/web/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/belhar\\_confession\\_with\\_letter.pdf](https://unitingpresbyterian.org/web/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/belhar_confession_with_letter.pdf). See also the text of *The Belhar Confession* in the appendix.

The following paragraphs are abstracted from the longer and more detailed discussion in Piet Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) which is a one-volume theological discussion on the background, content, ecumenicity, and reception of the confession.

<sup>31</sup> An accessible discussion of Belhar is found in Daan Cloete and Dirk Smit eds., *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

## ***From the Unity of God to the Unity of the Church***

The Nicene Creed was formulated in the context of the development of the early church's understanding of the Trinity. One can therefore expect that the three persons would be confessed both in their own personhood and in their inter-relationship to one another. The first thing that strikes one is the strong emphasis on unity in the Nicene Creed: We believe in **one** God, **one** Lord who is of **one being** with the Father, the Holy Spirit who **with the Father and the Son** is worshipped and glorified; and we believe in **one** church. The focal point of the unity is the Trinity as **one God** (against forms of tri-theism) where Father, Son and Spirit are **equally divine** (against forms of sub-ordinationism) and from whose grace **the church as one church** is established (against ecclesial division due to conflicting doctrines).

It is instructive to note that Belhar takes the outcome of the struggle for the church's Trinitarian faith as confessed in the Nicene Creed as its very starting point: «We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit». In this manner Belhar establishes itself on the ecumenical faith of the church through the ages. The unity of God, so eloquently expressed in the Nicene Creed, is again taken up in the very last sentence of Belhar: «To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever». The fact that Belhar both starts and finishes with a Trinitarian formulation, embeds the whole confession in the key traits of the Nicene faith and situates the whole confession within a Trinitarian 'frame'.

Due to the nature of the heresies of its time, the Trinitarian faith is itself expounded and defended in the NC. Belhar assumes this faith and uses it as its starting point in order to shift the focus from the unity of God to the unity of the church. The reason is that the heretical situation against which Belhar witnesses, is an ecclesial one of separated churches for people of different racial descent. In Belhar, there is therefore a 'contraction' of the Nicene Creed so that belief in the triune God is immediately linked to the church in a double movement, each of which confirms the NC in an interesting way:

In article 1, the phrase «We believe in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit [...]» is followed by «[...] who gathers, protects, and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as he has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end». This is in line with the structure of both the NC and the *Apostolicum*. But where the NC had to give extensive detailed formulations on the pre-existence

of the Son and the Spirit,<sup>32</sup> Belhar links the triune God's 'pre-existence' («from the beginning of the world») and 'post-existence' («and will do to the end») not so much to Godself, as to the establishment and protection of the church. To a certain extent, the NC focuses on the «immanent» Trinity<sup>33</sup> whereas Belhar focuses on the «economic» Trinity as manifested in the history of the church.

This is immediately followed by the second movement, i.e., in article 2.1, which deals in its entirety with the unity of the church: «We believe in one, holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family». In a very delicate way, Belhar here draws on both the NC and the *Apostolicum*. For the unity of the church, which is the core focus of article 2, Belhar takes over the NC adjective of **one** church.

In the light of the heresy against which Belhar confessed, it thus derives the unity of the church in article 2 from the NC and elaborates this unity in the four ensuing paragraphs (unity as gift and obligation; unity as visible; unity as manifested in a variety of ways; unity established in freedom). The theological structure of the NC is clearly maintained, but in line with the context and heresy that Belhar is addressing, the trinitarian basis of faith is translated into more elaborate ecclesiological terms. Hence, the unity of the triune God becomes motivation for and is reflected in the unity of the community of saints. In this way, articles 1 and 2 of Belhar, as well as the closing section of article 5, are in full consonance with the apostolic faith expressed in the NC.

### ***From the Humanity of Christ to Reconciliation in the World***

The connection between the NC and Belhar, concerning the humanity of Christ, is evident from three crucial phrases in the Nicene Creed that put the whole of Christ's earthly work in a strong *pro nobis*-framework: «**For us all and for our salvation** he came down from heaven» is followed a few lines later by «**For our sake** he was crucified under Pontius Pilate» (my emphases). In a unique way the NC makes clear that Christ's work was directed at humans and their salvation and

<sup>32</sup> This emphasis is evident in the description of the Son as «eternally begotten» (*gennethenta pro patoon toon aioonoon*) and as «begotten not made» (*gennythenta ou poiethenvta*) and the Holy Spirit as «Lord» (*kurios*) who proceeds (*ekporeuomenon*) from the Father.

<sup>33</sup> This distinction is obviously a construction we put on the NC today. Due to the heresies it had to confront, the intra-trinitarian confession was necessary, but – as will be seen below – the NC in its Christology is as historically related as any 'economic' theology could be.

should therefore be interpreted in such a way that the reality of this salvation is honored. Although the NC does not provide us with a specific salvation-historical theology, it would be fair to suggest that this salvation is epitomized by incarnation-as-reconciliation. Christ was crucified «for our sake» in the sense that he took our sins upon himself and was crucified in our place. And this he did «for us all», reconciling humankind to God (Col 1.15–20). The first fruit of this vicarious suffering is the church, namely those reconciled to God and one another, because they accept Christ's work as «for our sake».

In this manner, the transition from unity to reconciliation, so central to articles 2 and 3 in Belhar, is made within the framework of the NC itself. In article 2, Belhar confesses that: «Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another».<sup>34</sup> Christ's «work of reconciliation» is a theological summary of the incarnated Christ, and the *pro nobis* character is reflected in the church as a community of reconciled people, in the same way that the NC links the church to the work of the Trinity. Belhar therefore rests fully on the basis of the incarnate Christ, as confessed in the NC, and, under threat of a serious defilement of the gospel, expands the NC to spell out what the concrete implications of Christ's work «for our salvation» and «for our sake» are.

Belhar's concern is therefore with the **visibility** of our salvation and therefore substantially confesses the manifest **unity of the church** in article 2 and **reconciliation amongst people in the world** as fruit of this «beneficial work» in the whole of article 3. Needless to say, making salvation concrete is for Belhar an ecclesiological matter, because «We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ».<sup>35</sup> In this way, both the Christological and ecclesiological implications of the NC are made explicit in the context from which Belhar was proclaimed.

## From the Spirit as Giver of Life to Justice for the Destitute, the Poor, and the Wronged

Text-comparisons show that most of the additions of the NC (AD 381) to the original Nicene text (AD 325) relate to the article on the Spirit. For our purposes, two of

<sup>34</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 2.2.

<sup>35</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 3.



those additions are of great importance: The Spirit is confessed as «the giver of life» and as the one «who has spoken through the prophets».

The first formulation relates to John 6.63 («the Spirit gives life»), Romans 8.2 («the law of the Spirit of life») and 2 Corinthians 3.6 («the letter brings death, but the Spirit brings life»), and emphasizes the life-giving work of the Spirit where life is understood in both physical (see context of bread in John 6) and spiritual terms. The second formulation relates to 2 Peter 1.21 and brings a unity between the Spirit and the word of God spoken through the prophets. The intention of the NC is clear: Only God gives life, and it is God that who speaks through the prophets; therefore, the Spirit is equally part of the Godhead and should be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son.

In Belhar, the work of the Spirit is confessed as «Life-giver» and «Word-giver». These two characteristics are intimately related to one another, especially in a Trinitarian context, and they are also externally related to four other realities: the establishment of the church;<sup>36</sup> the unity in the church;<sup>37</sup> reconciliation in society and the world,<sup>38</sup> and ultimately justice for the destitute, the poor and the wronged.<sup>39</sup> Let us cite these references to the work of the Spirit to demonstrate how closely Belhar follows the NC:

Article 1: «We believe in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and, cares for his Church **by his Word and his Spirit** [...]» The manner in which the triune God establishes and leads the church through history, is via the Word-giving and life-giving Spirit.

In article 2.3, it is confessed that: «[...] through the working of God's Spirit it [...]» (the unity established by Christ's reconciliation) «[...] is a binding force [...]»; that believers «[...] are filled with one Spirit,»<sup>40</sup> and «[...] that the variety of spiritual gifts [...] as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service [...]».<sup>41</sup>

In article 3, we find a much more direct link to the Nicene text. After confessing that God has entrusted the message of reconciliation to the church, Belhar follows with a twofold repetition of the Nicene phrase referred to above:

<sup>36</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 1.

<sup>37</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 2.

<sup>38</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 3.

<sup>39</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 4.

<sup>40</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 2.5.

<sup>41</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 2.6.

We believe that God **by his lifegiving Word and Spirit** has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity; that God **by his lifegiving Word and Spirit** will enable His people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.

This powerful formulation gives a distinct cosmic and social interpretation of the Word-giving and Life-giving Spirit because God (negatively) conquers social irreconciliation and (positively) opens **«new possibilities of life for society and the world»**.

This enables Belhar to make the third and last transition from unity and reconciliation to justice in article 4.1:

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity he is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged and that he calls his Church to follow Him in this [...].

Belhar commences its fourth article with an important theological statement about the manner of God's revelation to the world. God is known to us via Jesus Christ and the Spirit. And the NC already confessed that the incarnation of Christ occurred by the power of the Spirit. What Belhar does, is to link Jesus' incarnation via the Spirit (i.e., his revelation of God) not only to his birth from the Virgin Mary, his crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection, but to the manner of his ministry in the world. The crucial 'markers' of Christ's humiliation and humanity – so well-known from both the NC and the *Apostolicum* – is 'filled in' with the 'markers' of his self-donating ministry in the world as clearly attested to in the gospels.

On this basis, Belhar can formulate in revelatory language: «We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace [...]».<sup>42</sup> This is the same God who in Christ «[...] for us all and for our salvation [...]» came down from heaven (NC) to establish reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth (Belhar). Belhar gives a further concrete explication of the 'Incarnated One' and in a situation of structural injustice and of human oppression, confesses that Christ's ministry «[...] for us all [...]» became a ministry focused on the destitute, the poor, and the wronged, because in God there is no injustice. This is the apostolic faith of the ecumenical church today, says the World Council of Churches' (WCC) report. For people who suffer, the message is clear:

<sup>42</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, article 4.

God's solidarity enables them to struggle against suffering and death in all its manifestations. In the particular case of human oppression, the victim is assured that God is never on the side of the oppressor, the bringer of death, but will, in his justice, protect the rights and lives of the victims.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

There are many valid points of critique against the formulations from which the Nicene faith has grown. The NC language is rooted in ancient Greek philosophical concepts such as *homoousios* («of one substance») and terms like «begotten, not made» and «light from light» rely on metaphysical frameworks strange to us today. One may quite easily point to the rather messy historical context in which the creed was crafted and on this basis question its authority and intent – perhaps NC was shaped more by ecclesiastical power dynamics than by spiritual insight alone? And from our contemporary values of inclusivity and gender equality one could argue that the creed reflects a patriarchal world-view which may hinder its adoption and liturgical use today.

But in the light of the discussion above, we as Christians from the Reformed family are not fazed or disturbed at all by these and other good points of criticisms as we understand two things clearly: First, Creeds and confessions derive their universal message exactly because they reflect and stem from the historical, theological, linguistic and political context in which they arose. And second, Creeds and confessions need constant interpretation and re-interpretation<sup>44</sup> to make them more intelligible and relevant for today. In fact, the four examples discussed above do exactly this: The Reformed confession make the NC speak afresh in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

We therefore share in the festive commemoration of the Nicene faith with deep gratitude to God. God, through the Holy Spirit, inspired and led the early church via contingent political and ecclesial power-struggles to formulate in human language of that time the mystery of our Triune God as basis for what has become the tradition of the Nicene faith. And when God inspired the Reformation movement

<sup>43</sup> This quotation is from *Confessing the One Faith*, paragraph 157 with my emphasis. See also paragraphs 120, 153–161, 277.

<sup>44</sup> One such conscious reinterpretation from a feminist perspective is found in Piet Naudé, “Can our Creeds Speak a Gendered Truth? A Feminist Reading of the Nicene Creed and the Belhar Confession” *Scriptura* 86 (2004), 201–209.

in the sixteenth century and led us afterward to confess our faith anew in different contexts, the foundation of Scripture and the gift of NC were there to guide us, inspire us, and helped us to speak a truth in full accord with the one apostolic faith we all share.



# “We Believe”: Reformed and Ecumenical Witness in the Age of Capitalocene

*Allan Samuel Palanna*

## The Communal Language of the Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed’s use of «We believe» (*Pisteúomen*) underscores the fundamentally communal nature of Christian faith, contrasting sharply with the more individualistic «I believe» (*credo*) of the Apostles’ Creed. The linguistic and theological transition from the Greek *Pisteúomen* («we believe») to the Latin *credo* («I believe») in the Nicene Creed is complex. This shift reflects broader changes in Christian worship and doctrinal emphasis. The Nicene Creed, formulated in the fourth century, serves as a foundational statement of Christian faith. Originally composed in Greek, it began with *Pisteúomen*, emphasizing a collective declaration of belief. However, as the creed was translated and adopted in Latin-speaking regions, *Pisteúomen* became *credo*, shifting the focus to individual affirmation. This transition has significant implications for understanding the development of Christian liturgy and theology. The initial version of the Nicene Creed, established at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and expanded at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, utilized the first-person plural *Pisteúomen*. This choice underscored the communal nature of the church’s faith, reflecting a unified stance against heresies of the time. The collective expression was appropriate for the ecumenical councils, which aimed to define orthodox belief for the context. As Christianity spread into Latin-speaking regions, the creed was translated, and *Pisteúomen* became *credo*. This change from «we believe» to «I believe» marked a shift towards personal affirmation of faith.

The Latin version begins: «Credo in unum Deum [...]» («I believe in one God [...]»). This adaptation may have been influenced by the use of the creed in baptismal rites, where individual confession was paramount. Over time, the singular form became standard in Western liturgical practice. The use of «I believe» in the Latin tradition emphasizes personal commitment to the faith, aligning with the Western church's focus on individual responsibility in salvation. Conversely, the original «we believe» highlights the communal aspect of belief, resonating with Eastern Christian liturgies that retain the plural form. This divergence illustrates differing theological emphases between Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This linguistic choice of *Pisteúomen* in the earlier creeds reflects the early church's conception of salvation not as a private possession but as an invitation to participate in the character and work of the Triune God. As Miroslav Volf observes, «Confession is, moreover, not an individual and private affair. It always takes place «before others» (Matt 10.32–33) and possesses an essential social and public dimension».<sup>2</sup> Hence, faith is not merely a private affair between the soul and God; it is ecclesial, communal, embodied. In the creed, belief is not merely affirmed by individuals but confessed *together*, as one body – one ecclesia.

The Creed's Trinitarian articulation – faith in «one God, the Father Almighty», «one Lord Jesus Christ», and the «Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life» – establishes a relational ontology at the heart of Christian confession. This unity and co-equality within the Godhead is not only doctrinal but exemplary, shaping the church's own life as a communion of persons. As Catherine Mowry LaCugna articulates that «the doctrine of the Trinity is, at its core, a practical teaching with profound implications for Christian living; it declares that God's very being is constituted by relationality».<sup>3</sup> In this light, the Nicene «we» is more than grammar – it is a theological anthropology grounded in divine communion.

The communal emphasis of the creed thus resists modern individualism and consumerist spirituality, which often commodify faith into isolated experiences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's warning is crucial here: «The Christian cannot simply take

<sup>1</sup> Jerry Filteau, «Some Latin Quibbles over the New Missal,» *National Catholic Reporter*, last modified August 25, 2010, accessed May 21, 2025, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/some-latin-quibbles-over-new-missal>.

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 149.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 1.

for granted the privilege of living among other Christians».<sup>4</sup> In hostile or pluralistic contexts where Christians may be tempted to retreat into privatized piety, the creed's collective affirmation becomes a moral and ethical compass for solidarity and mutual encouragement. Much more so, the creed is not merely articulating the ontology of the God or the character of the church or the future hope of the cosmos, but affirming God's relationship with humankind and creation. As Willie James Jennings affirms, «Christian identity [is] not as a quest to verify divine existence or activity in the world, but as an endeavour to understand the world and humankind from the standpoint of belief in God».<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Christian identity is not merely discovered through personal conversion but formed in the deep life of shared story and prayer, in confession and struggle.

In ecumenical terms, the creed's communality also becomes a bridge across theological and ecclesial divides. As Rowan Williams points out, that «this displays something fundamental to the essence of the Church – its capacity to appear as (and to be) a community with no private interests to defend, reflecting something of God's own equal, free, non-partisan love».<sup>6</sup> The creed is hence not a summary of private opinions or inner convictions, but a declaration made in the company of others, before others, and for others. The liturgical recitation of the creed during worship enacts this truth visibly – when believers say «we believe», they announce not only their faith but their belonging to one another across time, space, and across denomination.

Therefore, in an age marked by fragmentation and hyper-individualism, the Nicene Creed's «We believe» functions both as theological grammar and ecclesial resistance. It reminds the church that faith is inherently relational and perichoretic, rooted in the Trinity, expressed in community, and sustained through shared witness, especially in contexts of suffering and marginalization. As the early Christians gathered to declare their shared belief in the face of an ambivalent empire – overtly supportive and yet covertly hostile, so too the contemporary church must rediscover in this ancient confession the power of communion in the Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 108.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 132.



## Reformed Reception of the Nicene Creed

Despite the Reformation’s foundational emphasis on *sola scriptura* and its pointed critique of ecclesiastical traditions perceived as distortions of biblical Christianity, the Reformers notably retained the Nicene Creed as a vital articulation of orthodox faith. This retention was not mere historical inertia but a theological conviction that the creed faithfully echoed the essential contours of Scripture. John Calvin exemplifies this position in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.9.8 asserting that:

in this way, we willingly embrace and reverence as holy the early councils, such as those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, Chalcedon, and the like, which were concerned with refuting errors—in so far as they relate to the teachings of faith. For they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture, which the holy fathers applied with spiritual prudence to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen.<sup>7</sup>

For Calvin, the creed functioned not as an extra-biblical authority but as a distilled scriptural witness to the biblical narrative of God’s self-revelation.

The Reformed tradition’s fidelity to Nicene Trinitarianism is codified in confessions such as the Belgic Confession (1561), which proclaims, «We believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct, according to their incommunicable properties».<sup>8</sup> This theological articulation affirms the Reformed commitment not only to the authority of Scripture but to the church’s ongoing discernment of that authority through ecumenical consensus. The church requires tradition not to supersede the authority of Scripture, but to serve as a faithful compass for interpreting it rightly. The creed thus serves as a hermeneutical anchor, ensuring that Reformed theology remains grounded in the historic confession of the Triune God.

Importantly, the Reformed tradition has not allowed the Nicene framework to remain static. Instead, it has been generatively expanded in response to historical and social exigencies. The Confession of Belhar (1986), birthed in the crucible of apartheid South Africa, draws directly from Trinitarian theology to speak prophetically about unity, justice, and reconciliation. It affirms, «We believe that unity is,

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. trans. Henry Beveridge, (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845/ Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 972.

<sup>8</sup> The Belgic Confession, art. 8, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/BelgicConfession.pdf>

therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ [...],<sup>9</sup> framing ecclesial unity as a participation in the divine communion. This vision resonates with Jürgen Moltmann's assertion that «the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possession».<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the social doctrine of the Trinity is the theological foundation for community in freedom. For Moltmann, the triune life of God reveals a relationality that becomes the pattern for just and reconciled human community.

Likewise, the Accra Confession (2004), emerging from the global South, addresses the spiritual, structural, and ecological crises caused by neoliberal globalization. Its statement that «the economy exists to serve the dignity and well-being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation»<sup>11</sup> echoes the Trinitarian ethic of mutuality and partnership. Michael Northcott captures the spirit of such theological resistance when he writes, «Acknowledging the ecological and social situatedness of human action is at the same time a way of recovering true agency and moral responsibility».<sup>12</sup> This demands a critique of any political or economic order that distorts the created interdependence of all things. The creed, then, is not a relic but a living theological grammar of resistance against powers that negate the divine image in persons and the integrity of creation as it stakes the divine claim over against an earthly empire. Harper implicitly draws a parallel between the ancient Roman empire and today's globalized world, cautioning that, like the fall of the Roman empire due to its history of ecological plunder, ecological highhandedness can make societies deeply vulnerable to environmental stresses like climate change and pandemics.<sup>13</sup>

The contemporary relevance of the Nicene Creed within Reformed theology, therefore, lies not only in its doctrinal fidelity but also in its dynamic capacity to

<sup>9</sup> Confession of Belhar (English with footnotes), (art. 2), accessed March 14, 2025 [https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/confession\\_of\\_belhar-english-with\\_footnotes-pf.pdf](https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/confession_of_belhar-english-with_footnotes-pf.pdf). See also the text of *The Belhar Confession* in the appendix.

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 198.

<sup>11</sup> World Communion of Reformed Churches, *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*, accessed April 19, 2025, <https://wcrce.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AccraConfession-Introduction.pdf>, §19.

<sup>12</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 183.

<sup>13</sup> Kyle Harper, "The Environmental Fall of the Roman Empire," *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 145, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 101–111. [https://doi:10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00380](https://doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00380).

shape public theology. Moltmann articulates this very task: «A political theology which is consciously Christian, and is therefore bound to criticize political monotheism, will ask what is in accord with God – what his correspondences on earth are – which means among other things: in the political constitution of a community?»<sup>14</sup> In this light, the creed becomes both a confession of faith and a commitment to embodying that faith in the political and economic realities of the present.

## Creedal Witness in the Capitalocene: A Theological Resistance

In the present epoch, the age of the *Capitalocene*, the ecological, social, and economic crises produced by the entanglement of capital, the state, and militarism threaten the sanctity of life itself. Unlike the Anthropocene, which vaguely attributes ecological degradation to humanity as a whole, the Capitalocene specifically names the global system of exploitative capitalism as the primary agent of devastation. Jason Moore's examination of the current environmental crisis highlights its intricate nature. Moore claims that up until now «our point of departure is the Anthropocene concept, the most influential concept in environmental studies over the past decade».<sup>15</sup> Moore contends that the environmental crisis is not merely a consequence of the Anthropocene, where human actions throughout history have led to ecological disaster, but rather stems from the specific rise of the Capitalocene, «which signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology».<sup>16</sup> Joerg Rieger poses this important question: «Ultimately, organic intellectuals in the Capitalocene need to ask this question «What are we up against?»»<sup>17</sup>

The church, shaped by the Nicene confession of the Triune God, must discern its vocation not in abstraction but in active resistance to these anti-life forces. It is therefore not humans that are the problem – it's a specific economic system that privileges growth above life. This call to naming powers is to be formed by the Reformed theological impulse: to expose idols, the economic, political, and

<sup>14</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Jason W. Moore, "Introduction," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>17</sup> Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 12.

cultural heresies of our times and proclaim the sovereignty of God over all realms of existence.

The Nicene Creed, though historically rooted in the fourth century, provides a theological grammar potent enough to confront the unholy and destructive triad of the Capitalocene – state, military, and industrial capital. Its declaration of «one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth» is not a mere ontological claim but a political one, testifying that creation belongs not to extractive regimes but to the Triune Creator. Ellen Davis rightly urges faith communities to leave Pharaoh's Egypt behind and embrace the wilderness economy by confessing God as Creator while inherently protesting against every regime that assumes control over land, labour, and life.<sup>18</sup> In confessing the Creator, the creed subverts the idolatries of possessive individualism and imperial sovereignty. Furthermore, the creed's Christological center – «one Lord Jesus Christ [...] through whom all things were made» – reorients dominion away from empire and toward cruciform servanthood. In the Capitalocene, where the logic of sacrifice is reversed (the poor are sacrificed for the enrichment of the elite), the memory of Christ's passion becomes an indictment. The cross certainly was not a private act of redemption but a public challenge to unjust power.<sup>19</sup> To confess Christ as Lord in this context is to reject the lordship of market absolutism and militarized statecraft.

The pneumatological dimension of the creed, «the Lord, the giver of life» – likewise carries ecological and social resonance. The Spirit who «spoke through the prophets» continues to inspire resistance movements that struggle for life amid death-dealing systems. Leonardo Boff's liberation pneumatology reminds of the Spirit's work that the Spirit is the breath of life that permeates all creation and cries out wherever there is oppression and injustice.<sup>20</sup> Creedal language, then, is not only doctrinally significant but also politically radical when spoken within and against the Capitalocene.

Reformed confessions such as the Accra Confession explicitly name and resist the systemic injustices of global capitalism, declaring: «We reject any economic ideology that claims to be a system of benevolent providence yet produces unequal-

<sup>18</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), vii.

<sup>19</sup> Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 3ff.

<sup>20</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Come, Holy Spirit: Inner Fire, Giver of Life, and Comforter of the Poor*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 95ff.

ity and environmental destruction»<sup>21</sup> This reflects what the Lutheran theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda articulates ecological destruction as crucifying the body of Christ: «If Christ fills earth's creatures and elements, then the Earth now being «crucified» by human ignorance, greed, and arrogance is, in some sense, also the body of Christ».<sup>22</sup> This certainly calls for a *moral discernment in empire*, where faithful living includes the refusal to cooperate with systems that crucify. The creed, when engaged contextually, is no longer a static recital but a praxis of witness, where Karl Barth's call to resist becomes relevant: «In this unrighteous state the Christian can show his [sic] civic loyalty only by resistance and suffering».<sup>23</sup>

The church's creedal confession, especially in the South Asian context, thus becomes a counter-liturgy to the rituals of the Capitalocene. It is not accidental that persecution often intensifies where churches stand in solidarity with the poor and the earth, embodying the God they confess. In this way, the Nicene Creed remains a subversive act of allegiance, a pledge not to Mammon, emperor, or nationalism, but to the Triune God whose reign upends death-dealing structures.

## Covenant Theology and Ecumenical Unity: A Reformed Framework for Creedal 'We-Ness'

At the heart of the Reformed tradition lies the doctrine of the covenant – a theological lens through which God's relationship with humanity and creation is understood as both gracious and binding. Covenant theology affirms that God initiates and sustains a relational and communal life with God's people, grounded in divine faithfulness and human responsibility. This covenantal 'we-ness' resonates deeply with the Nicene Creed's communitarian confession – *pisteúomen*, «we believe» – for both articulate a shared faith that binds individuals into a corporate identity under the lordship of the Triune God.

The Reformed emphasis on covenant theology does not function as an insular doctrinal construct but opens outward to ecumenical implications. This covenant 'we-ness' is not merely a theological category, nor an exclusive, oppositional category of 'we versus them' but the very architecture of communion between God and

<sup>21</sup> *Accra Confession*, §19.

<sup>22</sup> Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Keith L Johnson, *The Essential Karl Barth: A Reader and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 360.

humanity, and by extension, among the people of God and creation. This shared life in covenant is mirrored in the Nicene Creed's collective voice, suggesting that faith is not merely an assent to propositions but a participatory belonging.

The ecumenical resonance of covenant theology becomes particularly potent in contexts of division, marginalization, and injustice. The Confession of Belhar (1986) emerges as a prophetic Reformed document that brings covenant theology into direct conversation with ecclesial unity and socio-political resistance. It asserts, «We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world».<sup>24</sup> This ecclesiological vision is not abstract unity, but unity that arises through shared covenantal obligation to justice, compassion, and witness.

The Reformed theologian John de Gruchy, reflecting on Belhar, observes that «it was the Dutch Reformed Mission Church that drafted the Belhar Confession of Faith in 1982 that effectively made it a «confessing church»».<sup>25</sup> Therefore, confessing faith in the Triune God is at the same time a confession of what it means to be the church in the world – it is a political confession. The covenant is thus not a static bond but an active call to embody the Creed's Trinitarian life in social, economic, and political forms of 'we-ness.'

This Trinitarian-covenantal matrix also frames the Accra Confession (2004), which extends the logic of covenant to the integrity of creation and economic justice. Its language is unambiguously confessional and communal: «We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. «The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof» (Ps 24.1)».<sup>26</sup> By invoking the language of belief (*we believe*) in direct continuity with creedal traditions, the Accra Confession situates covenant not only as a theological claim but as a counter-economic ethic. Covenant consciousness through a communal confessional creed provides the moral grammar to contest commodification, reminding us that the earth is not a possession but a gift held in trust.

Furthermore, covenant theology resists the fragmentation of ecclesial life by rooting Christian identity in the shared promises of God across traditions. In this way, covenant functions ecumenically, inviting different ecclesial bodies into mutual accountability and shared mission. Reformed theologian Dirk J. Smit reflects

<sup>24</sup> *Belgic Confession*, art. 3.

<sup>25</sup> John W. De Gruchy, «Beyers Naudé: South Africa's Bonhoeffer? Celebrating the Centenary of the Birth of Beyers Naudé – 1915–2015,» *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015): 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Accra Confession*, (§18). See also the text of *The Accra Confession* in the appendix.

on the ecumenical strength of the Belhar Confession: «In fact, these convictions have a long tradition in Reformed thought and practice. Reformed confessions were always intended to be embodied, also in the form of church orders [...]»<sup>27</sup> It offers a concrete and compelling invitation to live the unity of the church as part of Christian identity – not simply a goal to be achieved, but a gift to be received and enacted. The ‘we-ness’ of the creed thus becomes a covenantal call to embody reconciled community in a fractured world.

The convergence of covenant theology and creedal language offers the Reformed tradition a robust framework for ecumenical unity. It allows churches to move beyond mere theological agreement toward a shared life of justice, reconciliation, and public witness. The covenantal *pisteúomen* (we believe) is both a confession and a vocation summoning the church into solidarity with the Triune God, with one another, and with the groaning creation.

## Emerging Churches in India, and the Implicit Creedal Witness Through Suffering

There has been an exponential rise of new and emerging churches over against ‘mainline’ Christianity across the globe. Gina Zurlo contends that in countries such as India, emerging Christians currently account as the largest Christian group.<sup>28</sup> This pattern bound to steadily increase in the years to come even in global Christianity. While the Nicene Creed holds an official place within many historic mainline churches, its reception among Indian emerging Christian communities has been varied. This is not due to a denial of Trinitarian orthodoxy, but more often a matter of liturgical and ecclesial culture that emphasizes experience over formal confession. Nevertheless, the theological heart of the Nicene Creed – faith in the Triune God, the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, and the eschatological hope of the church often remains deeply embedded in the lived faith and spiritual imagination of these communities.

This implicit creedal embodiment is particularly evident in contexts of marginalization, where believers, especially in rural and Dalit churches, articulate a ro-

<sup>27</sup> Dirkie J Smit, *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays 3*, ed. Robert R. Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2009), 329.

<sup>28</sup> Gina A Zurlo, *Global Christianity: A Guide to the World’s Largest Religion from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 156.

bust faith through suffering, resistance, and hope. As Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong notes, «pentecostal theology cannot be constructed in the abstract, apart from the lived realities of pentecostalism on the ground; following the conviction that orthodoxy is first and foremost right worship—as in the classical theological dictum *lex orandi lex credendi*—pentecostal theology should be rooted in the experiences of the worshipping community».<sup>29</sup> The Spirit-filled lives of the poor and persecuted often constitute a kind of ‘lived theology’ that confesses the lordship of Christ with a clarity that formal creed or doctrine may fail to achieve. These communities may not recite the Nicene Creed liturgically, but in bearing witness under persecution, they perform its deepest affirmations – God’s creative presence, Christ’s lordship, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints, and the hope of resurrection. In contexts of suffering and persecution, particularly in the South Asian Capitalocene, the implicit *pisteúomen* (we believe) becomes a form of ecumenical witness that transcends denominational boundaries.

In contemporary India, where religious nationalism and state surveillance increasingly target minority Christian communities, the *Pisteúomen* – *we believe* of the creed becomes an existential declaration against fear and alienation. In South Asia in general and India in particular, confession is not only an act of worship or professing a Creed, but often an act of civil disobedience and communal solidarity. In this context, Christians who suffer for their faith participate in a creedal witness that is no less profound for its lack of formal expression. Their suffering aligns them with the suffering body of Christ and thus with the global church’s confessional identity.

Moreover, evolving ecclesiology of the emerging churches, with its emphasis on the active presence of the Spirit, resonates deeply with the Nicene affirmation of the Holy Spirit as «the Lord, the giver of life». Indian theologian Ivan Satyavrata emphasizes that, «This trajectory thus provides the theological basis for the Church’s evangelistic mandate, as the Spirit enables and guides the Church in its announcement of the good news of the kingdom, and actively draws people to God and to Christ.»<sup>30</sup> The Spirit is not simply a power to be experienced but the very presence of the Triune God who empowers the church to be a prophetic witness in the midst of empire. The charismatic expression of faith becomes a form of

<sup>29</sup> Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 79.

<sup>30</sup> Ivan Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness*, accessed May 2, 2025, <https://oro.open.ac.uk/59353/1/368807.pdf>.



theological resistance to the state-capital-military complex, particularly when it arises among the economically and socially dispossessed.

The significance of this creedal witness is heightened in interreligious contexts, where Christian faith is often seen as a foreign imposition. By living out the creed through lives of compassion, healing, and forgiveness, Indian Christians offer a counter-narrative to both the fundamentalist portrayal of religion and the commodification of spirituality. The theologian Nirmal Minz has argued from a tribal Indian perspective, and sees Christ as «being crushed, mutilated, and crucified in the experience of the Tribals».<sup>31</sup> Therefore confession is embodied in how one lives together as communities, not just in what one professes as creed. The «we believe» of the Nicene Creed finds resonance in the communal ethics and resistance of grassroots churches across India.

Ultimately, in the South Asian Capitalocene characterized by extractivist economies, militarized borders, and political theologies of exclusion – the creedal life of suffering churches offers a profound theological critique. It reminds the wider church that orthodoxy is not simply about propositional clarity but about fidelity in suffering. As Rowan Williams contends, «Look around, and you see why this article of the Creed is perhaps the most necessary to proclaim today, locally, interpersonally, internationally».<sup>32</sup> Therefore, creed in a sense, is the shape the Gospel takes when it is lived under pressure. In this sense, Indian Christian communities, are in fact at the forefront of embodying the Nicene confession, not through mere words but through cruciform discipleship and pneumatological hope.

To the extent that the Nicene Creed is treated as an ultimate end – a closed, definitive articulation of divine revelation and ecclesial faith – it imposes constraints on the ongoing self-disclosure of God beyond, and even in tension with, the Gospel. Such a posture threatens the radical freedom of God to make Godself known in ever-unfolding and surprising ways. Conversely, if Scripture is rightly discerned as God-breathed (*theopneustos*), in the spirit of 2 Timothy 3.16, then the divine breath remains dynamic and uncontrollably creative. When the dynamic and wild breath of God is subjected to the arbitrary norms of creed formed through imperial conciliar dictum, it becomes a human construct rather than a confession inspired by faith.

<sup>31</sup> Nirmal Minz, "Mission in the Context of Diversity – Mission in Tribal Context," *Religion and Society* 36, no. 1 (1989): 18–19.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, 154.

# **“Mommy, Was Baby Jesus Crucified?” Jesus’ Public Ministry in the Nicene- Constantinopolitan Creed and *Konfesi* *GKI 2014***

*Joas Adiprasetya*

## **Introduction: Creeds and Confessions**

At least two contemporary confessions have emerged in the history of the WCRC in recent decades: the Belhar Confession (1986) and the Accra Confession (2004), which demonstrate prophetic responses to situations of inhumanity. In addition to these two, we can also include the 1934 Barmen Declaration, which represents the church’s confessional resistance to Nazism. Although drafted by Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian, the declaration has been accepted across denominations.

Typically, confessions are distinguished from creeds, despite their similarities. Generally, creeds were formulated at the birth of the early church in response to the divergent (some prefer the terms ‘heterodox’ or ‘heretic’) teachings seen to lead people away from their faith. Arthur C. Cochrane succinctly explains the difference between the two, especially in the context of the Reformed tradition:

Both creeds and Confessions are confessions of the Church rather than of individual theologians. The difference between them is that the creeds seek to express the confession of the Church in a simple, direct way, whereas the Reformation Confessions of Faith seek to unfold and safeguard the true and right understanding of the confession.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Cochrane, “Introduction: Concerning Collections of Reformed Confessions,” in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 26.

Thus, both creeds and confessions are *confessional* in that they seek to express what Christians believe and confess. In addition to being confessional, both are also *ecclesial*, as they arise from the church's communal or collective struggles rather than from the results of individual thinking processes of theologians. However, unlike the universal creeds formulated once and for all, confessions were intended to address newly emerging problems at specific times and places. In other words, while creeds are seen as *timeless*, confessions are understood as *timely*.

The last difference does not imply that creeds are non-contextual. For instance, the Nicene Creed, as we all understand, was formulated to address the heated debate regarding the divinity of Jesus Christ. The church accepted the creed as a conciliar way to reject Arianism, which denied the affirmation of faith that the Father and the Son are of the same substance (*homoousios*). However, once a creed was accepted, the church confirmed that the truth of that creed is always the identity-defining symbol of the Christian faith for all places and ages. This is understandable because what is formulated, even if it arises from a specific contextual problem, relates to the core of the Christian faith.

Despite the differences between the Nicene Creed and the Reformed confessions, they should be viewed as ecclesial documents that seek a close connection between firm faith and a fullness of life. In this sense, we not only recognize that creeds and confessions are «faith seeking understanding» (*fides quaerens intellectum*), but they also represent «faith seeking the fullness of life» (*fides quaerens plenitudinem vitae*). In this regard, Christian beliefs and the fullness of life are interconnected and integrated. This idea allows us to constructively discuss the relationship between the Nicene Creed and the Reformed confessions, as I am attempting to do here.

The argument I wish to make in this chapter is that focusing on the fullness of life and sacramentality provides an interpretive lens for evaluating the exclusion of Jesus' public ministry from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and highlights the importance of contemporary confessions in creating a significant space for Jesus' ministerial work.<sup>2</sup> To substantiate this argument, I will discuss the absence of

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the second article of the Son, the AD 381 Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed does not add much to the AD 325 Nicene Creed. The addition of two human names, Mary and Pontius Pilate, and the inclusion of the eschatological Kingdom of God are indeed significant. The most noticeable addition is certainly in the third article on the Holy Spirit, which addresses the threat of Pneumatomachianism discussed at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. Therefore, while in this chapter I use the AD 381 Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, most arguments will also be applicable to the AD 325 Creed.

Jesus' public ministry in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, despite the insights the creed offers regarding the significance of the Christ-event for all humanity. Next, I will examine the confessional document of my church, the Indonesian Christian Church (ICC) or *Gereja Kristen Indonesia* (GKI), which intentionally mentions the ministerial life of Jesus, and how this section serves as a constructive tool for the church to engage with contemporary life situations. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on the sacramentality of Jesus' public ministry.

## The Fullness of Life and Jesus' Public Ministry: The Missing Part in the Creed

In recent years, one of the WCRC's focuses has been its commitment to God's life-advocating call, «so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness»<sup>3</sup> (Deut 30.19; John 10.10). The text of John 10.10, on which the affirmation is based, presents a contrast between two forces: Christ, who offers the fullness of life, and thieves, who also work to steal and kill and destroy. The WCRC acknowledges the negative side, which it must fight against, by stating that the contemporary world is «still trapped by multiple injustices and death, having fallen among thieves».<sup>4</sup>

The tension between a world fallen to thieves, who destroy lives, and Christ, who brings abundant life, demands that the member churches of WCRC confess their faith and live it confessionally. Such tension requires churches to strive for the fullness of life and play a prophetic role in opposing the «thieves». The task of identifying the thieves is significant here. For the 1934 Barmen Declaration, the thieves are the state absolutism of the Nazi regime and the German Christianity that justified Nazism; for the 1986 Belhar Confession, they are racism and the church's complicity in unjust apartheid; for the 2004 Accra Confession, they are the empire of the neoliberal economic system and the silence of the church. All three confessions affirm that resistance to doctrinal heresies is not the only task of the church. The church must also raise its prophetic voice against «ethical heresies»<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> World Communion of Reformed Churches, "WCRC's Mission and Vision," n.d., accessed July 15, 2025, <https://wcrceurope.org/about/mission-vision/>.

<sup>4</sup> World Communion of Reformed Churches, "WCRC's Mission and Vision."

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Dirkie Smit for suggesting the use of this term.

or what I might call ‘heteropraxis’. This is precisely what the Barmen Declaration, Belhar Confession, and Accra Confession have offered.

Following the 2017 General Council in Leipzig, the World Council of Churches affirmed a strategic vision entitled «Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen among Thieves».<sup>6</sup> Thus, how churches respond to this double calling is fundamentally *confessional*. They must live missionally between a prophetic ‘No’ and a transformative ‘Yes.’ In point 115 of the General Secretary’s Report for the 2017 General Assembly, Chris Ferguson affirms:

How will WCRC on all its levels answer Klein’s and the wider world’s yearning for a Yes that will get us all (creation included) through “the storms?” What is our Yes in a world fallen among thieves where No is not enough? Is there a distinctive missional contribution from the Reformed family of churches?<sup>7</sup>

How can the Reformed churches understand the struggle for the fullness of life as truly confessional? I have shown that the Nicene Creed focuses on opposing Arianism. Its doctrinal character is further demonstrated by the ‘doctrinal confessions’ in the Reformed tradition. Meanwhile, the ‘prophetic confessions’ in this tradition seem to effectively illustrate the focus on humanity by both rejecting injustice and affirming the fullness of life.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed does not mention the long period of Jesus’ public ministry between his birth and his death and resurrection, paralleling the same omission found in the Apostle’s Creed of the West. Here is a comparison of the two creeds.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chris Ferguson, “Transformative Ecumenism: God’s Mission and the Whole Inhabited World,” in *For the Sake of the Common Good: Essays in Honour of Lois Wilson*, ed. Kate Merriman and Bertha Yetman (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022), 29–39.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Ferguson, “Appendix 2: General Secretary’s Report,” in *Proceedings of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches: Leipzig, Germany, 29 June–7 July 2017*, ed. Chris Ferguson (Hannover: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2017), 209. Here, Ferguson addresses Naomi Klein’s work, *No Is Not Enough*, in which she maintains, «The firmest of no’s has to be accompanied by a bold and forward-looking yes [...] But it is yes that will keep us in the fight. Yes is the beacon in the coming storms that will prevent us from losing our way». See Naomi Klein, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump’s Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), Kindle edition, 219.

**The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed  
(the second article)**

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God, eternally begotten  
of the Father, God from God, Light from  
Light, true God from true God, begotten,  
not made, of one being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came  
down from heaven; by the power of the  
Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the  
Virgin Mary, and was made man.

*{the absence of Jesus' public ministry}*

For our sake he was crucified under  
Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was  
buried. On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures; he  
ascended into heaven and is seated at the  
right hand of the Father. He will come  
again in glory to judge the living and the  
dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

**The Apostle's Creed (the second article)**

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our  
Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.

*{the absence of Jesus' public ministry}*

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was cru-  
cified, died, and was buried; he descended  
to hell. The third day he rose again from  
the dead. He ascended to heaven and is  
seated at the right hand of God the Father  
almighty. From there he will come to judge  
the living and the dead.

The question is whether such a lack indicates the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed's deficiency in affirming the fullness of human life? To approach the question, I can offer four crucial notes here. First, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed obviously divides the second article (on the Son) into two parts. The first part affirms the Son's identity as consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father and his work in creation. This first part does not appear in the Apostle's Creed. The most obvious explanation is that the Nicene Creed (and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) was intended to reject Arianism, which relegated the Son to the level of creation and, therefore, only had a similar substance (*homoiousios*) to the Father. Interestingly, in this first section, the relationship between the Father as Creator, and the Son through whom all things were created, is also demonstrated, as seen in the clause, «Through him all things were made». This clause, thus, prevents the church from adopting a deistic attitude, which is more likely to emerge in the

Apostles' Creed.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the clause also strengthens the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Second, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Apostles' Creed highlight the Christ-event in their confessions. The person of Jesus Christ is understood through a series of events involving his engagement with the historical contexts of that time. Viewed as a whole, the Christ-event affirms the truth that incarnation is historicization. However, while the Apostles' Creed does not explain its meaning directly for believers, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed does so by proclaiming at the beginning of the second part, «For us men and for our salvation». This affirmation is reinforced by the statement, «For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate». Ingolf U. Dalferth is correct when he maintains,

The saving significance of the whole sequence of events in general and of Christ's crucifixion in particular is explicitly stated—it was for us, for our salvation, that all this happened. Jesus Christ not only died, he died for us. The sober rehearsal of his story is thus emphasized to be more than a biographical sketch of the history of this particular person long since past. In speaking of his crucifixion for us the Creed speaks of a total soteriological event in which this person no less than the confessing believer himself and every other human being participate. It tells not just the story of Jesus Christ; in doing so it tells our story as well as his.<sup>9</sup>

Third, Dalferth's assertion that the creed «tells not just the story of Jesus Christ; in doing so it tells our story as well as his» is essential. This reflects the nature of the Christ-event as the divine engagement with the entire history of humanity and all creation. The story of the Son becoming human and the stories of humanity grappling with sinfulness are intertwined. Thus, the names of two persons in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (and the Apostles' Creed) – Mary and Pontius Pilate – carry significant meanings. The mention of Mary indicates that believers can attain the highest nobility through their encounter with Christ. Conversely, the inclusion of Pontius Pilate's name suggests that humans can be in the worst position to reject the truth, goodness, and beauty presented by Jesus, the God-Human. In other words, Mary and Pontius Pilate represent the human struggle not to be trapped in sinfulness that degrades humanity and to strive for a full and flourishing life.

<sup>8</sup> David. O. Brown, *All Things Come into Being through Him: A Christology of Creation* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2023), 213–19.

<sup>9</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Christ Died for Us: Reflections on the Sacrificial Language of Salvation," in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (New York & Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 299.

Fourth and finally, it is worth mentioning that both creeds lack Jesus Christ's ministerial life. The omission is certainly understandable due to the intention of the creeds. When discussing the Apostles' Creed, John Calvin does not object to the omission of Jesus' public ministry from the creed. He argues that the creed «sums up in a few words the main points of our redemption, and thus may serve as a tablet for us upon which we see distinctly and point by point the things in Christ that we ought to heed».<sup>10</sup> By the same logic, we can assume Calvin would not object to the omission of Jesus' public ministry from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, given the similarities between the two creeds. According to Calvin, this focus on redemption must lead us to assume that the entire ministerial work of Christ is contained therein. He said, «For this reason, the so-called «Apostles' Creed» passes at once in the best order from the birth of Christ to his death and resurrection, wherein the whole of perfect salvation consists. Yet the remainder of the obedience that he manifested in his life is not excluded. Paul embraces it all from beginning to end: «He emptied himself, took the form of a servant, [...] and was obedient to the Father unto death, even death on a cross»».<sup>11</sup>

Although we can understand the reason behind the omission, the narratives of Jesus' public ministry would benefit people from the Global South who struggle with inhumane life situations. Such an overemphasis on redemption can lead to neglecting the resistance against the injustices confronted daily. For those who suffer, the gospel message about the kingdom of God speaks not only of salvation as spiritual liberation from sin but also of liberation from inhuman injustice. In other words, if we recall the double clause in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, «for us men and for our salvation», we can say that the public work of Jesus can give substance to the clause «for us men», while the emphasis on the incarnation and redemption focuses attention on the clause «for our salvation».

In this relation, «the missing middle», as N. T. Wright calls it, should be the bridge between incarnation and atonement. Concerning this, he laments,

Again, lots of detail, filled in in new ways to answer new problems and challenges. But again no detail at all, no *mention* at all, of anything between the second person of the Trinity becoming human and this human/divine man being «crucified for us

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles, vol. I of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 527 at II.XVI.5.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 508 at II.XVI.5)



under Pontius Pilate». There is nothing there about what Jesus *did*, or why he did it, or how anything he did relates to either his birth or his death. There is, in short, an enormous gap. At precisely the point where Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John think something very important needs to be said, the creeds say nothing at all.<sup>12</sup>

For Wright, the gap is unfortunate, as it removes one of the central messages in the gospels: the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ as a present-day reality. As a biblical scholar, Wright compares the Scriptures and the Creed – canon and creed – and finds that, by eliminating Jesus’ public ministry, the creed changes the focus of the gospels. He says,

What I see, in other words, is a great gulf opening up between the canon and the creeds. The canonical gospels give us a Jesus whose public career radically mattered as part of his overall accomplishment, which had to do with the kingdom of God. The creeds give us a Jesus whose miraculous birth and saving death, resurrection, and ascension are all we need to know.<sup>13</sup>

For Wright, the problem with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is its lack of attention to detail. This is precisely what the canonical gospels offer to us. It is in the detailed stories of Jesus’ public life that we can grasp Jesus’ central message: the coming of the kingdom of God here and now. In contrast to the gospels, Wright tells us, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed speaks of the kingdom of God («his kingdom») eschatologically, when «He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end».<sup>14</sup> In this way, the creed masks the present dimension of God’s kingdom, which is actualized in Jesus’ public ministry, as recorded by the gospels. Jason Valeriano Hallig concurs with Wright on the serious problem caused by the omission of Jesus’ public ministry from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Echoing Wright, he says,

The missing part of the Jesus narrative is itself the message of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, the whole life of Jesus was about the Kingdom of God, from the announcement of its coming through His public ministry to its realization in His death and resurrection. Jesus did nothing outside what He was called to do—to bring the Kingdom back to the people of God.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *How God Became King*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *How God Became King*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Jason V. Hallig, *Your Gospel Is Too Small: Reframing the Gospel Toward Its Cosmic Grandeur* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2021), 27–28.

While the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed presents the kingdom of God as a future promise, the gospels convey it as a present reality. The central message of Jesus' entire life focused on the coming of God's kingdom. Not only do the gospels bring the kingdom of God into the present, but they also bring the kingdom to people who suffer in everyday life. Interestingly, while the message of the kingdom of God in Jesus' public life is eclipsed in the creed, the idea of the church is made explicit, although it appears in the third article of faith on the Holy Spirit: «We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.» This shift reflects Alfred Loisy's satiric complaint, «Jesus announced the kingdom, and it is the Church that came».<sup>16</sup> Instead of making room for the marks of the kingdom of God (*notae regni Dei*), the creed explores the four marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*). Loisy believes that such a shift is justifiable insofar as the kingdom of God remains the goal of the church.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the church indeed inherits the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which undermines the kingdom of God as the central message of Jesus' public ministry and emphasizes the necessity of the church. Yet, the remedy is hopefully found when the church faithfully answers the call to make *present* what is *absent* in the creed. One of the ways in which the church can do this is by formulating its confessions.

## **Konfesi GKI 2024 and Jesus' Public Ministry**

The 2014 Confession of ICC (hereafter, *Konfesi GKI 2014*) is one of the contemporary confessions formulated by the member churches of WCRC. GKI or ICC is a church that merged in 1988 from three previous churches: ICC West Java, ICC Central Java, and ICC East Java. However, *Konfesi GKI 2014* was not formulated and accepted until 2014, twenty-six years after the unity.

This confession consists of an introduction, confession, and explanation of the confession.<sup>18</sup> It is worth mentioning the explicit recognition of the link between *Konfesi GKI 2014* and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The second paragraph of the introduction states:

<sup>16</sup> In French: «Jésus annonçait le Royaume, et c'est l'Église qui est venue». See Alfred F. Loisy, *L'évangile et l'église* (Paris: Bellevue, 1904), 111.

<sup>17</sup> Loisy, *L'évangile et l'église*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> The complete text can be found here: "Konfesi GKI 2014," 2014, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://gkiswjatim.org/download/konfesi-gki-2014/7/>.

*Konfesi GKI* is an expression of the confession of faith recognized and lived by GKI. GKI recognizes the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. The three creeds are confessions of faith that find their source in the Scripture and are accepted and belong to the church ecumenically. Thus, on the one hand, by recognizing the three creeds, GKI wants to commune ecumenically with the universal church. On the other hand, by formulating its own confession, GKI wants to bind itself to the communion of love, both within the fellowship of GKI and in the living context of GKI amidst the rich diversity of the natural, cultural, and religious surroundings in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup>

GKI acknowledges its dual engagement with the universal church and Indonesia's rich and diverse society. Our recognition of the catholicity of our church is demonstrated by our acceptance of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (and two other creeds, although they are of the Western tradition) and our acknowledgment that all three creeds have their source in the Scriptures. In this sense, *Konfesi GKI 2014* must be seen as both ecumenical and contextual.

Moreover, the introduction states the main idea of the confession, affirming that GKI is called to be «participating in the communion of love and the saving work of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.» Thus, it becomes clear that *Konfesi GKI 2014* is characteristically Trinitarian, which is also reflected in its basic structure. Similar to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Apostles' Creed, *Konfesi GKI 2014* consists of three articles, each focusing on one person of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The main idea in the introduction recognizes the Triune God as the God of Communion and the Missional God. The church is called to participate in both divine dimensions. Thus, as a community that receives its identity through participation in the Triune God, the church also becomes a «missional communion» and a «communal mission». The strength of this theology of participation is made possible by God's openness through Jesus Christ, who was incarnate and became consubstantial with humans.

Since my focus is on Jesus Christ, I will present the original text in Bahasa Indonesia along with its translation in English.

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<sup>19</sup> "Konfesi GKI 2014," Introduction, paragraph. 2.

**Konfesi GKI 2014 (Bahasa Indonesia)**

7. Kami percaya kepada Yesus Kristus,
8. Anak Allah yang dikandung oleh Roh Kudus dan dilahirkan dari rahim perawan Maria,
9. yang diutus untuk menegakkan Kerajaan Allah bagi seluruh ciptaan,
10. yang mengampuni orang berdosa serta memanggilnya bertobat, mengasihi semua orang tanpa diskriminasi, menegakkan keadilan dan perdamaian tanpa kekerasan, memberkati setiap pribadi, keluarga, dan anak-anak, memberdayakan orang miskin, memulihkan orang sakit, membebaskan orang tertindas, menjadi sahabat bagi orang yang diasingkan,
11. yang menyelamatkan dunia dengan menempuh jalan penderitaan hingga mati di kayu salib dan pada hari yang ketiga dibangkitkan dari kematian, agar kami bebas dari kuasa dosa dan maut, menyatakan kasih yang melenyapkan ketakutan dan melampaui kejahatan, serta beroleh kebangkitan dan hidup yang abadi,
12. yang naik ke surga, agar kami memberitakan Injil-Nya kepada segala makhluk,
13. yang akan datang kembali untuk menghakimi dan membarui segala sesuatu, agar kami mampu merayakan kehidupan dan menyambut kematian di dunia ini dalam iman, pengharapan dan kasih.

**The 2014 Confession of ICC (English translation)**

7. We believe in Jesus Christ,
8. the Son of God who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born from the womb of the virgin Mary,
9. who was sent to establish the Kingdom of God for all creation,
10. who forgave sinners and called them to repentance, loved everyone without discrimination, upheld justice and peace without violence, blessed every person, family, and children, empowered the poor, restored the sick, liberated the oppressed, became a friend to the marginalized,
11. who saved the world by taking the path of suffering, up to death on the cross, and on the third day being raised from the dead, so that we can be liberated from the power of sin and death, express love that dispels fear and transcends evil, and receive resurrection and eternal life,
12. who ascended to heaven, so that we can preach His Gospel to all creatures,
13. who will come again to judge and renew all things, so that we can celebrate life and welcome death in this world in faith, hope, and love.

Like the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, *Konfesi GKI 2014* also uses «we» as the plural subject confessing faith (*credimus*: «we believe»). The second article on Jesus Christ in *Konfesi GKI 2014* likewise employs the Christ-event as its language. However, unlike the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (and the Apostles' Creed), which jumps from incarnation to atonement and skips Jesus' public ministry, *Konfesi GKI*

2014 presents a summary of Jesus' works in paragraphs 9–10, beginning with a reference to the kingdom of God: «[Jesus Christ] was sent to establish the Kingdom of God for all creation». The reference to «all creation» indicates the willingness of the confession to enlarge the scope of the kingdom of God, including not only humans but also non-humans.

The sending of Jesus Christ thus affirms the mission of the Triune God. The Father sends the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, and thus the Triune God sends the church through its participation in the mission of the Triune God. Within this missional framework, participating in God's mission means enacting Jesus' ministerial works to proclaim the kingdom of God in the world. In this sense, GKI or ICC is called to become «the church of paragraphs 9–10».

Paragraph 10 demonstrates GKI's serious commitment to acknowledging, summarizing, and embodying Jesus' public ministry. As a member of the confession drafting team, I recall how the team engaged dialectically between a deep reading of biblical texts and serious discussions on socio-cultural and ecological issues in Indonesia at that time. This paragraph highlights eight works of Christ that are relevant to the struggles of GKI in the public space. GKI believes in Jesus Christ who 1) forgave sinners and called them to repentance; 2) loved everyone without discrimination; 3) upheld justice and peace without violence; 4) blessed every person, family, and children; 5) empowered the poor; 6) restored the sick; 7) liberated the oppressed; and 8) became a friend to the marginalized. To be sure, Jesus' public ministry encompasses more than the eight points summarized in this confession, but the selection of these eight points reflects GKI's confessional choice in living out what it believes in the specific context it faces.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Konfesi GKI 2014* is complemented by an "Explanation of the Confession," which provides a more detailed explanation of the statements within the confession, offering a valuable deeper perspective. For example, the statement that Jesus Christ was sent to "love(d) everyone without discrimination" is further explained as follows: "Discrimination against others, whether personal or communal, is unfair treatment caused by negative prejudice against a person or group of people, based on differences including age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, level of education, economic condition, and social status." We can see that this confession opens up a space for more concrete conversation in public space, allowing the church to engage with issues of gender, disability, economic injustice, and ethnic conflict, among other pressing concerns.

## “Mommy, was Baby Jesus Crucified?": Towards the Sacrament of Everyday Life

One day, when I was not preaching, I sat with many others in the pews. Next to me, a mother and her little girl followed the service quietly. As soon as we stood up and recited the creed, the little girl asked her mother curiously, «Mommy, was Baby Jesus crucified?» Her mother simply signaled for her to be quiet and not make any noise that might disturb the other people. Well, I was disturbed [...] not by the little girl's whisper, but by the ‘theological’ question she asked. The little girl represents many Christians who may not have a theological background but sense that something is wrong with our creed.

In this chapter, I discuss a problem in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (and the Apostles' Creed): the omission of Jesus' public ministry. This heavy focus on the incarnation and atonement results in believers being unable to appreciate the confessional nature of Jesus' public ministry, which is centered on the kingdom of God. However, I am grateful to be part of the ICC, which recognizes this issue and is attempting to include in *Konfesi GKI 2014* what was overlooked in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. In a sense, *Konfesi GKI 2014* represents the ICC's effort to do theology contextually and confessionally while also emphasizing the importance of the Scriptures as the source of its confession of faith. The decision to include Jesus' public ministry in paragraphs 9–10 demonstrates that the church acknowledges the significance of being consistent with the details of Jesus' story in the gospels, particularly in affirming that Jesus «was sent to establish the Kingdom of God for all creation» (paragraph 9).

In this final section, I would like to reflect on the sacramentality of Jesus' public ministry in our confession of faith. We recognize that human suffering is an everyday reality that prevents people from living in fullness. The stories of humans struggling on this aging planet are the stories of daily suffering caused by the «thieves» who destroy their lives (John 10.10). However, Jesus brings the new story that enters our everyday lives with a promise of God's kingdom of love, peace, and justice. When Jesus was named Immanuel – meaning, God-with-us – that name became his identity, which he embodied not only at his birth, death, and resurrection, but also in his everyday life for three years when he proclaimed the kingdom of God. He expressed this identity when he taught, healed, performed miracles, ate with sinners, welcomed children, befriended the marginalized, and so on. During

his three years of public ministry, Jesus encountered thousands of people, each with his or her own story. The gospel narratives convey that the kingdom of God is truly present when the story of the suffering people merges with the story of Jesus Christ. The Christ-event consists of ordinary and everyday experiences consecrated as the salvific event, just as bread and wine are consecrated to symbolize or to present the mystery of the incarnate Son.

The inclusion of Jesus' public ministry in *Konfesi GKI 2014* truly reflects what Dietrich Bonhoeffer says about God in Jesus Christ, who is «the beyond in the midst of our life».<sup>21</sup> Through his public ministry, Jesus demonstrates his Father's desire to engage with human affairs, offering a flourishing life amid all attempts by thieves to destroy it. In his everyday ministry, Jesus allows ordinary people to encounter God through him. He is not only Immanuel (God-with-us) at his birth, but his Immanuel-ness is experienced in our daily struggles. There is no moment in which we live Immanuel-less-ly. The presence of Jesus in people's everyday lives *mediates* the divine presence and, in turn, enables them to *participate* in the kingdom of God. The mediating work of Jesus is expressed in the 'with' of his name as Immanuel, God-*with-us*. This reminds me of Sam Wells, who maintains that «'with' is the most important word in the Christian faith».<sup>22</sup> Therefore, I assert that Jesus' ministry is truly the sacrament of everyday life or the quotidian sacrament. In the words of Albert Gerhards, «It is also in the everyday world of contemporary people that one is constantly finding experiences of the surprising presence of the holy in the midst of the profaneness of the everyday».<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the church fathers who convened in Nicaea in 325 did not consider the daily events of Jesus' public ministry to be more important than the special events of his incarnation and atonement. However, believers experience the sacramental mystery of God's presence through Jesus Christ, the Immanuel, in their day-to-day lives. It is through the encounter with Emmanuel that they find their fullness of life, as their stories become engrafted into the story of Jesus Christ,<sup>24</sup> «who forgave sinners and called them to repentance, loved everyone without discrimination, up-

<sup>21</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 93.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Gerhards, "Sacrament and Our Everyday World: Baptismal Theology and Praxis in the Face of Contemporary Challenges," *Studia Liturgica* 30 no.1 (2000): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003932070003000104>.

<sup>24</sup> Intentionally, I employ the term 'engrafted,' which is commonly used by Calvin to explain our union with Christ as a double grace (*Institutes*, III.11.10). See Calvin, *Institutes*, 737.

held justice and peace without violence, blessed every person, family, and children, empowered the poor, restored the sick, liberated the oppressed, became a friend to the marginalized».<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in the light of *fides quaerens plenitudinem vitae*, we are grateful for all of Jesus' public ministry, which enables us to confess that the Son has become incarnate as a human being, «for us [humans] and for our salvation», as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed helps us confess.

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<sup>25</sup> "Konfesi GKI 2014," paragraph 10.





# The Nicene Faith and The United Church of Canada

*HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Don Schweitzer*

How has the Nicene faith informed and inspired The United Church of Canada's (UCC) theology, worship, and witness, and how can it do so in the future? If we identify the Nicene faith with the Nicene Creed, the answer to the second question is largely negative. Although the Nicene Creed is included with other creeds in the UCC's current worship and hymn books, it is not widely used in the UCC today. Despite a recent argument that the UCC would benefit if the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were used in congregational worship,<sup>1</sup> the denomination is not moving that way. The Nicene Creed has little influence in the UCC today.

However, if we follow a distinction used by Reformed churches in Scotland between the substance of the faith and its creedal expression,<sup>2</sup> we can see that the Nicene faith has greatly influenced the UCC's life and worship in the past and continues to do so, even though the Nicene Creed does not. The introduction to the UCC's *Twenty Articles of Doctrine*,<sup>3</sup> the faith statement in its 1925 *Basis of Union*, followed this distinction, describing these articles as setting forth «the substance of the Christian faith»,<sup>4</sup> as commonly held among the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches of Canada, who entered the union<sup>5</sup> that formed the UCC.

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<sup>1</sup> William Haughton, *The Search for a Symbol* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 197.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Torrance, "The Substance of Faith," *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology* edited by David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 174–5.

<sup>3</sup> The United Church of Canada, *Twenty Articles of Doctrine* (1925), accessed July 12, 2025, <https://united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements#twenty>.

<sup>4</sup> The UCC, *Twenty Articles*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> A fourth body, the Local Union Churches also entered union.

The introduction also states that the UCC acknowledges «the teachings of the great creeds of the ancient Church».<sup>6</sup> Presumably this included the Nicene Creed.

What follows will examine how the substance of the Nicene faith has been affirmed in UCC faith statements, helped shape its theology, life, and worship, and could shape this in the future as well. Our focus will be on the UCC's two most recent faith statements: *A New Creed* (1968) and *A Song of Faith* (2006).<sup>7</sup> We begin by briefly identifying some salient affirmations of the Nicene faith.

## The Council of Nicaea

Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 to settle controversial issues causing division in the church and empire. Foremost amongst these were theological questions raised by the Arian controversy over how to understand Jesus' nature and relationship to God. At stake here was the transcendence of Jesus Christ and the freedom of God to enter history in a new way to effect salvation. The request that the council clarify what was orthodox in these matters required that it break new theological ground by making a basic determination concerning the nature of Jesus Christ and his relation to God.

After the council, Constantine banished Arius and several bishops who disagreed with its affirmations.<sup>8</sup> Such political interference in the life of faith communities and punishment of non-conformists runs counter to the UCC's tradition of spiritual freedom.<sup>9</sup> In the UCC, such actions are seen as contrary to the gospel that Nicaea sought to interpret.

The council's theological deliberations were an exercise in inculturating the gospel. Christianity had changed from being a sect within Judaism to become an established religion of the empire. Its membership was increasingly made up of Gentiles who had to understand the gospel in relation to their Hellenistic cultural

<sup>6</sup> The UCC, *Twenty Articles*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> These can be found as follows: The United Church of Canada, *A New Creed* (1968), accessed July 12, 2025, <https://united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements#newcreed>; The United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith* (2006), accessed July 12, 2025, <https://united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements#songfaith>. See also the text of *A New Creed* and *A Song of Faith* in the appendix.

<sup>8</sup> R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 172–8.

<sup>9</sup> The UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 10.

and philosophical assumptions. This required developing new ways and terms for speaking of God and Jesus, that were in keeping with New Testament, while sometimes going beyond it.

The council stated the following about Jesus' nature and relationship to God:

one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only-begotten of the Father, that is of the substance (*ousia*) of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into existence.<sup>10</sup>

Understood along these lines, Jesus is the source of a radical hope over against sin, evil, and death. Against Arius' description of Jesus as the highest of creation, Nicaea affirmed Jesus' divinity and oneness with God. This was an important step in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and laid the basis for distinguishing between the immanent Trinity, God in eternity, and the economic Trinity, God active and revealed in history.

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is one in nature (*ousia*) but exists in three persons (*hypostasis*), had been progressing before the council and continued afterward. In one sense, Nicaea was one step in this development. In another, its affirmations regarding Jesus' divinity and his relationship to God were a turning point in the development of Christian thought<sup>11</sup> and became a fundamental statement of Trinitarian doctrine, normative for most of Christianity. Still, these affirmations have to be thought through and appropriately expressed by subsequent generations in the church. What follows will examine how the UCC has attempted to do this.

## The Formation of the UCC and its Initial Appropriation of the Nicene faith

The UCC was inaugurated on June 10, 1925. At the Congregational Union of Canada's last Annual Assembly, the overarching reason given for union was to produce

<sup>10</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 114.

«a fitter vehicle for the manifestation of the Spirit»<sup>12</sup> in Canada. This succinctly identifies two of three guiding loyalties<sup>13</sup> of UCC theology.

The phrase «a fitter vehicle» reflects the UCC's loyalty to its Canadian context, which the UCC has vigorously engaged<sup>14</sup> since its formation. This formation was intended to produce a church better able to undertake this engagement. Somewhat like the Council of Nicaea, it was an attempt to unify Protestant Christianity in Canada by creating a 'national' church, capable of helping shape the nation's moral ethos. The UCC's engagement with its Canadian context has contributed to it developing four faith statements in its one-hundred-year history.

The phrase «for the manifestation of the Spirit» can be taken as indicating a loyalty to the ecumenical church's theological heritage, Nicene faith included. Memberships in international organizations like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches were important for the three large denominations that entered union.<sup>15</sup> This helped instill in the UCC a concern to uphold the ecumenical church's theological heritage. In keeping with this, the UCC's first statement of faith, the *Twenty Articles of Doctrine* (1925), affirmed God as Triune, the persons of the Trinity as consubstantial,<sup>16</sup> and Jesus as the «Eternal Son of God».<sup>17</sup>

The 1940 *A Statement of Faith*<sup>18</sup> maintained this continuity with Nicaea, affirming God as Triune<sup>19</sup> and Jesus as «the Son of God incarnate»,<sup>20</sup> and followed Nicaea in another way. *A Statement's* 'Preamble' affirmed that while the UCC intended to be loyal to Scripture and the ecumenical church's theological heritage, it would interpret these contextually.<sup>21</sup> This was part of the UCC's loyalty to its Canadian context. Like the Council of Nicaea, it would interpret the gospel and the church's theological heritage in relation to questions arising from its context and in terms

<sup>12</sup> "Congregational Union Meetings," *The New Outlook*, July 1, 1925.

<sup>13</sup> These three guiding loyalties are: to the gospel, the Canadian context, and the global ecumenical church; Don Schweitzer, Robert Fennell and Michael Bourgeois, "Conclusion," *The Theology of The United Church of Canada* ed. Don Schweitzer, Robert Fennell and Michael Bourgeois (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019), 339.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Beardsall, "Sin and Redemption in The United Church of Canada," in *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* updated and expanded (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company Inc., 1988), 42.

<sup>16</sup> The UCC, *Twenty Articles*, 1–2, at Article I.

<sup>17</sup> The UCC, *Twenty Articles*, 1–2, at Article VII.

<sup>18</sup> United Church of Canada, *A Statement of Faith* (1940), accessed July 12, 2025, <https://united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/statement-faith>

<sup>19</sup> The UCC, *Statement of Faith*, Article IV.

<sup>20</sup> The UCC, *Statement of Faith*, 1–2 at Article II.

<sup>21</sup> The UCC, *Statement of Faith*, 1.

understandable and appropriate to it. This has led to the UCC interpreting the substance of the Nicene faith in an open way, as a guideline for articulating the faith, and sometimes dialectically, rather than mechanically repeating Nicaea's teachings.

This contextual concern may be why *A Statement* departed from the Nicene Creed<sup>22</sup> by not mentioning the Virgin Mary, who was included in Article VII of the *Twenty Articles of Doctrine*. In the committee that drafted *A Statement*, liberal theology contended with Karl Barth's early theology. *A Statement* took a Barthian turn by putting increased emphasis on divine transcendence.<sup>23</sup> Yet it did not follow Barth's affirmation of the virgin birth.<sup>24</sup> Subsequent UCC faith statements have also omitted this. Some members would like the church to affirm it,<sup>25</sup> but the UCC is not moving this way.

Following the cultural upheaval in Canada in the years 1965–75, tensions and conflicts between the UCC's loyalty to its Canadian context and its ecumenical theological heritage became prominent. This was the backdrop to the creation of the UCC's *A New Creed* (ANC).

## A New Creed

The creative social chaos<sup>26</sup> of the long sixties (1960–75) ended the privileged social status of Protestantism in English-speaking Canada and brought division between theological liberalism and conservatism to the fore in the UCC. Dissatisfaction with the status quo and movements for social change focused around issues such as the Viet Nam War, gender inequality, racial and economic injustice, had become prominent in Canada.<sup>27</sup> This gave rise to a sense of the gospel as a call to social change.

<sup>22</sup> The Nicene or Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed dates from the Council of Constantinople (AD 381). The reconstruction of the creed drawn up at the Council of Nicaea provided by Hanson does not mention the Virgin Mary; Hanson, *The Search*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Phyllis Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 121.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 172–202. The German original was published in 1937.

<sup>25</sup> Mac Watts, "Let's Bring Mary In From The Margins," *Touchstone* 42, no. 2 (June 2024): 36–43.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas John Hall, "Christianity and Canadian Contexts: Then and Now," *Intersecting Voices* ed. Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, "Christianity and Canadian Contexts," 21–24.

All this shifted the focus of theological concern for many Canadian “Christians.” The bishops at Nicaea sought metaphysical precision in their understanding of Jesus. In Canada and elsewhere, many Christians now sought historical concreteness in Christology. They wanted to know where Jesus was to be found amidst the social conflicts of the late 1960s and what he called the church to be and do in relation to these. The Synoptic accounts of Jesus’ public ministry and programmatic passages regarding this like Luke 4.18–19 took on new importance for the church’s Christology.

At the same time, denominations like the UCC became subject to widespread public criticism and were challenged to relinquish beliefs like the incarnation, key to the Nicene faith, that conflicted with the ethos of modernity. The optimistic liberalism of the long sixties promoted an attitude of «self-sufficient finitude»,<sup>28</sup> a secularizing outlook that took hold amongst some UCC members and ruptured their relationship to traditional affirmations of a transcendent God who intervened in history.

In 1965 there was a call in the UCC for a faith statement that could be used during baptism services as an alternative to the Apostle’s Creed. Many UCC members were happy using the latter in worship. But a threefold critique was raised against it and the Nicene Creed. First, their terminology, particularly the Nicene Creed’s, was judged to be unintelligible to many church members. Second, many did not believe some of their affirmations, such as «born of the Virgin Mary». Third, there was a demand that an adequate creed should state the ethical implications of Christian faith in a way that the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds do not.<sup>29</sup>

The booklet that accompanied *ANC* noted that the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds would remain useful in the church, especially for instruction and in ecumenical settings, but their responsible use required preparatory instruction, and when used in worship, appropriate introductions to them. The booklet acknowledged continuity between the substance of the Nicene faith and what the UCC represented in the present, but also that the Nicene Creed’s terminology was foreign to many Canadians in the late 1960s.<sup>30</sup> A demand for a more adequate articulation of this continuity was present in some responses to the initial draft of *ANC*.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Tillich, cited in Roger Shinn, “Tillich as Interpreter and Disturber of Contemporary Culture,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 39, no. 4 (January 1986): 23.

<sup>29</sup> The United Church of Canada, *Creeds: A Report of the Committee on Christian Faith* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), 11–14.

<sup>30</sup> The United Church of Canada, *Creeds*, 6.

When this initial draft was presented to the 1968 General Council, the council asked that it be revised to more adequately express the gospel for that time.<sup>31</sup> Suggestions for revision were made by R. C. Chalmers, a UCC theologian from the Maritimes, and Gregory Baum, a prominent, ecumenically engaged Roman Catholic social ethicist. Chalmers criticized the draft for only describing Jesus as the «true Man», and suggested a greater emphasis on Jesus' transcendence.<sup>32</sup> Baum noted that it did not mention the cross or resurrection.

The committee's revised text, adopted in November 1968, followed these suggestions by describing Jesus as «crucified and risen, our judge and our hope», thus resisting the self-secularizing trend in the UCC and affirming Jesus' radical transcendence. Also, in keeping with the Nicene faith, *ANC* affirms the triune nature of God through its structure.

The initial omission of reference to Jesus' death and resurrection<sup>33</sup> reflects the era when the belief in Jesus' resurrection was doubtful for some UCC members. Yet, for many in the UCC, Jesus' resurrection was a crucial aspect of historic Christian identity and an essential component of their moral empowerment and spirituality in the present. *ANC* did not articulate the ethical implications of the eschatological dimensions<sup>34</sup> of Jesus' resurrection. The Nicene Creed's explicit eschatological anticipation is an important corrective to this, which *A Song of Faith* reinstated.

*ANC*'s Christology came closer to the Nicene Creed when its male terminology was replaced in 1979–80 to make its language more inclusive. Instead of describing God as having become incarnate «in the true Man, Jesus», the revised *ANC* speaks of «the Word made flesh». Here the Nicene Creed can strengthen *ANC* with its historically concrete description of Jesus as crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and its affirmation of his resurrection three days later, «according to the Scriptures». Conversely, the positive influence of feminist scholarship that led to *ANC*'s language being made more inclusive corrects the Nicene Creed's exclusively male language for God and humanity.

In 1995, in response to the environmental crisis, the phrase «to live with respect in creation» was added to *ANC*.<sup>35</sup> In drafting this poignant line, a remarkable contribution was made by Indigenous church members such as Stan McKay, an

<sup>31</sup> UCC, Record of Proceedings, General Council 23, 1968, 56.

<sup>32</sup> Haughton, *The Search for a Symbol*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> UCC Record of Proceedings, GC 23, 1968, 322.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Bourgeois, «Eschatology», in *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, 325. (313–331).

<sup>35</sup> Harold Wells, «The Good Creation», *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, 90–1.



Indigenous elder elected the first Indigenous moderator of the UCC. Not only did this addition explicitly address ecological concerns and the church's commitment to do something about them, it also «meant the inclusion of an important aspect of Indigenous worldviews in *A New Creed*».<sup>36</sup>

This addition underscores a theology of God in creation embedded in *ANC* and resonates with the Nicene Creed, which proclaims God as «maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible» and Jesus as «giver of life». The Nicene faith can help provide a theological basis for this respect, through Jonathan Edwards' (1703–58) interpretation of its Trinitarian theology,<sup>37</sup> which understands God to be radically transcendent but also internally related to creation.

*ANC* was intended to be suitable for use in worship. In the UCC, instead of simply discarding ancient doctrines, a faithful attempt has been made to shed light on them in a new context with a liturgical practice in mind. The role of Scripture and its interpretation in the creation of new faith statements that are ecumenical in scope and praxis oriented has been emphasized.<sup>38</sup> Particularly in relation to *ANC* and *A Song*, the UCC has been keen to develop faith statements, relevant to their contexts, that confirm and inspire Christians in their justice-seeking and witness in the world.<sup>39</sup> For the UCC, worship matters and the world matters. There is a correlation between what is believed in worship and what is practiced in the world.

In sum, *ANC* was created to provide a faith statement: 1) relevant to the modern context, and 2) suitable for worship. In its creation and revisions, the divinity of Jesus, the historical particularity of the cross and the resurrection, as well as incarnational and ecological theology embedded in the Nicene Creed have been an influence. This beloved creed is regularly and creatively used in worship and other settings of UCC life. Examples of this can be found in the United Church's Worship Resources.

<sup>36</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Don Schweitzer, *Moments in Time: Sermons from The United Church of Canada 1910-2022* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2024), 7.

<sup>37</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, "Edwards on God and Nature: Resources for Contemporary Theology," *Edwards In Our Time* ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen Guelzo (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 15–44.

<sup>38</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Don Schweitzer, *The Authority and Interpretation in The United Church of Canada: An Intercultural Adventure, Part II* (Daejeon: Daeganggan, 2016), 65.

<sup>39</sup> Don Schweitzer, "Emergent Theologies within The United Church of Canada," *Uniting Church Studies* 26, no. 1 (June 2024): 81.

### **Example One: A New Creed: Lenten Sermon Series<sup>40</sup>**

**Lent 1** Genesis 1.27–2:4 & Revelation 21.1–6

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating.

**Lent 2** John 1.1–5 & John 14.15–17, 25–27

Who has come in Jesus, the word made flesh,

to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.

**Lent 3** Matthew 16.13–20 & Ephesians 3.16–4.6

We trust in God. We are called to be the church;

to celebrate God's presence,

**Lent 4** Genesis 1.24–26 & Luke 22.24–27

To live with respect in creation,

To love and serve others,

**Lent 5** Micah 6.8 & Romans 12.9–21

To seek justice and resist evil,

**Palm Sunday** The Passion Narrative

To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,

our judge and our hope.

**Easter Sunday** The Easter Narrative

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

### **Example Two: A Creed for Easter<sup>41</sup>**

What do you know?

**I know that I am.**

**I know that we are.**

What do you feel?

**Sadness and joy.**

**Hope and despair.**

**The awful and the awe-full!**

<sup>40</sup> High River U.C. Worship Team, "'A New Creed' Lenten Sermon Series," in *Gathering: Resources for Worship Planners* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House) Lent–Easter 2016, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Bott, "A Creed for Easter," in *Gathering* Lent–Easter 2017, 34–35. See also the text of *A Creed for Easter* in the appendix.

What do you believe?

**I believe that  
we are not alone.**

**We live in God's world.**

**I believe in God:  
who has created and is creating,  
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,  
to reconcile and make new,  
who works in us and others by the Spirit.**

**I believe that  
we are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.**

In life?

**In life, in death, in life beyond death.**

We believe...

**God is with us. We are not alone.**

In that belief,  
**we worship God.**

### **Example Three: A New Creed with Actions<sup>42</sup>**

**We are not alone:** *Left fist out in front of body*

**We live in God's world:** *Right hand comes down and 'claims' or covers fist*

**We believe in God:** *Right finger points up (making symbol for one)*

**Who has created:** *Right hand comes down and circles fist*

**And is creating:** *circles again*

**Who has come in Jesus:** *Right hand held up palm forward to show full hand*

**The Word made flesh:** *right hand comes down and rests on fist*

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<sup>42</sup> United Church of Canada, *A New Creed with Actions* - YouTube video, 1:29, posted by United Church of Canada, October 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFEZL-hcsMR4>. See also the text of *A New Creed with Actions* in the appendix.

**To reconcile:** *right hand lifts and descends again upon the fist (as if to break it open)*  
**And make new:** *two hands break apart and come back together with a clap (becoming one)*

**Who works in us:** *two hands together 'stir' the heart*

**And others:** *two hands stir in wider circle (eyes making contact with neighbours)*

**By the Spirit:** *two hands join at the thumb (creating a bird) and fly into the sky*

**We trust in God:** *two hands break apart and extend heavenward as if receiving grace*

**We are called to be the church:** *hands join with neighbours' hands at the side*

**To celebrate God's presence:** *hands are lifted together (still joined with neighbours') over the head*

**To live with respect in creation:** *hands let go of neighbours' hands and form a cup (as if holding something beautiful and delicate)*

**To love:** *turn to the right and massage the shoulders of the person next to you*

**And serve:** *turn to the left and do the same*

**Others:** *turn and face the circle again*

**To seek justice:** *right hand forms a fist and comes down in front*

**And resist evil:** *left hand makes a stop motion and comes to rest beside fist*

**To proclaim Jesus:** *touch the palms of both hands (showing nail holes)*

**Crucified:** *extend hands out to side*

**And risen:** *lifts hands up above the head*

**Our judge and our hope:** *make a fist with right hand and shake it slowing and with determination at head level, eyes closed*

**In life:** *left hand extends forward and opening slowing like a flower*

**In death:** *left hand closing slowing*

**In life beyond death:** *right hand extended and opening slowing*

**God is with us:** *two hands clasp as if in prayer*

**We are not alone:** *Hands unclasp and grasp neighbours' hands*

**Thanks be to God:** *Hands raised together*

**Amen:** *right fist in the air*

These examples show how *ANC* is relevant to the twenty-first century and suitable for worship. They show how creeds can be used in worship, how they can inspire preaching and compliment interpretation of Scripture, as in example one. Creeds can also be used to create a Holy Communion liturgy, as in example two. The final example, *A New Creed* with action prayer demonstrates how doctrinal statements can be embodied, experiential, and participatory; how whole congregations regard-

less of age, ability, and accessibility can confess the creed together. In a similar vein, the Nicene Creed could be incorporated as a sermon series and/or, expanded as part of the Communion liturgy and turned into an action prayer.

## Debate about the Use of Traditional Trinitarian Language in Baptism

In the 1980s, the exclusively male language of the traditional Trinitarian baptismal formula, «in the name of The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit», became subject to feminist critique in the UCC. The UCC's acceptance of this critique is an example of how it sometimes dialectically interprets the Nicene faith.

The UCC response to the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document noted that using such exclusively male language for God was «intrinsically (sexist)».<sup>43</sup> In a subsequent document, *In Whose Name? The Baptismal Formula in Contemporary Culture*,<sup>44</sup> produced by the Roman Catholic/United Church dialogue, the UCC noted that this formula was deeply rooted in Scripture and the ecumenical church's theological heritage, and so called for it to be balanced by other expressions.<sup>45</sup> Here the UCC said both 'yes' and 'no' to the creed's language. It affirmed its traditional language for God as important to retain, but it declared it inadequate in the present on its own, and in need of supplementation providing gender balance in the language used for God in baptism. This helped shape the language used for God in the UCC's most recent faith statement, *A Song of Faith*.

## A Song of Faith

In the 1990s, after twenty-five years of declining membership and work on transformative yet often conflictual changes in its mission goals, teaching, and worship practices, the UCC woke up exhausted, in a secularized world that wanted it for occasional rites of passage and charity work, but little else. The golden era of wel-

<sup>43</sup> "The United Church of Canada," *Churches Respond to BEM*, Vol. II, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1986), 279.

<sup>44</sup> Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue of Canada, "In Whose Name? The Baptismal Formula in Contemporary Culture" (2000), accessed July 12, 2025, <https://generalcouncil.ca/document/canadian-roman-catholic-united-church-dialogue>.

<sup>45</sup> Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue of Canada, "In Whose Name?," 32.

fare capitalism had ended. The UCC, with its commitments to social justice, found itself in a spiritual wilderness, and seeking a new form of evangelism. This is part of the backdrop for the development of *A Song of Faith*, the UCC's most recent faith statement.

In 2000, the 37<sup>th</sup> General Council asked the UCC's Committee on Theology and Faith to produce «a timely and contextual statement of faith» that would engage «the church in conversation on the nature of the church (ecclesiology), ministry and sacraments».<sup>46</sup> When adopted as a faith statement in 2006, *A Song of Faith*<sup>47</sup> was accompanied by a 'Preamble' and four appendices discussing salient aspects of the Canadian context that it sought to address. Unlike the Nicene Creed or *ANC*, *A Song* is too long to be recited in worship.

*ANC* and *A Song* were written so that they could be said with integrity by theological conservatives and liberals. Both were attempts, to a certain extent, to help unify the church by providing texts that would resonate with very different understandings of the gospel found in the UCC. This was a different approach to unity from Nicaea, which sought to define the truth that all must confess.

*A Song* responded to the postmodern demand for recognition of God's radical transcendence and otherness<sup>48</sup> with an exuberant Trinitarian understanding of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and active in the Spirit. It may be the UCC's most Trinitarian faith statement.<sup>49</sup> It reflects the Nicene faith in this and several related affirmations. First, its opening three lines,

God is Holy Mystery,  
beyond complete knowledge,  
above perfect description,

reiterate a central Nicene theme, that while revelation mediates genuine and sufficient knowledge about God, the divine nature is ultimately incomprehensible.<sup>50</sup> However, *A Song* invokes divine mystery as a warrant for accepting diversity in creation and religion. Also, while *A Song* affirms God's radical transcendence, its next three lines,

Yet,

<sup>46</sup> The UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> The UCC, *A Song of Faith*.

<sup>48</sup> David Tracy, *On Naming the Present* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 41.

<sup>49</sup> Freed, Foster, "A Response from the Trenches to the Draft Statement of Faith," *Touchstone* 23, (September 2005): 35–46.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 282.

in love,  
the one eternal God seeks relationship,

suggest that God is also internally related to creation. This differs from Nicene theologies' emphasis on divine simplicity and immutability.

Like Nicene theologies,<sup>51</sup> *A Song* prioritizes Scripture as a source for theology. Unlike the Nicene Creed, *A Song* emphasizes the Holy Spirit's role in the church's reading of Scripture<sup>52</sup> and has an element of confession:

The church has not always lived up to its vision.  
It requires the Spirit to reorient it,  
helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition.<sup>53</sup>

This description of the Spirit correcting the church can be read as echoing the Nicene Creed's affirmation of the Spirit as «the Lord». *A Song* also connects the Spirit here to this chapter's theme of how the Nicaean heritage is appropriated in the present.

Like *ANC* in its revised forms, *A Song* accepts Nicaea's affirmation of Jesus' divinity and the doctrine of the Trinity, but does not emphasize the metaphysical precision that Nicaea sought. Instead, it carries forward *ANC*'s concern for concreteness in its understanding of Jesus and the Spirit's working in history.

However, Nicaea's push for metaphysical precision has something to offer the UCC in its concern to address climate change. The Nicene Creed's phrase, «through him all things were made», attributes a role to Jesus Christ in creation that none of the UCC's four faith statements mention. This notion that creation occurs through Christ affirms creation's intrinsic value as an expression of God's goodness and beauty and that it should be respected as such.

Following the two paragraphs on Scripture, *A Song* focuses on Jesus Christ for the next six paragraphs. As noted elsewhere, it «devotes more space to Jesus than to any other topic and has numerous references to Christ before and after this».<sup>54</sup> The following lines in *A Song of Faith* capture the incarnational God:

We sing of Jesus,  
a Jew,  
born to a woman in poverty  
in a time of social upheaval  
and political oppression.

<sup>51</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 431.

<sup>52</sup> UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Kim-Cragg and Schweitzer, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, 65.

He knew human joy and sorrow.  
 So filled with the Holy Spirit was he  
 that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.  
 We sing praise to God incarnate.<sup>55</sup>

Compare these lines with the Nicene Creed:

he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human.  
 He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;  
 he suffered and was buried.

Both creeds address Jesus' historical particularity as a resistance to abusive human power and as a praise to the sovereignty of God.

The Nicaean doctrinal formulations are not simply benchmarks for orthodoxy. They can also present new beginnings for theological reflection, if the church thinks about the gospel in light of them.<sup>56</sup> Jürgen Moltmann and Elizabeth Johnson used the doctrine of the Trinity in this way, as a point of departure for understanding Jesus' death.<sup>57</sup> *A Song* also does this briefly in the following lines:

In Jesus' crucifixion,  
 God bears the sin, grief, and suffering of the world.<sup>58</sup>

Here, by reflecting on the cross through the lens of the Trinity, *A Song* articulates how God is present in the negativities of life.

Since Nicaea, Christologies have often focused on thinking about Christ's identity in metaphysical terms. Yet a main purpose of the Christologies of Arius, Athanasius, and others at the time of Nicaea was practical: to reveal «who we really are and can be, where we come from and where we are invited to go – and to remind us that the very vision we have of Christ, in our «active faith», is enough to change both ourselves and our world».<sup>59</sup> Particularly through its focus on Jesus' social context and public ministry, *A Song* also emphasizes, in line with this earlier concern, how Jesus reveals who we are and who we are called to be. Like Nicaea, it maintains eschatological hope.<sup>60</sup> In *A Song*, this is a promise for the healing and renewal of creation.

<sup>55</sup> UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations I* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 149–150.

<sup>57</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), 235–78; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 265–9.

<sup>58</sup> UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Daley, *God Visible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125.

<sup>60</sup> UCC, *A Song of Faith*, 9.



A *Song* has been well used in worship, including in services of Holy Communion<sup>61</sup> and marriage. The new formulation of belief helps give language to a public announcement of a life-long commitment of a couple bound by mutual love shown in the example below.<sup>62</sup>

## **The Litany for Blessing and Celebration of Marriage**

Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love, Holy Mystery you are beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description; the One on whom all hearts rely.

### **We sing thanksgiving.**

We find ourselves in a world of beauty. All creation is good. As humans we are made to live and move and have our being in God. All parts of creation, animate and inanimate are related. We recognize all people as kin.

### **We sing of the Creator.**

We acknowledge the chaos and brokenness that touches all; that threatens our home, the earth. Yet evil does not – cannot – undermine or overcome the love of God. We are called to work with God for the healing of the world – that all might have abundant life.

### **We sing of grace.**

We find God made known to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Holy One embodied. Jesus crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender; preaching and practising unconditional love: love of God, neighbour, friend, and enemy. Jesus commanded his followers to love one another as he loved them.

### **We sing of God the Christ.**

### **We sing of Spirit,**

who speaks our prayers of deepest longing and enfolds our concerns and confessions, transforming us and the world.

**Grateful for God's loving action, we cannot keep from singing.**

**Creating and seeking relationship, in awe and trust, we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love. Amen.**

<sup>61</sup> Suzanne Edgar, "A Song of Faith Communion Prayer" in *Gathering*, Lent–Easter 2022, 47–48.

<sup>62</sup> Rev. Phil Hobbs, "Litany for a Celebration of Marriage from 'A Song of Faith'" in *Gathering*, Pentecost 2, 2020, 11.

Given its poetic form, *A Song of Faith* has also been adapted in many prayers. Below are examples of this from a Lenten service, taken from one of the five services inspired by *A Song of Faith*.<sup>63</sup>

### **Call to Worship**

One: God is Holy Mystery,

All: beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description.

One: Yet, in love, the one eternal God seeks relationship.

All: So, God creates the universe and with it the possibility of being and relating.

One: God tends the universe, mending the broken and reconciling the estranged.

All: God enlivens the universe, guiding all things toward harmony with their Source.

One: Grateful for God's loving action,

All: We cannot keep from singing.

### **Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Pardon**

One: Made in the image of God,

All: We yearn for the fulfillment that is life in God.

One: Yet we choose to turn away from God.

All: We surrender ourselves to sin, a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice, or apathy.

One: Becoming bound and complacent in a web of false desires and wrong choices

All: We bring harm to ourselves and others.

One: We sing lament and repentance.

All: Yet evil does not – cannot – Undermine or overcome the love of God.

One: God forgives,

All: and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings with honesty and humility.

One: God reconciles –

All: and calls us to repent the part we have played in damaging our world, ourselves and each other.

One: God transforms.

All: We sing of grace.

### **Prayers of the People**

In grateful response to God's abundant love,

We bear in mind our integral connection.

<sup>63</sup> Michele Braniff, "A Song of Faith Lenten Service Series" in *Gathering*, Lent–Easter 2017, 54–71.

To the earth and one another; We participate in God's work of healing and mending creation. [...]

As children of the Timeless One,

Our time-bound lives will find completion.

In the all-embracing Creator.

In the meantime, we embrace the present,

Embodying hope, loving our enemies, caring for the earth, choosing life.

This particular example of the prayers of the people highlights the God of creation which resonates strongly with the creed.

## Conclusion

As the discussion above shows, the Nicene faith's Trinitarian and christological affirmations have had a formative effect on the UCC's official theology as expressed in its four faith statements. Through *ANC* and *A Song*, these affirmations have found expression in UCC worship.

The UCC's relationship to the Nicene faith is open-ended and dialectical. It takes the Nicene faith as a benchmark for orthodoxy around the doctrine of God and Christology that it seeks to adhere to, and that guides its thinking on these subjects. However, as the UCC affirms and expresses this theological heritage in the present, there is often a 'no' to aspects of the Nicene faith accompanying every 'yes' to it. This reflects Nicaea's own relationship to its inherited tradition, as it sought to inculturate the gospel and answer questions that its context posed to the church.

The UCC's appropriation of Nicaea could be deepened by more frequently making Nicaea's Christological and Trinitarian affirmations starting points for theological reflection, in Karl Rahner's sense, as ways to «the – ever greater – Truth».<sup>64</sup> The Trinity and Christology can be methodological doctrines, what one thinks in terms of, rather than simply topics that one thinks about.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations I*, 149.

<sup>65</sup> We thank Michael Bourgeois for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

# Nicene Creed and the Confessional Reforms of the Church of Scotland

*Liam Jerrold Fraser*

Since its reformation in 1560, the Church of Scotland has been a confessional church. Yet the role of the creeds in the life of the church – and in particular the Nicene Creed – has varied greatly over the centuries. In this chapter, we will begin by charting the history of the Nicene Creed within the Church of Scotland, before considering recent confessional reforms that have raised the creed to new prominence within the life of the church. It will be argued that the new authority of the Nicene Creed within the Church of Scotland draws a line under centuries of dispute regarding the relationship between the Catholic and Reformed elements of the church's identity. Rather than recognising Scripture and confession as the church's only doctrinal sources, it will be argued that adopting the third doctrinal source of the creed provides a better basis for unity within the church than Scripture and confession alone. While the formal adoption of the creed is likely to encourage unity within the Church of Scotland, it may also foster unity between the Church of Scotland and other churches. Yet challenges remain, and it is not clear whether the Nicene Creed – rather than Nicene faith – will fulfil a unifying function within the wider Scottish church.

## The Historic Position of the Nicene Creed

Despite much regional variation, prior to the Scottish Reformation, at least some Scots would have heard the Nicene Creed recited or sung in Latin at Mass.<sup>1</sup> Given

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<sup>1</sup> See William D. Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 17, 34.

low rates of literacy, and infrequent mass attendance, however, detailed knowledge of the creed just before the Reformation would not have been great. While Archbishop Hamilton introduced teaching in English just prior to the Reformation through the use of his Catechism, it is interesting to note that the second part of Hamilton's Catechism is based on the shorter Apostles' Creed rather than the Nicene Creed.<sup>2</sup> As such, church members are unlikely to have encountered the Nicene Creed being referred to in English in the teaching of the church.

The introduction of vernacular services at the Reformation could have changed this situation. Yet while the Nicene Creed likely featured in some Scottish services after the Reformation – partly through the influence of the English Prayer Book<sup>3</sup> – because of an intentional lack of uniformity in Reformed worship, and because of Calvin's preference for the Apostles' Creed,<sup>4</sup> John Knox did not promote the use of the Nicene Creed in worship.

Just as the Reformation saw a diminution in the position of the Nicene Creed within worship, so it also witnessed a relativising of its influence within doctrine. The 'Scots Confession' – authored by John Knox and others – contains echoes of the creed, but no explicit reference.<sup>5</sup> That is because Chapter 20 of the Scots Confession says of Councils of the Church that: «it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance».<sup>6</sup>

Councils, creeds, and confessions have a role in confessing the faith and refuting error. Yet, it is the word of God that gives them authority, and they are therefore not essential for the church or its faith.

In 1566 the Scottish Parliament adopted the 'Second Helvetic Confession' as a true statement of the Reformed faith, and Chapter XI of the confession explicitly approves of the Creed of Nicaea. While this approval might have raised the profile of the creed, the teaching of the Scots Confession on councils and their pronounce-

<sup>2</sup> John Hamilton, *The Catechism of John Hamilton, Archbishop of St. Andrews* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884).

<sup>3</sup> Maxwell, *History of Worship*, 43–44.

<sup>4</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), II.16.18 and William D. Maxwell, *The Liturgical Portions of the Genevan Service Book* (London: Faith Press, 1965), especially footnote 7 on page 40, which explains Calvin's preference for the Apostles' over the Nicene Creed.

<sup>5</sup> The order of the Scots Confession loosely follows that of the Nicene Creed, and echoes of its language can be found in Chapters I, VI, and X, among others. See G.D. Henderson (d. *The Scots Confession 1560* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> Henderson, *Scots Confession*, Chapter 20.

ments was later strengthened by the 'Westminster Confession', which came to hold dominance over the church's doctrine. The confession teaches that:

All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, councils and the statements they produce are not without use. Yet they cannot be made into a rule of faith or practice, a function that belongs to the word of God alone.

The common position of the Scots and Westminster Confessions regarding councils and their doctrinal statements was not without irony, however. As Torrance argues in *Scottish Theology*, the rejection of Roman Catholic tradition by the Reformers and their successors was not matched by a corresponding humility regarding their own man-made authorities. At its worst, the Westminster Confession came to exercise an influence over the life of the Church of Scotland that made it an equal to – or even superior to – Scripture itself. The result was centuries of disagreement between those who were closer to the magisterial Reformers in favouring confessions, and more radical Protestants who believed that Scripture alone should be the source and reference point of doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Because the only authoritative sources of doctrine were Scripture or the Westminster Confession, however, agreement on what doctrines *united* Christians became difficult to locate, contributing to Scottish Presbyterianism's sad history of disunity and schism.

With the important exception of the historically small Roman Catholic Church and Scottish Episcopal Church, the dominance of the Westminster Confession ensured that the Nicene Creed would not feature in the life of most Scottish churches for a considerable length of time. This changed, however, from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The so-called Scoto-Catholic revival – analogous to, yet distinct from the Anglo-Catholic revival – saw newfound study of the ancient creedal statements of the church.<sup>9</sup> While early editions of *Euchologion* or Book of Common Order,

<sup>7</sup> Free Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), Chapter 31.4.

<sup>8</sup> See T.F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> The classic expression of Scoto-Catholic theology is H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). For a shorter introduction, see D.M. Murray, "Scoto-Catholics" in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 750.

as it became known, made use of the Apostles' Creed,<sup>10</sup> eventually the Nicene Creed replaced it within the communion liturgy,<sup>11</sup> with the creed being formally adopted as part of the church's communion liturgy in 1940.<sup>12</sup> In this way, for the first time ever, the Nicene Creed was regularly heard, in English, in Scottish parish churches. A noteworthy change in Scotland's religious life, and one that only took place in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## The Reunion Settlement of 1929

While the Scoto-Catholic revival saw the greater use of the Nicene Creed within worship, the negotiations leading to the reunion of the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland in 1929 would soon see the creed take centre stage in a new doctrinal dispute. In a debate charted by Murray and Sjölander,<sup>13</sup> those working towards reunion disagreed over the place of the Nicene Creed within the reunited Church of Scotland, as well as the wider issue of the relation between the fundamental doctrines of the faith and the Westminster Confession. On one side stood the Scoto-Catholic party, who wanted the Nicene Creed to be included in the constitution of the reunited church. On the other side were those who for both legal and theological reasons wished the church to hold to a minimal doctrinal position, and to have almost total freedom to alter its doctrinal position as and when the General Assembly wished it to. The outcome of this debate was a compromise. The Nicene Creed would *not* be mentioned in the church's constitution or the vows of office-holders, but instead a short description of the church's faith – couched in doxological form – would be included in the First Article Declaratory. The First Article reads:

The Church of Scotland is part of the Holy Catholic or Universal Church; worshipping one God, Almighty, all-wise, and all-loving, in the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; adoring the Father, infinite in Majesty, of whom are all things; confessing our Lord Jesus Christ,

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Church Service Society, *Euchologion* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1867), 51–2.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order* (Edinburgh: Church Service Society, 1922), 177.

<sup>12</sup> Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1940).

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Murray, *Freedom to Reform* (Edinburgh: T&Y Clark, 1993), 43–67, and Rolf Sjölander, *Presbyterian Reunion in Scotland 1907–1921* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 167–182 and 257–263.

the Eternal Son, made very man for our salvation; glorying in His Cross and Resurrection, and owning obedience to Him as the Head over all things to His Church; trusting in the promised renewal and guidance of the Holy Spirit; proclaiming the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God through faith in Christ, and the gift of Eternal Life; and labouring for the advancement of the Kingdom of God throughout the world. The Church of Scotland adheres to the Scottish Reformation; receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life; and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon.<sup>14</sup>

While the final form of the First Article Declaratory represented a compromise position, it would be the vows and subscription of office-holders that would prove most decisive for the doctrinal complexion of the Church of Scotland in the coming century. For while the church as *institution* affirmed the ‘Catholic faith’ in the First Article Declaratory – a faith that is clearly Trinitarian – *office-holders* were instead required to believe «the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church» i.e., the Westminster Confession<sup>15</sup>. Because office-holders vowed and subscribed to the fundamental doctrines contained in the Westminster Confession and not the confession itself, however, and because they assented to fundamental doctrines in the confession and not in the First Article Declaratory, confusion remained as to what these fundamental doctrines might be. Were they those expressed in the First Article, or were they something else? While many leading commentators assumed that the fundamental doctrines were those contained in the First Article Declaratory, the position remained unclear.<sup>16</sup>

The constitutional settlement of the reunited church therefore canonised two distinctions. The first was a distinction between what was variously described as «the fundamental doctrines of the faith» or «the substance of the faith» or «the Catholic faith» on the one hand, and the Westminster Confession on the other. The second distinction was between what the church as an institution believed in relation to the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith and the Westminster Confession and how office-holders themselves related to them. The result was that office-holders made vows and subscribed to fundamental doctrines that were not

<sup>14</sup> See James T. Cox, *Practice and Procedure in The Church of Scotland*, 6th. ed. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1964), 366.

<sup>15</sup> Cox, *Practice and Procedure*, 370.

<sup>16</sup> Cox, *Practice and Procedure*, 6; Andrew Herron, *The Law and Practice of the Kirk* (Glasgow: Chapter House, 1995), 360; James L. Weatherhead, *The Constitution and Laws of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland, 1997), 26.



defined, yet were said to be contained in a Confession of Faith that no office-holder was required to believe in.

While it was assumed at the time that the reunited church would quickly clarify its confessional position,<sup>17</sup> the Great Depression, followed by the Second World War, delayed these plans. From 1968 to 1974, an attempt was made to alter the confessional position of the church once again. Yet while securing support from over two thirds of presbyteries, the proposals were ultimately rejected by the General Assembly, and the unsatisfactory settlement of 1929 remained unchanged.

## Recent Developments

In the following decades, the inability of the church to clarify its doctrinal position led to increasing theological drift, and greater pluralism in the church's belief and practice. This not only had theological effects but – more importantly – came to harm the peace and unity of the church.

Beginning with a controversial 1993 'Report on Marriage' which split the church's Panel on Doctrine, the Church of Scotland would become embroiled in two decades of dispute over human sexuality. While the details of this debate do not concern us here,<sup>18</sup> a lack of doctrinal unity in the church, and disagreement over same-sex relationships, led to the formulation of the theological and ecclesiological concept of 'constrained difference.' The 2014 report of the Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland says of this concept that:

Constrained difference is intended to describe 'a 'constrained' or limited departure from a norm based on well-founded scriptural reasoning and not a 'free for all' state of relativism.'<sup>19</sup>

The 'limited departure' in question was the affirmation of same-sex relationships and their celebration in liturgical acts such as blessing or marriage. Importantly, however, the report acknowledges that not all norms can be departed from. The

<sup>17</sup> A short statement of faith for the reunited Church was prepared, but never saw formal adoption or widespread use. For commentary on this statement, see J.G. Riddell, *What We Believe* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1937).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of some of the theological issues in play, see Liam Jerrold Fraser, "A Tradition in Crisis: Understanding and Repairing Division over Homosexuality in the Church of Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69, no. 2 (2016): 155–170.

<sup>19</sup> Church of Scotland, *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2014), 20/10.

report quotes Calvin's belief that there are fundamental doctrines such as the unity of God and the divinity of Christ that are so foundational to the Christian faith that their rejection calls into question the existence of the church itself.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, while noting the importance of such doctrines, the report did not seek to define or locate them further. In so doing, the concept of 'constrained difference' maintained the doctrinal ambiguity of the Reunion settlement of 1929.

While the Theological Forum and the wider church had hoped to limit division over same-sex relationships and related theological issues, many thousands of members have left the church over its perceived doctrinal laxity.<sup>21</sup> While the presenting issue was same-sex relationships, it is arguable that the more basic issue was an inability on the part of all sides to believe that they shared the same faith as their theological opponents. Due to the absence of publicly acknowledged shared fundamental doctrines, doctrines that would have allowed members to recognise each other as Christians, what should have been a secondary issue concerning sexuality became a primary issue. When uniformity of doctrine and practice broke down, there was no deeper unity to maintain communion.

## The Book of Confessions

Three years after the Church of Scotland permitted congregations to depart from the historic position of the church on sexuality, the Theological Forum was contacted by the Very Rev Dr Finlay Macdonald, former Principal Clerk of the General Assembly, and asked once more to investigate the place of the Westminster Confession in the life of the church. While the Theological Forum was initially reluctant to open up the question of confessional reform, following a successful motion from the Presbytery of Melrose and Peebles, the General Assembly of 2018 instructed the Theological Forum to produce a new report on the confessional position of the church. The Theological Forum presented its final report in 2022, and proposed that the church expand the number of its subordinate standards into a *Book of Confessions*, while also clarifying the location of 'the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith' mentioned in both the First Article Declaratory and the ordination

<sup>20</sup> Church of Scotland, *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* 2014, 20/8.

<sup>21</sup> See David J. Randall, *A Sad Departure* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015).

vows of office-holders.<sup>22</sup> The General Assembly accepted an overture based on these proposals in May 2023, and this began a two year Double Barrier Act procedure that concluded in May 2025. The outcome was the adoption of a new *Book of Confessions*, along with corresponding changes to the Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland, the preamble to ordination services, the vows of ordination, and the Formula of Subscription that all office-holders must sign.

The *Book of Confessions* contains five statements of faith from across the history of the church: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Scots Confession, the Westminster Confession, and the 1992 Statement of Faith. Importantly, the Westminster Confession remains a subordinate standard of the church, but is now accompanied by other subordinate standards recognised by the Church of Scotland as accurate summaries of its faith.

As we saw earlier with the reunion settlement of 1929, however, it is to some extent irrelevant what the church as an institution is said to believe if its office members are not required to believe it. For that reason, the mechanism by which the Nicene Creed and the other doctrinal statements contained in the *Book of Confessions* shape the church's belief and practice are the vows and subscription of its office-holders.

While Ministers and Deacons make eight vows in total, we will consider those vows – along with their accompanying Formula of Subscription – which are most relevant to the Nicene Creed, and the doctrinal identity of the church.

The second and third vows for Ministers and Deacons read:

Do you believe the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the supreme rule of faith and life?

**I do**

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds?

**I do**

The subscription for all office-holders is:

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. I promise to be guided in my life and doctrine by the Book

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the reforms and their rationale, see Church of Scotland, *Reports of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2022), 6/1–17.

of Confessions of this Church. I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God, and promise that I will submit thereto and concur therewith. I promise to observe the order of worship and administration of all public ordinances as the same are or may be allowed in this Church.

The vows of ordination and their accompanying subscription make it clear that it is the word of God that reigns in the church. Every statement of faith and every vow is subject to it, and there has been no change to this core principle of Reformed theology. Yet the church recognises in the First Article Declaratory that there are certain fundamental doctrines that are so basic to the teaching of the Word that all office-holders are required to believe them. These are what are referred to in the vows of ordination, which state that the fundamental doctrines are expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. These include the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Ascension. Office-holders must not only confess their belief in the word of God, then, but the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith expressed in the creeds. As we noted earlier, this represents the Church of Scotland's commitment to the catholic or universal faith of the church.

The verb 'expressed' used in the third vow for Ministers and Deacons has two meanings. First, it means that the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith are truly expressed by the creeds. They faithfully declare the Trinitarian faith of the church, and its belief in the incarnate, crucified, resurrected and ascended Lord. Yet second, the verb 'expressed' is used to indicate that even the creeds cannot say everything that can be said about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The glory of God is so great, that nothing we can think or say or write can ever exhaust it. It is the light of all creation, and our words – no matter what light they shed on the mysteries of faith – can only ever point to that greater light.

While these vows express what the church and its office-holders have in common with other Christians, a further vow addresses itself to the distinctive Reformed beliefs of the Church of Scotland, which differentiate it from other parts of the catholic or universal church. The vow reads:

Do you confess the Catholic and Reformed faith of the Church as contained in its Book of Confessions, and promise to be guided by the said Book in your life and doctrine?

**I do**

The Church of Scotland's faith is catholic because it is faithful to the fundamental doctrines expressed in the creeds. Yet it is also *Reformed*. Although the Church of

Scotland claims full continuity with the medieval Scottish church, that church was reformed in 1560. While the Reformed tradition is diverse, the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession contain those Reformed teachings that have been most decisive for the character and practice of the Church of Scotland.

In making this vow, office-holders promise that they will be 'guided' by the *Book of Confessions*. To be 'guided' by the *Book of Confessions* not only means to be guided by the creeds then, but to be guided by the Scots Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the 1992 Statement of Faith. This means being guided by these confessions' teaching on salvation, the sacraments, and the relation of the church to the state, among other distinctive doctrines. Yet 'guided' does not mean 'controlled' or 'dictated' by. Since the Declaratory Acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Presbyterian churches that reunited to form the current Church of Scotland have recognised liberty of conscience «on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the substance of the faith».<sup>23</sup> As such, no office-holder is bound by the teaching of the Scots and Westminster Confessions with regard to predestination, for example. Yet 'guided by' means that they will at least be aware of it, and will not discount it without due consideration.

## Analysis of Reforms

In effect, the recent confessional reforms of the Church of Scotland represent a victory for the theology of the Scoto-Catholics that was rejected in the church reunion of 1929. It is now recognised that it is unhelpful to have only two – unequal – doctrinal sources of Scripture and confession, and for office-holders to subscribe to fundamental doctrines that are not clearly located or defined. Instead, while Scripture retains its ultimate authority, the basic doctrinal unity of the church is maintained by the fundamental doctrines expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. These two documents are widely accessible, and enjoy the highest profile of any doctrinal statements in the Western church. Yet added to Scripture and the Creeds are the church's historic Reformed Confessions, articulating what differentiates the Church of Scotland from other parts of the church catholic.

The Church of Scotland's confessional reforms therefore tread a fine line between clarifying the location and character of the fundamental doctrines of the

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<sup>23</sup> Cox, *Practice and Procedure*, 370.

faith without suggesting that the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds could ever fully define or exhaust these fundamentals, nor take the place of Holy Scripture in the theology or life of the church. The reforms build unity in the church by identifying the fundamental shared beliefs of its members, without requiring full uniformity on all points of doctrine. In this way, the confessional position of the Church of Scotland is both Catholic and Reformed: faithful to the doctrine taught by the Fathers of the church and the Scottish Reformers, yet not confusing the doctrinal pronouncements of the church with the word of God. It affords the Nicene Creed a new position of prominence within the church, yet maintains a distinction between the faith expressed by the Nicene Creed and the text of the Nicene Creed itself.

These reforms, of course, were only one of the options open to the church, and it is instructive to reflect not only on why they were chosen, but how they differ from the doctrinal positions of other parts of the Reformed family.

The first issue to note is how the *Book of Confessions* and its related vows of ordination and subscription are a response to internal pluralism and disunity. The existence of a *Book of Confessions*, rather than a single confession, is symptomatic of a broadening of Reformed identity within the Church of Scotland. This has been evident since the eighteenth century, but grew in scope from the mid-nineteenth century onward as a result of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 and advances in biblical criticism and geological and evolutionary thought.<sup>24</sup> Its recent cause, however, has been disagreement over human sexuality and gender. An inability to recognise other church members as Christians has necessitated a greater emphasis upon shared areas of doctrine. Taken together, a broadening of Reformed identity, along with a greater need for unity, has produced both a *Book of Confessions* and a tightened adherence to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

While disunity and doctrinal pluralism are the primary factors leading to the adoption of the Church of Scotland's new confessional position, they have also been influenced by the wider ecclesial context of Scotland. While the Church of Scotland was for much of Scottish history the *only* church, the Church of Scotland now serves in ministry and mission alongside many other Christian denominations. The most important of these for the shaping of the church's recent confessional reforms are the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Scottish Roman Catholic Church. The Scottish Episcopal Church is a continuation of the Church of Scotland from the period

<sup>24</sup> For an overview, see A.C. Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 123–128 Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland 1874–1900* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978), 215–297.

in which it was episcopal, and a number of attempts have taken place since the twentieth century to bring about reunion between the two churches. Likewise, the Scottish Catholic Church continued to exist after the Reformation of the Church of Scotland in 1560, and since the nineteenth century has grown dramatically to become the largest denomination in Scotland. The formal adoption of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and the deliberate description of the Church of Scotland as both Catholic and Reformed, are attempts to celebrate the Church of Scotland's essential unity with these two parts of Christ's church, and to make ever-closer union with them a reality.

While the co-existence of the Church of Scotland with the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Scottish Catholic Church is an important influence upon the church's confessional reforms, this has not been inconsequential for the *internal* life of the church. One of the aspects of the Church of Scotland which differentiate it from other Reformed churches is the existence of a small but consequential Scoto-Catholic party. It was the presence of Scoto-Catholics in the Church of Scotland that led to the adoption of the Nicene Creed into the *Book of Common Order*, and Scoto-Catholic influence during the 1929 reunion negotiations that led to the – Nicene influenced – First Article Declaratory. In the same way, it is not irreverent that the present author – a member of the Scoto-Catholic party – was Convener of the Theological Forum when it advanced the reforms under discussion, and this may have had some influence on their final form.

These varying internal and external factors mean that the *Book of Confessions of the Church of Scotland*, and its accompanying vows and subscription, function in a different way from other Reformed churches that recognise multiple subordinate standards, such as the Hungarian and Romanian Reformed Churches, and the Presbyterian Church (USA). A comparison between the Church of Scotland's *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)* reveals a number of important differences. The first is the relationship between confessing the Christian faith and written confessions that express that faith. There is a much greater emphasis in the *Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)* upon the inability of any confessional statement to serve as an expression of faith for all ages, and a corresponding need to produce new statements of faith for every context.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, however, the rationale behind the Church of Scotland's

<sup>25</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Confessions Study Edition* (Louisville.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 433–455.

*Book of Confessions* is to balance a number of competing tensions, such as that between Scripture and doctrinal statements, creeds and confessions, and between liberty of conscience and adherence to the catholic faith. Second, the way in which these two confessional books function within the life of their respective churches takes a different form. The *Book of Confessions of the Church of Scotland* is only part of a number of constitutional reforms, and cannot be understood apart from the vows and subscription of office-holders that accompany it. While office-holders in the Prebysiteian Church (USA) make vows in relation to their *Book of Confessions*, these vows orientate the office-holder to the *Book* in a way that is different from the Church of Scotland, most obviously, by not stressing the doctrinal primacy of the creeds. These two Reformed churches may have converged in their mutual production of a *Book of Confessions*, then, but the rationale behind them, and their practical outworking, is different.

## Ecumenical Potential and Challenges

Such, then, is the confessional position of the Church of Scotland, a position that has arisen from tensions within its tradition and the wider ecclesial context of Scotland. Yet what is the potential of this new confessional position for improving ecumenism, and the unity of the wider Scottish church?

There is some evidence that a doctrinal pivot towards the Nicene Creed has potential. Three recent ecumenical agreements entered into by the Church of Scotland – the Columba Declaration with the Church of England, the Saint Andrew Declaration with the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the Saint Margaret Declaration with the Scottish Roman Catholic Church – all echo the creed’s language of being part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and assert the importance of adherence to the apostolic faith.<sup>26</sup> Yet – and important for what will be said later – there is no *explicit* reference to the Nicene Creed in these texts. Its theology is present, yet the creed itself is not.

<sup>26</sup> “Saint Columba Declaration,” The Church of Scotland and The Church of England, last modified 2015, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-scotland-and-church-england-reach-historic-agreement>; “Saint Andrew Declaration,” The Church of Scotland the Scottish Episcopal Church, last modified 2021, [https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/81331/Saint-Andrew-Declaration.pdf](https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/81331/Saint-Andrew-Declaration.pdf); “Saint Margaret Declaration,” The Church of Scotland the Scottish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, last modified 2022, <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/archive/2022/kirks-general-assembly-endorses-saint-margaret-declaration>.



This brings us to research recently undertaken into the views of Scottish church leaders concerning the Nicene Creed.<sup>27</sup> In a survey of just under one hundred Scottish church leaders, over seventy-three per cent of respondents believed the creed was somewhat important to very important for Christian unity, while just over twenty-five per cent of respondents believed it was not very important or not important at all. Further, over seventy-seven per cent of respondents believed that the creed *could* become more important for Christian unity if its profile was raised. As such, the research demonstrates a high level of support for the Nicene Creed within the Scottish church, and a belief that it could encourage greater Christian unity.

While there is some evidence, then, that the confessional reforms of the Church of Scotland are indicative of growing support for the Nicene Creed within Scotland, the creed nevertheless faces challenges.

The first – and most salient – challenge concerns the difference between believing that Christian unity is important, and believing that the Nicene Creed is the way to bring about that unity. The aforementioned research showed that while seventy-three per cent of respondents believed that the creed was at least somewhat important for Christian unity, eighty-eight per cent of respondents were actually engaging in ecumenical activity. This suggests that support for practical expressions of ecumenism is greater than support for the Nicene Creed itself.

This may be reflective of the fact that the Nicene Creed has not – until recently – been viewed as the basis for unity in the church. The Westminster Confession, the historic episcopate, or adherence to the Evangelical Alliance's Basis of Faith have all fulfilled this role, but the Nicene Creed less so. It may also be reflective of a trend noticed by myself and other researchers, that Scottish Christians are becoming increasingly less interested in doctrine and theology, and far more interested in the experience of worship and the social and ethical impact of faith.<sup>28</sup>

If the first challenge concerns a distinction between Christian unity and the Nicene Creed, the second challenge concerns the function of credal and confessional statements within and between churches. My research showed that respondents from an evangelical or charismatic background were less likely to view the creed

<sup>27</sup> A fuller account of this research can be found Church of Scotland, *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2025), 5/1–2.

<sup>28</sup> Giselle Vincett, Elizabeth Olson and Peter Hopkins, "Young People and Performance Christianity in Scotland," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (May 2012): 275–290; Liam Jerrold Fraser, "Does the Church in Scotland Still Need Theology?," *Theology in Scotland* 21, no. 1 (2014): 7–19.

as relevant to twenty-first century church life. This not only illustrates that those influenced by evangelical tradition are sometimes dismissive of doctrinal texts other than Scripture, but is also expressive of a particular issue in Scottish church history concerning subscription.<sup>29</sup> While partly shaped by the evangelical revival, the issue of whether church leaders should be bound by summaries of doctrine is a tension found even in the Scots Confession, where – as we have seen – the authors explicitly place the confession and all human authorities in a different and lower category from Scripture.<sup>30</sup> For some evangelicals and charismatics – who explicitly raised this issue in the qualitative part of the research – this also applies to the creed, which has no greater authority than any other human document.

Lastly, the research highlights the relatively new phenomenon of ethnic minority churches. Scotland differs from England in being overwhelmingly white and, until recently, this was reflected in its churches. Yet as research by Sheila Akomiah-Conteh has shown, it is ethnic minority diaspora churches that account for the majority of new churches in Scotland, and with demographic changes, this phenomenon is only likely to increase.<sup>31</sup> My research showed, however, that respondents from diaspora backgrounds were less likely to view the creed as being important for Christian unity, suggesting in some of their comments that the Spirit, worship, or prayer were more significant. Ethnic minority Christians in Scotland are generally eager to engage in ecumenical working, yet this desire seems to have little to do with adherence to the Nicene Creed *per se*.<sup>32</sup> There are therefore questions as to whether the Nicene Creed can unite historic Scottish churches and new diaspora churches who have little or no experience of the Creed.

In conclusion, then, we are left with a somewhat paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the creed exercises a growing influence within the Church of Scotland, and some influence in ecumenical dialogue. Likewise, the majority of Scottish church leaders believe that the Nicene Creed is at least somewhat important for Christian unity in Scotland. Yet more people confess the faith of Nicaea than hold to the Nicene Creed itself – a reflection of Scotland's Protestant history, and an in-

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of some of the issues in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see A.C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1983), 60–87 and Murray, *Freedom to Reform*, 21–42.

<sup>30</sup> See Henderson, *Scots Confession*, 31–32.

<sup>31</sup> Sheila Akomiah-Conteh, “New Churches in Glasgow 2000–2016” (PhD Diss., University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>32</sup> “Churches without People, and People without Churches,” Brendan Research, last modified October 2024, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e5wYhTFiyecYUHN3-QZOouLY-9iPnbq7u/view>.

creasingly pluralist society. Yet whatever the fortunes of the Nicene Creed within the wider Scottish church, by resolving theological problems that have plagued the church for centuries, the Nicene Creed now finds itself at the centre of the Church of Scotland's ecclesiology. With a careful balance between catholic creeds and Reformed confessions, the Church of Scotland has now clarified its identity to be both catholic and Reformed.

# **The Legacy of Nicaea: Generous Orthodoxy, Faithful Orthopraxis and Transformative Orthopathy**

*Richard Clutterbuck*

## **Introduction: The Nature of Doctrine**

Why bother with Christian doctrine? How we regard the legacy of Nicaea will to some extent depend on whether we see a common Christian teaching as a helpful focus for unity or as an outdated and restrictive set of propositions. And, if we do find doctrine relevant, then the nature of its utility will matter too. In this chapter I argue that the doctrine of Nicaea does indeed continue to matter and that it does so, in part, because it enables us to link together the cognitive, active and affective aspects of Christian faith. Nicaea, then, and the creed that is associated with it, becomes a multi-faceted source of Christian unity. It promotes diachronic unity, what Jürgen Moltmann called «the ecumenism of time»; it also facilitates synchronic unity, providing a common focus for the faith of Christians in different traditions and cultures. In addition to these, it promotes Christian coherence, binding together the cognitive, active, and affective elements of faith. While this essay focusses on the third of these aspects of unity, it assumes the importance of the other two.

Like all theology, this essay is written from a particular perspective and within a particular context. In this case the perspective and context are those of a British Methodist who has worked in theological education in the UK, Oceania, and Ireland, and whose formation and theological outlook has been consistently ecumenical. Methodism, as an eighteenth-century offshoot of the Church of England, has a mixed relationship with the Reformed tradition. Although John Wesley famously

engaged in polemic against the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, his sacramental theology (and much of his other thinking) was, as he put it, a mere 'hair's breadth' away from Calvin. What follows, therefore, is not an attempt to critique classic Reformed theology, nor does it aim to present Methodism as a tradition that uniquely reflects the Nicaean heritage. Rather it sets out to appreciate the ongoing value of Nicaea with the aid of some of the distinctive elements of the Wesleyan tradition.

We begin, however, with a Lutheran, rather than Reformed or Methodist theologian – a well-known recent attempt to define the nature and ecumenical utility of Christian doctrine. George Lindbeck, in his much-discussed 1984 work, *The Nature of Doctrine*,<sup>1</sup> aims to provide an account of doctrinal truth that will facilitate both ecumenical tolerance and interfaith understanding. He sets out three possible approaches to doctrinal truth. The first he identifies as 'Cognitive Propositionalism', characteristic, he says, of much traditional Christianity as well as contemporary fundamentalism. It assumes a close relationship between the words employed in Christian doctrine and the reality (or realities) to which they refer. The second option, 'Experiential Expressivism', takes the primary referent of doctrinal language to be the faith-experience and existential concerns of individual believers and their faith-communities. Such an approach is often traced to Schleiermacher and to his recent successors, as well as to more popular presentations of faith. Lindbeck finds both of these approaches unsatisfactory in important respects. Cognitive Propositionalism, by making doctrine a set of first-order statements, creates mutually-incompatible versions of reality and makes dialogue and tolerance problematic. Experiential Expressivism, on the other hand, leaves doctrines as no more than a set of subjective accounts of how people feel. In their place he proposes what he calls a 'Cultural Linguistic' account of doctrine. This, he says, puts the emphasis on the communal practices characteristic of Christian communities and sees doctrinal language encoding these as the narrative and 'grammar' of Christianity. For Lindbeck, such a cultural linguistic concept avoids the exclusiveness of a propositional or personal understanding of truth and in its place makes truth more a matter of coherence and performance than an ontological description of reality. Doctrines, therefore, are second-order statements about appropriate language, rather than first-order statements of absolute fact. He says:

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<sup>1</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

It can thus be seen that the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations were among the few, and perhaps the only, possible outcomes of the process of adjusting Christian discourse to the world of late classical antiquity in a manner conformable to regulative principles that were already at work in the earlier strata of the tradition. These creeds can be understood by Christian and non-Christian alike as paradigmatically instantiating doctrinal rules that have been abidingly important from the beginning in forming mainstream Christian identity.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the merits of Lindbeck's account (and they are many), the argument of this essay is that, contrary to Lindbeck, credal formulations, such as the creed of Nicaea, must be seen in terms of a three-fold field of reference that involves cognitive, performative, and affective aspects of faith. Only when all three are taken together can we properly appreciate and make use of these traditional expressions of doctrine and utilise them as unifying foci for the diversity of the world-wide Christian church. I will argue that such a three-fold reference is faithful to the Bible and early church, and that it also reflects the way in which the Nicæan inheritance has been received in my own Wesleyan tradition. I use the terms 'orthodoxy', 'orthopraxy' and 'orthopathy' as shorthand for these three aspects of Christian identity and coherence.

## Generous Orthodoxy

The phrase 'generous orthodoxy' is usually associated with American theologian, Hans Frei,<sup>3</sup> and has been popularised by the radical evangelical author, Brian McLaren.<sup>4</sup> The phrase implies a recognition that the concept of orthodoxy has been (and may still be) used in ungenerous ways. Orthodoxy may be employed as a hard border, a means of exclusion, policed by strict adherence to confessional detail, often insisting on a particular interpretation of the creed. One might think of 'TULIP' Calvinism<sup>5</sup> and its insistence on double predestination, or post-Vatican I Roman Catholicism, with its persecution of so-called modernists. In other words,

<sup>2</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Frei, "Response to Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 08, no.1 (1987).

<sup>4</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> TULIP Calvinism is a mnemonic acronym summarizing the core theological points of Reformed theology as articulated in classic Calvinism. TULIP is associated with John Calvin, but the acronym came long after his lifetime. Each letter in TULIP stands for one of the five central doctrines of Calvinist soteriology: T – Total Depravity, U – Unconditional Election, L – Limited Atonement, I – Irresistible Grace, P – Perseverance of the Saints.

orthodoxy may be employed primarily as a concept of difference rather than a concept of unity. Resisting this (mis)use of orthodoxy is part of Frei's agenda, as he sets out its potential to bring together those who are usually labelled as 'liberal' or 'conservative' Christians and divided accordingly. McClaren employs the phrase 'generous orthodoxy' in a rather different way, and with a different purpose from Frei. Writing as a self-educated pastor rather than as a professional theologian, McClaren seeks to bring together different perspectives on the significance of Jesus and then give an account of how an eclectic mix of different Christian traditions has guided his own journey of faith. Critics have pointed out that McClaren's version of orthodoxy does not fit with any existing models of Christian faith and that he removes the sense that doctrines have a propositional force. While he professes an intention to remain faithful to the historic creeds and the Christian Scriptures, he does not truly reflect a sense of being held within a tradition.

My argument is that Christian faith has a necessary cognitive element; that is, it involves truth-claims relating to the nature of God, the universe and humanity. Such truth-claims may be (and should be) tentative and limited, as the apophatic tradition in Christianity rightly insists, but they are important, nonetheless. Without them, Christian unity and reconciliation will be superficial. As Methodist theologian, Geoffrey Wainwright, wrote in his review of *The Nature of Doctrine*:

It should by now be clear that doctrinal issues are inescapably substantial issues in the moves of the churches towards reconciliation. If one of the benefits Lindbeck (tacitly) hoped for from his rule theory of knowledge was the easing of the ecumenical burden through the unloading of ontological freight, then he will inevitably be disappointed.<sup>6</sup>

Wainwright has his own approach to 'generous orthodoxy', seeing it exemplified in the active ministry of ecumenist and missiologist, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who combined a rigorous adherence to the doctrinal Tradition with a commitment to reconcile the different traditions that have emerged from it.<sup>7</sup> In a recent two-volume work<sup>8</sup> on the relationship between Scripture and doctrine in the early Christian

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, "Ecumenical Dimensions of Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*," *Modern Theology* 4, no.2 (1988).

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2000). I am using the distinction between 'Tradition' and 'traditions' made popular through the Montreal report of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Conference. PC Rodger and L Vischer, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: The Report from Montreal 1963*, World Council of Churches Faith and Order (London: SCM, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> Frances Young, *Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity. Volume One: Scripture, the Genesis of Doctrine*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023).

centuries, another Methodist theologian, Frances Young, highlights the ways in which early Christian theology combined an awareness that human language and knowledge of God is at best partial, with a conviction that catechesis – teaching the faith – is at the heart of the church’s mission. Young goes so far as to argue that the church of the early centuries resembled a school more than it did a conventional religion; she illustrates her claim by looking at how Cyril of Jerusalem’s *Catechetical Lectures* set out (in the mid-fourth century) the key doctrines of Nicaea while not necessarily using identical language.<sup>9</sup> This teaching ministry was part of a process by which the different strands of Christian biblical interpretation could converge without entirely eliminating a diversity of reading.

The Reformed tradition has tended to insist that councils and creeds are to be received and followed only if their teaching can be proved through direct reference to Scripture. So, for example, Articles 8 and 21 of the Church of England Articles of Religion promote the historic creeds on the grounds that they are warranted by Scripture, but insist that ‘General Councils’ are not infallible and must be tested against the truth of the Bible. Young’s teasing out of the relationship between Scripture and doctrine in the first four centuries suggests that truth is rather more complex than that, with something like a dialectic between them. Councils, such as Nicaea, are both the product of engagement with Scripture and themselves provide a lens through which Scripture may be read.

It can also be argued that ‘generous orthodoxy’ reflects the way in which faith is presented in Scripture itself. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul insists that he is passing on traditions that he himself had received «from the Lord». In 1 Cor 11.23–24 he continually uses variations of the Greek term for handing on, *paradidomai*, in order to stress both the generosity of God in giving us Jesus Christ, and the generous gift constituted by the words and works of Jesus. Similarly, in 1 Cor 15.3, as he recounts the narrative of Christ’s resurrection appearances, he again uses *paradidomai* to stress that his teaching is the handing on of a gift that he has already received from the generosity of God.<sup>10</sup>

This concept of generous orthodoxy sits well with the Wesleyan tradition. While John Wesley insisted that doctrine was not the core of Christianity, but merely the entrance gate into it, he was, he said, «Fixed as the sun in his judgement concern-

<sup>9</sup> Young, *Doctrine and Scripture*, 1. Chapter 6: Creeds, From confession to dogma.

<sup>10</sup> I have dealt with this in more detail in: Richard Clutterbuck, *Handing on Christ: Rediscovering the Gift of Christian Doctrine* (London: Epworth Press, 2009).



ing the main branches of Christian doctrine».<sup>11</sup> These doctrines are chiefly those found in the teaching of Nicaea. Beyond them, suggests Wesley, is a penumbra of *adiaphora*, matters that are not essential and on which sincere Christians may agree to differ. The adage, «in things essential, unity; in things indifferent, liberty; in all things, charity» did not originate with Wesley,<sup>12</sup> but it is a good summary of his approach to doctrinal orthodoxy. In the face of a contemporary revival of Arianism, Wesley was adamant in re-asserting the Nicæan doctrine of the divinity of Christ, while in less essential matters he was content to «think and let think»<sup>13</sup>

Before moving on to the second and third strands of my vision of Christian orthodoxy, it must be admitted that in most of the churches belonging to the Wesleyan tradition, the cognitive aspect of orthodoxy is down-played and neglected compared with the commitments to social activism and to Christian experience. This is partly because Methodism emerged in the aftermath of the European Enlightenment, with its deep distrust of inherited traditions and (in its Romantic vein) an emphasis on religious feeling. The recovery of an appropriate acknowledgement of Nicæan creedal Christianity is a necessary development<sup>14</sup> for my own tradition.

## Faithful Orthopraxy

The term 'orthopraxy' is usually associated with liberation theology, with the conviction that praxis has priority over theory and that the focus of Christianity must be a preferential option for the poor. In this context, however, orthopraxy has a more general meaning: that Christian faithfulness requires some shared understanding of what it means to live out the life of faith.

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, "Sermon on the Catholic Spirit," in *The Library of Protestant Thought*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: OUP, 1964), 102

Whilst this sermon and the surprisingly-ecumenical "Letter to a Roman Catholic" (Outler, *Library of Protestant Thought*, 493–499) exemplify the approach I am advocating, it would be disingenuous not to admit to Wesley's capacity for intolerance and polemic as well as his eirenic 'generous orthodoxy'.

<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that this 'unity principle' was first formulated by Rupertus Meldenius, a seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian.

<sup>13</sup> Ted Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs: Formal and Popular Expressions of the Core Beliefs of the Wesleyan Communities* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2010), 38

<sup>14</sup> This was a frequent argument of Geoffrey Wainwright. See, for example, Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialogue* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). See, also my own account of the post-Enlightenment disparagement of doctrine in: Clutterbuck, *Handing on Christ: Rediscovering the Gift of Christian Doctrine*, (London: SCM Press, 2022), chap. 3, "The Uncherished Gift".

That Nicaea bequeaths to subsequent Christian generations a canon of theological affirmation is conventional enough, however contested that canon might become. It is less obvious that it has bequeathed canons of authentic Christian behaviour and experience. Some justification may be needed.

First, attention can be drawn to the range of meaning connected to the word *pistis* in the New Testament. It frequently implies both a belief that something is the case (specifically, the status of the person of Jesus Christ) and it refers to an attitude of committed trust. But, in addition, it often has a clear implication of faithfulness, of a pattern of behaviour consistent with the belief that is espoused and the relationship of trust to which one is committed. So, for example, Paul can write of «the obedience of faith» (Rom 1.5) and the author of Revelation can refer to Jesus as «the faithful witness» (Rev. 1.5). In spite of the bitter debates over ‘faith’ and ‘works’ in the Reformation and the centuries that followed, there is a clear implication that faith includes a performative element and cannot be defined simply in terms of cognitive affirmation or affective trust.

This inescapable complexity of faith is reflected, too, in the key characters responsible for the development of Nicæan theology in the fourth century. For all of them there is a clear commitment to asceticism as a necessary accompaniment to belief. In other words, what we have learned to call a Christian ‘life-style’ is firmly connected to our understanding of the nature of God and of God’s relationship with the world and humanity. Athanasius famously promoted the memory of the monastic pioneer, Anthony, while Gregory Naziansus – a key member of the Cappadocian theologians who developed a fuller Trinitarianism based on Nicaea – argued for a life of *philosophia*, which combined contemplation of the divine reality with active service to the needy.<sup>15</sup>

This deep link between doctrine and human action has been developed most helpfully by Ellen Charry in her *By the Renewing of Your Minds*.<sup>16</sup> Beginning with St Paul and moving through a series of Christian theological classics, Charry argues that «[...] the classic theologians based their understanding of human excellence on knowing and loving God, the imitation of or assimilation to whom brings proper human dignity and flourishing».<sup>17</sup> Her chapter on Athanasius takes a close look

<sup>15</sup> Morwenna Ludlow, “The Cappadocians,” in *The First Christian Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwells, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: OUP, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 18.

at his *Contra Gentiles* and also *De Incarnatione Verbi*, exploring the way in which a proper understanding of God's incarnation in Christ enables a re-orientation to the goodness of God and to a life lived as God intended. She concludes: «Thus, the aretegenic function of the *homoousios* emerges. If the Son were not the very ordered goodness of God, but became the Son at a point in time, he could not restore us to our true nature or provide us with the standard of human excellence».<sup>18</sup>

This, then, is a practical legacy of Nicaea, cementing the Christian aspiration to live a life of active Christian service to a vision of the God who has created all things, is incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, and present through the Holy Spirit. Since the Enlightenment, this has not been as obvious as it would have been in previous eras. The temptation has been to compare the practical ethical teachings of Jesus with the allegedly speculative, divisive, and less relevant propositions of the creeds. This concern links such movements as the nineteenth-century 'Jesus of History' movement, (which produced multiple lives of Jesus emphasising his ethical teaching and giving less attention to doctrines about him) and the more recent 'Jesus Seminar', with its picture of Jesus as a prophetic teacher of wisdom. The result is a frequent assumption that common action can be a basis for Christian unity, but doctrine can only be a source of division. The slogan «Doctrine divides but service unites» became something of a mantra for that branch of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement that was impatient with the methodology of *Faith and Order*.

My own Wesleyan tradition has not been immune from these developments. Methodism has long been associated with social action, though the focus of this has shifted from decade to decade. It has sometimes, though, allowed social commitment and activism to float free from the doctrinal framework in which it originated. In its origin, this was not so. The standard collection of Wesley's sermons,<sup>19</sup> which Methodist preachers in the UK are still required to study, has a mixture of doctrinal, experiential, and ethical themes. Of the forty-four sermons, no less than thirteen are on the Sermon on the Mount, whilst another is on the use of money. The sermon on 'The Catholic Spirit' has already been mentioned. It is worth quoting Wesley on how different forms of unity cohere in the life of the Christian:

But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to the worship of God which he judges

<sup>18</sup> Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1944).

to be most acceptable in his sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation – his heart is enlarged towards all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love.<sup>20</sup>

This was no abstract idealism; early Methodists saw conversion to the truth in Christ expressed in such practical actions as feeding the poor and visiting condemned prisoners. Wesley's preaching, no less than that of St John Chrysostom, could move from extracting doctrinal teaching from biblical texts to righteous condemnation of injustice and of luxurious living. This was a worldly asceticism, that gave each Christian, and not merely those called to the monastic life, an opportunity and responsibility to follow Christ in a radical way.

It is not my claim that Nicaea, any more than the Old and New Testaments, provides Christian communities with a detailed ethic that can remain the same through any cultural situation or historical circumstance. Orthopraxy is not a demand that all Christians should act in exactly the same way. Rather, it is that, just as the theological affirmations of Nicaea are a proper and lasting expression of the scriptural narrative, so they are also a lens through which the churches can discern the kind of responses they should make to the ethical challenges they face. To give one example, Nicaea's insistence on God's creation of the world out of nothing provides the springboard for a contemporary Christian commitment to the environment. This is well-expressed in the current 'Social Creed of the United Methodist Church'.<sup>21</sup>

## Transformative Orthopathy

If there are canons of belief and action, can there also be canons of experience, of religious affection? The term 'orthopathy' has come into common usage, at least within the Wesleyan tradition, through the work of Theodore Runyon, who sees it as a distinctive contribution from Methodism to the world-wide Christian community.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 454.

<sup>21</sup> "Our Social Creed," *The United Methodist Church*, accessed July 12, 2025, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/our-social-creed>.

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

Since Schleiermacher developed his emphasis on religious experience as the main referent for Christian doctrinal language, there has been a tendency either to transpose all doctrinal claims into existential language (as was the case with Paul Tillich's systematic theology) or to try to guard doctrinal truth from the taint of experiential, affective religion (as Karl Barth often appears to do).<sup>23</sup> In response to this fragmentation of doctrinal belief and Christian experience, Nicaea represents a unifying concern for a faith that is both confessional and transformative. The New Testament authors, and the framers and defenders of Nicaea, had a common concern for the *telos* (final goal) of the Christian life. So, for example, the opening verses of 1 Corinthians combine language about the person of Christ with reference both to present experience and to the outcome (*telos*) of the Christian journey: fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. Similarly, the author of Ephesians writes (Eph 1) of the nature of Christ (the one through whom we have access to God), our present religious experience (immersed in the mystery of salvation), and our future hope (the praise of God and union with Christ).

The theological debates of the fourth century, out of which emerged the creed of Nicaea and its eventual reception, were as much concerned with the present experience and future hope of salvation as they were with the correct description of the reality of God and Christ. Who is Christ if we address him in worship? Athanasius is perhaps best-known for his saying that in Christ, «God became as we are so that we might become as God is». The Cappadocians, rigorous doctrinal theologians though they were, had no doubt as to the key purpose of dogma: the transformation of humanity to share the life of God, what is sometimes called 'theopoiesis' or 'Deification'. Post-Nicene Eastern Christianity brought together the doctrinal emphasis on incarnation with the aspiration for human life in union with the divine.<sup>24</sup>

There has been considerable recent scholarship, setting out the connections between the Wesleyan and (Eastern) Orthodox traditions. These point, particularly, to the post-Nicene devotional theology tradition represented by Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>23</sup> At a more conversational level, I recall a Roman Catholic seminarian getting exasperated in a discussion with Methodist students: «why is it that every time I ask a Methodist what they believe they tell me how they feel?»

<sup>24</sup> Examples of such scholarship can be found in the following: Randy Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influence, Convergences and Differences," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 45, no. 2 (1990). S T Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002). Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (London: Epworth Press, 1971).

Wesley was profoundly influenced by two figures in this movement. One was Macarius the Egyptian (as Wesley would have known him), while another was Ephraim the Syrian. Wesley included the Macarian homilies in his 'Christian Library', intended as reading for his travelling preachers. Frances Young comments:

Wesley and Macarius had a common practical theology, a common drive towards perfection as the goal of the Christian life, a common emphasis on the incarnation and the Holy Spirit as the generator of perfection, a common stress on the love of God. Indeed, what Wesley did could be described as a 'democratizing' of the old monastic ideal of holiness.<sup>25</sup>

Young concludes her scholarly analysis of Wesley and Macarius with a series of reflections on the contemporary relevance of this tradition of theology and holiness. While the Wesleyan tradition has not always been successful in marrying together the tenets of Christian belief and the felt experience of religious commitment, its co-founder, Charles Wesley, provided a strong lead through his vast output of hymnody. Indeed, as long as the corpus of Wesley hymns formed the bedrock of Methodist worship, there was a greater possibility of a healthy balance between the two. Like his brother, John, Charles was a stout defender of the basic outline of Christian belief, as set out at Nicaea and its successor councils. Whereas John's defence was generally through sermons and other prose, Charles employed his poetic gifts. So, for example, he published a whole collection of hymns on the Trinity. He can put Nicaean doctrine into verse:

A personal distinction see  
Betwixt the Father and the Son!  
Yet is the filial Deity  
With the paternal Godhead One:  
A different person we confess  
Jesus whom all his saints admire,  
Whom all his host celestial praise,  
One and the same with God the Sire<sup>26</sup>

His more popular hymns – those that have become the pillars of Methodist worship over two centuries – show a greater power of religious imagination. They are both intensely personal and deeply embedded within the affirmation of Scripture and

<sup>25</sup> Frances Young, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014). 294–309.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Trinity*, accessed July 12, 2025, [https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/67\\_Trinity\\_Hymns\\_%281767%29\\_mod\\_0.pdf](https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/67_Trinity_Hymns_%281767%29_mod_0.pdf).

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the creeds. Take his Christmas hymn, Glory be to God on high. He says of Jesus Christ:

Emptied of his majesty  
of his dazzling glories shorn,  
being's source begins to be,  
and God himself is born.

The same hymn ends:

Knees and hearts to him we bow;  
of our flesh and of our bone,  
Jesus is our brother now  
and God is all our own<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most-frequently-sung hymn with this combination is 'And can it be?', in which the narrative of the incarnation and cross is layered with the personal experience and transformation of the believer:

He left his Father's throne above  
so free, so infinite his grace,  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
for, O my God, it found out me.

The final stanza underlines the extent of the transformation that comes from a relationship with the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ:

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus and all in him is mine!  
Alive in him, my living head  
and clothed in righteousness divine,  
bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.<sup>28</sup>

Frances Young, whose two-volume examination of scriptural exegesis and doctrinal formulation in the early church has already been mentioned, ends that study with the assertion that: «[...] it is in songs and hymns that congregations sing together doctrines and scriptures, celebrating the divine love whereby they are adopted into

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<sup>27</sup> The Methodist Church, ed., *Singing the Faith* (London: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> The Methodist Church, *Singing the Faith*.

a world way beyond anything known on earth, which yet transfigures everything known on earth».<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Nicaea continues to offer a place where different Christian traditions can meet. Its doctrinal affirmation of God's creative and redemptive work in Christ, its setting in a church with an admiration for asceticism, and its conviction that humanity is called into union with the life of God: all these can be taken up in a spirit of generosity rather than one of exclusion.

Each of the three aspects of this legacy have been illustrated by reference to this writer's Wesleyan heritage. Methodism, though, is not alone, in finding echoes of Nicaea in its teaching, social action and religious experience. Just as Methodists need to reclaim that legacy, so do their sisters and brothers in Reformed and other churches.

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<sup>29</sup> Frances Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, 2 vols., vol. 2 of *Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 306





# The Nicene Creed in Contemporary Catholic Theology: Critical Tensions, Surprising Inspirations

*Bernhard Knorn*

The 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325), celebrated in 2025, presents a valuable opportunity for church leaders and theologians alike to underscore the enduring significance of the Nicene Creed. One of such documents was issued in early 2025 by the International Theological Commission of the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith with the approval of Pope Francis. This document understands the creed as a primarily liturgical text and suggests a «doxological reading of the Symbol»,<sup>1</sup> aiming to inspire praise of God and spiritually nourish the faithful through this shared expression of the Christian faith. It also emphasizes the creed's vital role in advancing the cause of Christian unity.

The Nicene faith, in fact, already serves as a unifying foundation for the vast majority of Churches in both the East and the West. However, when referring to the 'Nicene Creed', what is commonly meant is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (NC), as adopted by the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. This expanded and revised form of the original Nicene Creed has not been fully embraced by the pre-Ephesine Church of the East or by the pre-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox Churches. For these communities, the Nicene faith in its original form remains the foundation. Nevertheless, in ecumenical dialogues, various Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedo-

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<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour: 1700th anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325–2025," *Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 2025, no. 5, accessed July 19, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_doc\\_20250403\\_1700-nicea\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20250403_1700-nicea_en.html).

nian Churches have affirmed a shared understanding of the faith as articulated in the first three Ecumenical Councils – Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus – bringing their positions close to the content of the NC.<sup>2</sup> The later Western addition of the ‘*filioque*’, stating that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father «and the Son», still divides the Churches. However, the original Greek version of the creed, without the *filioque*, was officially recognized by the Catholic Church in 1995 as equally valid and is used in some Eastern Catholic Churches.<sup>3</sup>

This article focuses on developments in Catholic theology during the twentieth century and discusses some debates regarding the normative status of the creed in systematic theology. Many approaches and concepts introduced by leading theologians of that period continue to be discussed today and form a significant part of the foundation for contemporary theological reflection. This study does not aim to examine specific articles or to analyze how these authors interpreted particular statements or topics from the creed. Rather, its primary objective is to explore how the early Christian creeds have been understood in terms of their formal authority in influential Catholic theologies. A brief overview regarding this issue within Western Christianity will provide the necessary context for the then following inquiry.

## The Role and Status of Confessions of Faith in Western Christianity

At first glance, there appears to be broad consensus regarding the NC as a widely accepted foundation for the doctrine of faith within Western Christianity. However, its normative status is not universally recognized. Some Christian communities hold that Scripture alone constitutes the authoritative source of faith. Pentecostal traditions, for instance, typically regard creeds more as historical formulations that

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Theresia Hainthaler, “Nicaea and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the Ecumenical Dialogue Between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches,” in *The Creed of Nicaea (325): The Status Quaestionis and the Neglected Topics*, ed. Alberto Melloni and Costanza Bianchi (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2024), 137–56, <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737017657.137>.

<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “The Greek and the Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit,” Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, September 13, 1995, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/altri-testi/en1.html>. The recent document by the International Theological Commission is based on the original Greek NC without *filioque* (cf. ‘Jesus Christ,’ no. 4).

aid in understanding the development of Christian belief than as binding declarations to which every believer must subscribe.<sup>4</sup> Non-Trinitarian communities, for their part, reject at least certain elements of the NC. Even within the traditional mainline Churches, the status of the NC varies in both theological interpretation and ecclesial life. Its authority was the subject of considerable debate throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the Lutheran Church, the Apostles' Creed, the NC, and the Athanasian Creed are its confessional foundation according to the *Book of Concord* from 1580.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Church of England affirmed these same creeds as «most certain warrants of Holy Scripture»<sup>6</sup>. Within Calvinism, although the recitation of the creed was removed from the liturgy, theological agreement with the early Christian creeds remained intact.<sup>7</sup> Broadening the perspective, several Christian communities – such as Baptists, Mennonites, or the Moravian Brethren – reject the normative authority of these post-biblical confessional texts. Particularly throughout the twentieth century, numerous Protestant Churches in America, Asia, and Africa, which either separated from European Churches or developed independently, have produced a wide array of new 'statements of faith'.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in recent years, many ecumenically inclined communities have moved toward recognizing the Symbols of the early church.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the role and authority of the Creeds in Reformed and Lutheran worship and theology were frequently contested. These debates often reflected divergent Christian responses to the anti-dogmatic – and thus anti-creedal – rationalism of the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> The Swiss '*Apostolicum*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Valentina Ciciliot, "Beyond the Filioque Controversy and the Symbols of Faith: The Rise of Pentecostal, Charismatic and Non-Denominational Christianity," in *Nicaea After 1700 Years: Critical Insights into a Living Legacy*, ed. Luca Ferracci, Stephan van Erp, and Susan Abraham (London: SCM, 2025), 68–76.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 19–21.

<sup>6</sup> The Forty-Two Articles of the Church of England (1552/53), art. 7; cf. The Thirty-Nine Articles (1562/63), art. 8, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 3; 757.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Confessio Fidei Gallicana* (1559), chap. 5; *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* (1566), chap. 11 in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:142, 831.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 486–88; Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 361–75.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Pelikan, *Credo*, 488–97.

Controversy' began in 1845, when a motion was introduced at the St. Gallen synod of the Reformed Church to remove the Apostles' Creed from the baptismal liturgy. This motion was rejected, but in several other cantons between 1868 and the 1870s, revised liturgical books for Baptism and the Lord's Supper sparked intense debate and were gradually adopted. Some omitted the creed entirely, others included it as optional.<sup>10</sup> The background of the whole controversy were internal debates on the political stance of the church at that time. Unlike in Germany, the Swiss Reformed Churches did not loosen their strong historical ties with the cantonal governments. They debated about how much freedom might be allowed within the church in order to stay attractive and open to all people, even to those who were increasingly questioning the traditional doctrines. One of the issues debated in this context was the normative status of the creed. Proponents for dropping the creed typically cited Scripture as the sole foundation of Reformed doctrine. Theologians also criticized the creed for omitting the doctrine of justification regarded as the core of the Christian message, while including elements such as the virgin birth and descent of Jesus into hell – teachings they considered marginal to the faith and incompatible with a modern, enlightened worldview.

Similar theological concerns lay at the heart of the *Apostolicum* Controversy in the German Lutheran states, particularly in Prussia and Württemberg. The first debates emerged in Berlin in 1871. Different from Switzerland, the conflict in Germany primarily unfolded between pastors and church authorities aligned with the Prussian government, which staunchly defended the tradition of retaining the creed as an essential component of Lutheran liturgy. The renowned theologian Adolf Harnack (1851–1930) became involved in these debates in 1890, advocating for a balanced approach. Nevertheless, he proposed the formulation of a new creed that would reflect modern theological developments.<sup>11</sup>

Four decades later, two influential Protestant authors turned against Harnack: His former student, the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), and the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968). Both took a critical stance toward liberal theology because numerous liberal Protestants sympathized with Hitler's fascist movement in Germany. In response, Bonhoeffer and Barth strongly empha-

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rudolf Gebhard, "Apostolikumsstreit," *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, January 27, 2011, accessed July 12, 2025, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/043205/2011-01-27/>.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Daniela Dunkel, "Apostolicum Controversy," in *Religion Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), [https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888\\_rpp\\_SIM\\_00934](https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_SIM_00934); Julia Winnebeck, *Apostolikumsstreitigkeiten: Diskussionen um Liturgie, Lehre und Kirchenverfassung in der Preußischen Landeskirche 1871–1914* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016).

sized the necessity of confessing the Christian faith in opposition to National Socialist ideology. Barth, for example, wrote in the opening pages of his exposition of the Apostles' Creed in 1935: «Confession is always concrete, historical decision, a *battle action* of the *Church*, which thinks that it hears, in various convictions and doctrines cropping up within its pale, the voice of unbelief, false belief or superstition». <sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer supported staunchly the 1934 Barmen Declaration upon his return from London to Germany in 1935, but his position was in one aspect different from Barth's. For him, confession of faith served primarily to sustain the church's inner life: the creed played a vital role in preserving the unity of believers in times of trial. Ultimately, however, to profess the faith meant to follow Christ and therefore to become active in the resistance against Hitler. <sup>13</sup>

Until the 1950s, the Catholic Church saw no significant debate regarding the normative status of the creed. However, this began to shift in the context of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a change perceptible even among the highest ranks of the church. It has been a long-standing practice to begin councils and synods with a profession of faith, which is still a norm of current Canon Law. <sup>14</sup> The decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and those of the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) both open with the NC. <sup>15</sup> Although the creed was not formally included in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) recited it during the opening celebration, after which the council Fathers expressed their assent and loyalty to it. Notably, however, the Tridentine Profession of Faith was used. <sup>16</sup> Although this Profession incorporates the NC, it also includes doctrinal additions that surprised many observers – particularly guests from other Churches and many bishops who had expected greater ecumenical sensitivity from John XXIII. These additions, drawn from post-Reformation polemics, are «larded with theological controversy». <sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 1967), 502–3 (Outline for a Book, 1944); cf. Guido Vergauwen, «Dietrich Bonhoeffer Ringen um eine Kurzformel des Glaubens in Zeiten der Gefahr», in *Das Christentum der Theologen im 20. Jahrhundert: Vom 'Wesen des Christentums' zu den 'Kurzformeln des Glaubens'*, ed. Mariano Delgado (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 207–21.

<sup>14</sup> *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983), can. 833, §1.

<sup>15</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 662, 802.

<sup>16</sup> *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 1/1 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970), 157–58.

<sup>17</sup> Concilium General Secretariat, «The Creed in the Melting Pot», in *Dogma and Pluralism*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx, trans. Theodore L. Westow (New York: Herder and Herder,

Upon the conclusion of the council, Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) issued the new “Credo of the People of God” in 1968, which, as he stated, «repeats in substance, with some developments called for by the spiritual condition of our time, the creed of Nicea».<sup>18</sup> Many bishops and theologians wondered why both popes departed without need from the original creeds used across most Christian Churches, and why Paul VI promulgated a new ‘Credo’ without broader consultation either with other Churches, for instance at the World Council of Churches’ general assembly in Uppsala that same year, or at least with his own bishops, for example during the council three years earlier. In any case, the “Credo of the People of God” neither gained widespread popularity among the faithful nor was it intended for regular liturgical recitation. Rather, it functioned as a contemporary theological reflection on the themes of the traditional creeds.

In the post-conciliar period, it was not such new formulation but the Apostles’ Creed that has become very popular within the Catholic Church. As part of the liturgical reforms, the ancient Apostles’ Creed was introduced as a shorter alternative to the NC in the Order of Mass in most vernacular editions of the revised *Roman Missal*.<sup>19</sup> One motivating factor was the desire to emphasize the baptismal roots of the faithful’s active participation in the liturgy.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, incorporating a reference to the baptismal profession of faith was seen as pastorally and theologically fitting for Sunday Eucharist. The baptismal profession is traditionally made with the Apostles’ Creed, which originates in an ancient Roman baptismal Symbol. As a result, however, many parishes in German-speaking countries, for example, have almost entirely abandoned the NC – unlike in other parts of the world, where it continues to be used predominantly.

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1970), 131–53, at 131; cf. Massimiliano Proietti, “The Liturgical ‘Decanonisation’ of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: Inserting the ‘Apostolic’ Creed in the Post-Vatican II *Ordo Missae*,” in *Nicaea After 1700 Years: Critical Insights into a Living Legacy*, ed. Luca Ferracci, Stephan van Erp, and Susan Abraham, trans. Patricia Kelly (London: SCM, 2025), 49–58, at 49–51.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Paul VI, “*Solemni hac Liturgia (Credo of the People of God)*,” Apostolic Letter in the form of *Motu Proprio*, The Holy See, June 30, 1968, no. 3, accessed July 19, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_motu-proprio\\_19680630\\_cred.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19680630_cred.html).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Proietti, “Liturgical Decanonisation,” 55. In the current third typical (i.e. Latin) edition of the *Roman Missal* from 2002, the Apostles’ Creed has finally been universally included as an alternative to the NC in the Order of Mass.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy], no. 14: in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 7–8.

## The Debated Suggestions for New Short Formulas of the Faith

The above-mentioned developments provided the context and reference for Catholic theologians who proposed new formulations of the core doctrines of the faith. The short formulas of the Christian faith by Karl Rahner (1904–1984) are the most well-known and widely discussed efforts of providing modern alternatives to the traditional creeds. Beginning in the late 1960s, Rahner introduced these concise formulas as a way to respond to the increasing secularization in European societies.<sup>21</sup>

Karl Rahner regarded the Symbols as permanently normative, also because they are recognized as such by most Christian denominations. Nevertheless, he believed that creeds like the Apostles' Creed could no longer effectively communicate the essential content of the faith. As he wrote in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1976), the creed «does not appeal directly enough to our contemporary intellectual and spiritual situation».<sup>22</sup> Not only do the cultures of then and now differ considerably from each other, but also more fundamentally the questions of the people and their capacity for understanding. In his brief creedal formulations, Rahner did not aim merely to present the core doctrines of faith in abstract terms. Rather, he sought to engage with contemporary experiences of the human longing for salvation. From this point of departure, he hoped to offer accessible pathways into the mystery of the Trinity. For him, the experience of salvation history should naturally lead into an understanding of the immanent Trinity. In doing so, he aimed to remain faithful to the original Trinitarian dogma while also embracing the historical unfolding of salvation.<sup>23</sup>

Rahner introduced a variety of short formulas across several publications, ranging from explanations of the faith on a few pages to concise summaries consisting of just a few sentences. Some of these texts are more catechetical in nature, others more personal, and still others take the form of academic theological propo-

<sup>21</sup> Karl Rahner, "In Search of a Short Formula of the Christian Faith," in *The Pastoral Approach to Atheism*, ed. Karl Rahner, trans. Theodore L. Westow (New York: Paulist Press, 1967), 70–82. This article, published concurrently in various languages, is the expanded version of an article from 1965, which explained the same idea, yet without the term 'Kurzformel' (short formula): Karl Rahner, "Kurzer Inbegriff des christlichen Glaubens für 'Ungläubige': Ein Versuch," *Geist und Leben* 38, no. 5 (1965): 374–79.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 449.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rahner, 452–54.



sitions. They also differ in thematic emphasis: some focus primarily on God's self-revelation, others on the relationship with Jesus Christ, the church, or the eschatological fulfillment of history. Overall, however, Rahner's short formulas are rooted in his transcendental theology and are generally not well-suited for liturgical or catechetical use.<sup>24</sup> He himself acknowledged that these were abstract formulations shaped by European intellectual traditions, and therefore not immediately accessible to all.<sup>25</sup>

Both practical and more fundamental questions regarding the relationship between short formulas and the traditional creeds were actively debated during the 1970s and 1980s. Joseph Ratzinger (1927–2022), for instance, strongly opposed the introduction of short formulas or any new creeds. He was concerned that such new statements could trivialize the faith. One of his more substantial theological objections was that these new formulations, being the work of individual theologians, lacked the liturgical and ecclesial context that gave traditional creeds their authority and function. They did not, for example, arise within the context of baptism, like the Apostles' Creed, which was used for catechetical instruction and professed in a responsorial form before baptism. Nor were they connected to ordination or the conferral of ecclesial office, as in the case of the *Professio Fidei Tridentina*, which candidates recited as a pledge of fidelity to church teaching. Most importantly, these creedal statements lacked official ecclesial recognition – such as approval by a council – and therefore, unlike the NC, could not serve as instruments of ecclesial unity.<sup>26</sup>

## The Nicene Creed in Renewed *Loci Theologici* Concepts

The pragmatic dimension of the creeds also came into focus in discussions about the extent to which the Symbols hold normative authority in theological argumen-

<sup>24</sup> Vgl. Helmut Hoping, "Ein transzendentaltheologischer Begriff des Christentums: Rahners Kurzformeln des Glaubens," in *Das Christentum der Theologen im 20. Jahrhundert: Vom 'Wesen des Christentums' zu den 'Kurzformeln des Glaubens'*, ed. Mariano Delgado (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 235–45, at 238–41.

<sup>25</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 454.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 122–30; cf. Leo Karrer, *Der Glaube in Kurzformeln: Zur theologischen und sprachtheoretischen Problematik und zur religionspädagogischen Verwendung der Kurzformeln des Glaubens* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1978).

tation. This issue emerged in the context of the *loci theologici*. This early-modern concept by Melchor Cano (1509–1560) received renewed attention in the 1990s, as theologians began proposing fresh interpretations of the original ten *loci* or introduced new sets of such sources that could provide evidence for theological claims – or more broadly, that are witnesses to the faith from different perspectives and are connected with varying degrees of authority.<sup>27</sup> The NC, for instance, belongs to the conciliar interpretation of the faith, one of the traditional *loci*. Cano considered the Apostles' Creed even part of apostolic tradition. While its direct apostolic origin is no longer asserted today, its enduring role in baptism and liturgy since the early church continues to be emphasized. In one of the most influential reformulations of the *loci*, Peter Hünemann introduced liturgy into the *loci theologici proprii* as a pragmatic instance intended to complement the other predominantly text-based instances. In this light, the creeds may be understood less as dogmatic propositions and more through their liturgical function.<sup>28</sup>

Hünemann discusses the creeds not only in the context of the *loci*. He also asks more generally to what extent such doctrinal formulations from the distant past still warrant true propositions.<sup>29</sup> For him, it is fundamentally important to recognize that truth is not established simply by citing authoritative texts – especially when the historical context of those texts differs significantly from our own. According to Hünemann, only communicative acts make arguments true, meaning that some form of dialogue or discernment leading to mutual understanding must take place. Such a process requires that doctrinal statements be articulated and interpreted in a way that is intelligible. Only then can one assess to what extent a particular interpretation of the faith is genuinely inspired by the Word of God and bears faithful witness to it. This process necessarily unfolds within a community of

<sup>27</sup> Melchor Cano's *loci theologici* are different from renowned Lutheran *Loci Communes* concepts, for example by Philip Melanchthon or Johann Gerhard. They are not the central topics of the Christian faith (God, faith, sin, grace, church [...]) but rather a hierarchy of formal instances that provide evidence for valid arguments (Sacred Scripture, apostolic tradition, Church teaching, Church fathers, philosophy, history [...]). For a survey, see Bernhard Knorn, "Die Theologie und ihre Quellen: Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der *Loci Theologici* Melchor Canos," in *Zwischen Dogma und Erfahrung: Erkundungen zum Grund des Glaubens*, ed. Dirk Ansorge, Bernhard Knorn, and Klaus Vechtel (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-76000>; Bernhard Körner, *Orte des Glaubens – Loci Theologici: Studien zur theologischen Erkenntnislehre* (Würzburg: Echter, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Peter Hünemann, *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre: Glaube – Überlieferung – Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2003), 212–14.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hünemann, 82–85; 267–73.

believers and, in turn, helps to shape that community. The truth of the faith becomes manifest within and for the communicative community that is the church.

Hünemann argues that professing and bearing witness to the faith is fundamentally a communicative process within a specific space and time in history. Within his framework of the *loci theologici*, the traditional creeds are, on the one hand, enduringly significant as testimonies to a formative process of communication in early Christianity. In this process, the apostolic proclamation of faith was shaped into a *regula fidei*, which was then passed on through catechetical instruction in preparation for baptism and ultimately professed liturgically by catechumens and by the wider ecclesial community. On the other hand, this tradition – understood as a process of mediation and transformation – did not come to a close with the liturgical consolidation or conciliar definition of the creeds in the early church. As Hünemann puts it: «The progressive development of creeds is thus part of the history of faith and of its understanding. This development may give directions for our present orientation in faith».<sup>30</sup> The theological significance of the creeds, then, does not rest solely on their formal authority, but arises from their dynamic presence in a web of communicative processes: unfolding through history, within the life of the church, in dialogue with the Word of God, and” in engagement with contemporary questions and the world in which we live.

## ***Lex Orandi Lex Credendi*: The Nicene Creed as an Inspiration for Mystagogical Theologies**

While Karl Rahner’s short formulas of the faith offered alternatives to the traditional creeds in order to make their content more accessible for today, Peter Hünemann took the history of the creeds as examples of processes of ecclesial communication that sought the truth of these traditional formulations within the changing contexts the believers live in. For Hünemann, it was crucial to understand the creeds not merely as doctrinal definitions, but primarily as liturgical texts. Building on these two approaches, many recent Catholic theologians have emphasized that the creed, as a central element of Christian liturgy, should inspire a mystagogical theology – one that initiates believers into the faith and deepens their liturgical experience by

<sup>30</sup> Hünemann, 271: «So gehört die Abfolge der Glaubensbekenntnisse zur Geschichte des Glaubens und seines Verständnisses. Diese Abfolge hat für die gegenwärtige Orientierung im Glauben eine richtungsweisende Funktion».

linking faith and worship to the lived realities of the faithful. In line with this perspective, the post-Second Vatican Council period has seen not only numerous theological explanations of the creeds but also more theoretical discussions on the shape theology must take to support this vision.

Already in patristic times, the *Explanatio* or *Expositio symboli* was a common form of explaining the Christian faith along the articles of a creed. From the early modern era onward, catechisms took on this role, though often at the expense of systematic depth in favor of practical instruction. It was not until the twentieth century that systematic theologians began to rediscover the value of presenting the faith in a manner that was both concise and theologically robust. On the Protestant side, the rejection of liberal compromises with traditional doctrine prompted renewed theological engagement with the creeds, exemplified by the work of Karl Barth. Particularly after the Second World War, a pressing theological concern emerged: what does it mean to believe in God in an age marked by atheism and a dominant scientific worldview? This question is central to Joseph Ratzinger's influential 1968 interpretation of the Apostles' Creed *Introduction to Christianity*. In the foreword, he wrote that his goal was:

to help understand faith afresh as something that makes possible true humanity in the world of today, to expound faith without changing it into the small coin to empty talk painfully laboring to hide a complete spiritual vacuum.<sup>31</sup>

This very successful publication was followed by many others. Particularly within the Catholic Church, this boom contributed to freeing professions of faith from being viewed merely as instruments for enforcing doctrinal conformity – as exemplified by the infamous Oath Against Modernism, which all Catholic clergy and theology professors were required to take from 1910 until 1967.<sup>32</sup> The liturgical reforms after the Second Vatican Council further emphasized the baptismal vocation of all the faithful actively participating in the liturgy now in the vernacular. This shift brought renewed focus to the baptismal faith articulated in the creed and heightened the importance of making that faith comprehensible to all participants. Indeed, the vast majority of theological publications in this period focused on the Apostles' Creed. Renowned interpretations by authors such as Henri de Lubac

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. Joseph R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 24–25.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Pius X, *Motu Proprio Sacrorum Antistitum*, September 1, 1910, in Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), nos. 3537–50.

(1969), Hans Urs von Balthasar (1989), Theodor Schneider (1985), Hans Küng (1992) and (on the Protestant side) Wolfhart Pannenberg (1972), have all been several times reprinted and translated into multiple languages.<sup>33</sup> In English and Romance-language contexts, where the NC is typically used in Catholic liturgy, more introductions to the NC have been published; however, these works have not achieved the same international prominence as some of the aforementioned interpretations of the Apostles' Creed.<sup>34</sup>

Given the critical tensions and extensive debates over the past two centuries regarding the reformulation – or even discontinuation – of creeds in the liturgy, it may come as a surprise that the latter half of the twentieth century saw the publication of numerous affirmative interpretations of these ancient texts: they are still inspiring in a postmodern world. The impetus to compose new creeds for the church appears to have diminished in recent decades within mainline Christian traditions. Only the introduction of the new English translation of the NC in the 2011 *Roman Missal* prompted some theological discussion.<sup>35</sup> Compared to the version used since the 1970s, the new translation adheres more closely to the Latin original. This development once again raised the question of whether such traditional liturgical texts should be rendered in language that is easily comprehensible, or whether they should instead preserve verbal continuity across times and cultures within the universal church.

Modern hermeneutics would rather not equate the identity of content with the verbal identity of a text. Instead, it emphasizes the significance of changing contexts that require new formulations. These concerns were, for instance, central to debates with theologians of the 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement. Seeking to distance themselves from liberal theologies – which they saw as indifferent to the core

<sup>33</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Christian Faith: The Structure of the Apostles' Creed*, trans. Illtyd Trethowan and John Saward (London: Chapman, 1986); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990); Theodor Schneider, *Was wir glauben: Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis Verstehen*, 2nd ed. (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2017); Hans Küng, *Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Doubleday, 1993); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Examples from various backgrounds: Berard L. Marthaler, *The Creed: The Apostolic Faith in Contemporary Theology*, 3rd ed. (Mystic: Twenty-Third, 2007); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Scott Hahn, *The Creed: Professing the Faith Through the Ages* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road, 2016); Jared Ortiz and Daniel A. Keating, *The Nicene Creed: A Scriptural, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Gerald O'Collins, *Lost in Translation: The English Language and the Catholic Mass* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 27–30; 37–46.

content of the Christian tradition – they aimed to affirmatively integrate that tradition into their systematic theological work. With a «commitment to credal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix»,<sup>36</sup> they addressed contemporary societal questions from a theological perspective. Their responses to the pressing issues of modern humanity were meant to stand in explicit contrast to those offered by the secular paradigm. For them, the faith of the church as articulated in the creeds was to offer a renewed source of orientation. However, such an approach presupposes a strong trust in the church's credibility – which has been significantly eroded, not in the least due to the scandal of sexual abuse. Following its initial momentum in the late 1990s, the Radical Orthodoxy movement has since seen a decline in influence.<sup>37</sup>

Still, a positive engagement with the ancient creeds continues to challenge systematic theology. It provokes essential questions about the relationship between faith and history, academic theology and the church, personal belief and ecclesial community, liturgy and doctrine. This integrative perspective gives rise to a liturgical-theological approach grounded in the principle *lex orandi lex credendi*: the rule of prayer as the rule of belief.<sup>38</sup> Precisely because the creeds are so familiar from their liturgical use and so deeply rooted in historical tradition, they continue to inspire theologians to revisit the foundational themes of Christian faith, including those that are difficult to affirm today. The creeds articulate a hierarchy of truths that urges a focus on the core message of Christianity. Moreover, as liturgical texts, they unite the pragmatics and content of faith: they are both profession and proclamation. During their recitation in worship, the emphasis often lies in standing faithfully before God with the community (*fides qua, fides ecclesiae*). Yet, when reflecting on their content, the creeds also provide a foundational interpretation of the faith (*fides quae*). A theology of the creed must therefore attend to both aspects, which are mutually enriching.

But is such an approach still realistic and compelling today? Rooted primarily in the works of authors from the liturgical movement and in Alexander Schme-

<sup>36</sup> John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, "Introduction: Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–20, at 2.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Andreas G. Weiß, "Die radikalen Grenzen von 'Radical Orthodoxy': John Milbanks postmoderne Re-Konstruktion christlichen Glaubens," *Geist und Leben* 94, no. 3–4 (2021): 291–98; 403–11.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Julia Knop, *Ecclesia Orans: Liturgie als Herausforderung für die Dogmatik* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012), 260–82.

mann's Orthodox liturgical theology, this concept relies fundamentally on the ecclesial nature of both the creed and theology.<sup>39</sup> In such contexts, liturgical-theological approaches appear highly plausible. Yet, as with Radical Orthodoxy, the question arises whether the current ecclesial landscape in many Western countries – though not invalidating these considerations in principle – renders them increasingly remote. After all, many Catholics no longer regularly participate in the liturgical life of the church. Is therefore the liturgical *memoria* of the central mysteries of the faith still accessible to a broad segment of the people of God? At the very least, in relation to the NC, efforts to revitalize its significance seem crucial. As one of the few liturgical texts shared across many Christian traditions, the creed holds the potential to serve as an anchor for deepening ecumenical communion.

## The Nicene Creed as a Common Profession of Faith for the Christian Churches

One of the long-term projects of multilateral ecumenical dialogue has been to achieve a consensus on the creed among all Christian Churches. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has pursued this aim since the World Conference of Churches in Lausanne in 1927. Beginning in 1978, the Commission launched a study on the ecumenical significance of the NC and, in 1982, proposed a concrete plan that outlines a three-step process. According to this plan in its revised version from 1990, the apostolic faith, «set out in a particular way in the credal statements of the early Church»<sup>40</sup> and most widely recognized in the NC, should be recovered as the foundation of faith for all Christian Churches in three steps: first, interpreting the creed in light of contemporary contexts (explication); second, recognizing it in its original wording (i.e., without the *filioque*)<sup>41</sup> as

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Knop, 213–18.

<sup>40</sup> Faith and Order Commission, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), no. 8; cf. Johannes Oeldemann, “‘Confessing the One Faith’: The Contribution of a Faith and Order Study to the Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea,” in *Nicaea After 1700 Years: Critical Insights into a Living Legacy*, ed. Luca Ferracci, Stephan van Erp, and Susan Abraham (London: SCM, 2025), 98–107.

<sup>41</sup> For ecumenical suggestions regarding the *filioque* issue, see Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *Glaubensbekenntnis und Kirchengemeinschaft: Das Modell des Konzils von Konstantinopel (381)* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), 122–23; Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “The Greek and the Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit.”

an authentic expression of the apostolic faith (recognition); and third, jointly confessing it anew (confession).<sup>42</sup> The cited document offers a comprehensive ecumenical exposition of the NC, identifies points of ongoing theological disagreement among various Churches, and explores the substantial common ground that could support further steps toward a broader recognition and ultimately a shared confession of the creed. Despite its promise, the project stalled – due in part to geopolitical shifts in the early 1990s, and also because the study primarily focused on mainline denominations and traditional theological concerns.<sup>43</sup>

The 2025 jubilee of the Nicene faith presents a timely opportunity to revisit at least the second step: encouraging as many Churches as possible to officially recognize the NC. Johannes Oeldemann rightly observes that in today's world of disregard for the truth, of polarization and global conflicts, such a statement of common ground among the Churches would carry significant weight.<sup>44</sup> Compared to the 1980s, any new initiative would need to involve non-credal Churches, Churches from the Global South, and a growing number of trans-denominational communities. While this diversity makes ecumenical consensus more challenging, it also renders it more urgent. Encouragingly, there is a growing awareness of the creeds' enduring value, along with new experiences of their adoption within global Christianity.<sup>45</sup>

The final step – a regular, joint public confession of the creed – would presuppose shared liturgical practices and thus a substantial degree of ecclesial communion. Yet this requirement need not become an obstacle. Even if the same texts were simply spoken across the different Churches, it would serve as a powerful sign of the communion that already exists. Such a pragmatic adoption of the NC would, in turn, stimulate theological reflection. A theology grounded in the Symbols of the early church must, by its very nature, become an ecumenical theology.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Faith and Order Commission, *Confessing the One Faith*, nos. 10–27.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Oeldemann, “‘Confessing the One Faith,’” 105.

<sup>44</sup> Oeldemann, 106.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ciciliot, “Beyond the Filioque Controversy,” 75.





# From Creed to Confessing: Worship, Teaching, and Mission

## Introduction

Reformed confessing is not merely about ascribing to a text, but is about actuating the theology behind it. Praxis matters. This applies to the Nicene Creed too. The Reformed approach to both council and creed is to place doctrinal affirmation in critical conversation with praxiological engagement in accordance with the maxim: *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* – the law of praying is the law of believing [and] the law of living. The previous sections in this book have focused on interrogating *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* through a variety of theological and historical lenses. This section engages *lex vivendi* by asking how the Nicene Council and its accompanying creed is a critical resource for today in terms of how Nicaea is applied in a variety of cultural contexts or on the sources and nature of confessing.

**Peniel Rajkumar** inaugurates this section's discussions by reflecting in his chapter on the latter and, in doing so, provides a general contextual-theological fundament to the chapters following his. In our common confessing, it is tempting to neglect the voices from the many margins of society and even in the global church because what is 'common' was often determined by those with power. Rajkumar reminds us that the common is diverse, and that attending to the 'un-common' ways of applying faith to local contexts provides wisdom for counter-marginalizing discipleship today.

The subsequent chapters engage Nicaea and the creed through various cultural perspectives from (nearly) around the globe. Some of the chapters bring Nicaea to bear on the state of Christianity in their contexts. **Kevin Muriithi Ndereba** resources the Nicene Creed and demonstrates its value for deepening Christian witness in an East African context. Such deepening is an alternative to the pragmatic and often-shallow 'charismatic' movements that continue to gain ground in much

of the Global South. **Annemarie Mayer** brings Nicaea to bear on the question of secularism in Europe. Drawing on opinion polls about belief or faith in Europe, she interrogates what Nicene faith is, but also what the state of faith in Europe is, concluding with whether there is a Christian future for Europe at all.

The remaining chapters reflect on Nicaea and the life of the church, often calling attention to ways in which faith was expressed outside of the written text. **Oan Jaisaodee** examines the value of resourcing Nicaea from a Thai context. She examines closely how Nicaea can be useful for Christian education, especially in a context where Buddhism is the majority religion. **Roderick Hewitt** brings Nicaea into engagement with the church's mission in Jamaica, arguing that Nicaea needs to be enculturated into a 'living creed' that is truly rooted in the local context and recognizes religio-cultural experiences expressed through music, art, and resources beyond merely the written text. **David Kim-Cragg** argues that there are elements of Nicaea in hymns sung by Indigenous Christians at Kinoshêw Sîpîy in Canada and argues that the hymnbook constitutes an enculturated sung expression of Christian life that perhaps gives us a window into a pre-Constantinized church. This allows us to appreciate an enculturation of Nicaea from a people who are not often in the front and center of Reformed theological consciousness. **Gemma King's** study of the reception history of various creeds, confessions, and catechisms in Scotland's Reformed Churches not only illuminates the many ways in which they were conveyed to the worshipping masses, but reminds us of the importance of translating modern confessions such as Accra for today's congregants.

In many ways, this section of the book showcases the catholicity of Reformed Christianity. It demonstrates how one confessional text and one pivotal conciliar event in church history can be resourced and applied in a variety of contexts that even the Emperor Constantine would not have been able to imagine. Certainly, there are regions of the world not represented in this chapter; the intention and focus for this section was not regional diversity but a diversity of practical-theological perspectives. That being said, a book on Reformed engagements with Nicaea and its creed is not meant to foreclose reflections but rather, the audacious hope is to open the doors to more engagements with contexts and cultural-theological perspectives beyond what was and can be represented in this book. Let us journey onwards, then, nourished by the faith which includes the story of Nicaea and empowered by the audacious hope that opens us to others, so that we can more truthfully and completely love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. (Matt 22. 37–39)

# **‘We don’t See skeletons Walking Up and Down’: Un-commoning Our Common Faith**

*Peniel Rajkumar*

## **Introduction: Our Common Faith?**

Several years ago, the Indian thinker Pandipedi Chenchiah wrote:

The common faith is an abstraction – something that does not exist independently on its own legs. Skeletons are common factors in human bodies, yet we do not see them walking up and down the streets, do not see them at all except in medical colleges. Human form and outline may be said to be common to men and women, yet we do not see bare forms like ghosts haunting men (sic). The common faith does not exist independently from the matrix of tissues called the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Though the Nicene Creed provides us a basis for a common faith, the embodiment of this faith takes different forms in different contexts. This essay explores how the kernel of faith contained in the Nicene Creed can assume different shape and form when rooted in different contexts. In the context of this book, this chapter falls under the section «From Creed to Confession». Therefore, I will explore how different Christian communities have, across time and space, confessed the Nicene Creed into commitment in different ways vis-à-vis some of the pressing issues of their contexts and time. In line with the Accra Confession this paper understands ‘confession’ not in the sense of a «classical doctrinal confession» but as a posture that conveys «the necessity and urgency of an active response to the challenges of our time», fully recognising

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Thangasamy, *The Theology of Chenchiah: With Selections from His Writings*, (Madras: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1966), 58.

that, «faith commitment may be expressed in various ways according to regional and theological traditions: as confession, as confessing together, as faith stance, as being faithful to the covenant of God».<sup>2</sup> All this is aligned with the reformed principle of *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed), which at its core is about «overcoming the drive, inherent in all human institutions, towards self-preservation [...] in order to respond creatively to the challenge presented by new historical situations».<sup>3</sup>

## The Nicene Creed: A Yes to Life?

Even though the Nicene Creed was the product of the politics of empire – not the least because the Council of Nicaea which shaped the creed was convened by Emperor Constantine who recognised that the unity of Christians was indispensable for the political stability of the empire – there is a larger narrative of life in the Nicene Creed. This is because we affirm our faith in God who is «maker of heaven and earth», we affirm our faith in Jesus through whom «all things were made», and we affirm our faith in the Holy Spirit the «giver of life». The Godhead that we Christians affirm in Trinitarian terms encompasses and embraces the wider web of creation beyond humans, and eschews a parochial anthropocentric dimension. All these faith affirmations attest and point to a view of salvation that is cosmic in scope. This directs our hope both towards life in this world (where God has spoken through the prophets, and has also invited us through baptism into a discipleship of forgiveness), as well as the «life of the world to come». How do we let our faith in this God of life shape our engagement with the world which has, and continues to face the onslaught of 'empire'?

## The Condition of Empire: A Yes to Death

'Empire' today has assumed the shape of «a decentred and deterritorialising apparatus of rule».<sup>4</sup> The force of empires (both past and present) rests on their ability to

<sup>2</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *The Accra Confession*, (2004), para 15, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://wrcr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AccraConfession-Introduction.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Shaull, *The Reformation and Liberation Theology: Insights for the Challenges of Today*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox press, 1991), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hard and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), x.

create conditions which foster disparity, deprivation, discrimination, division, and destruction – which affect both people and the planet. What is meant to be held in common – as God’s benevolent gifts – are hoarded through the politics of greed and guns and often invoking the name of God.

The necropolitics fostered by conditions of the empire is captured well by the *Accra Confession* which defines empire as, «The convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose of amassing political power and economic wealth», which «typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful», and «crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states, and can marginalize or co-opt religious communities». <sup>5</sup>

We can find similar resonances in a more recent document, *Unmasking Empire*, produced by the Council for World Mission (CWM) which describes empire as those connected forces which, «desire to control, profit, occupy and exploit peoples, planet, minds, bodies and allegiances» in a way «which destroys the earth, divides peoples and damages the most vulnerable». <sup>6</sup> According to the document:

Empire makes itself most evident in how power is used and profit made and for whom. Empire enables us to name the contested space between God and the world, for this is not the world as God wants it, not the fullness of life for all that Christ promised, nor the vision of shalom inspired by the Spirit. This contested space is where God enters in mission and calls others to share in counter-creating the world beyond Empire. <sup>7</sup>

Christian witness today inevitably entails the work of «counter-creating the world beyond empire».

## Un-Commoning Our Common Faith: Proclaiming ‘Yes’ to Life and ‘No’ to Death

How can we, through re-affirming our common faith as professed through the Nicene Creed, speak to the pressing challenges precipitated by conditions of em-

<sup>5</sup> *The Accra Confession*.

<sup>6</sup> See *Unmasking Empire* (Singapore: Council for World Mission, 2018), accessed May 20, 2025 <https://www.cwmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CWM-UNMASKING-EMPIRE-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See *Unmasking Empire*.

pire? This is where we turn our attention to those spaces where faithful counter-creation happens. Very often, these spaces of faithful counter-creation are un-common spaces, crucibles of suffering which produce rupture and resistance to the status-quo so that a new realm breaks in. The «life of the world to come» appears here not as a distant reality, but in a proleptic manner where God's just future becomes a present reality. Therefore, as we ponder about confessing our faith to commitment, it might be worth paying attention to these uncommon spaces where faith is lived out in a spirit of creative fidelity – where fidelity involves «recognisable continuity with our scriptural faith tradition, and creativity involves an openness to the Spirit for the inspiration to interpret and «perform» that tradition in ways that are life-giving».<sup>8</sup> This is particularly important at this time because these uncommon spaces are also the margins – which «have a disturbing revelatory potential, the potential of disclosure and the power of exposure».<sup>9</sup>

My essay will pay attention to the 're-affirmation' of our common faith in uncommon ways by local communities. Paying particular attention to the wisdom of the margins – those suppressed by the many manifestations of the empire – the paper will explore aspects of the Nicene Creed, from an un-common lens i.e., the experiences of people in the margins, which have pushed them to re-articulate our common faith in uncommon ways – so that the God of life who is at the heart of the Nicene Creed is re-affirmed. Let us turn to these re-affirmations.

### Believing in God?<sup>10</sup>

It need not be rehearsed here that for any theology to be life-affirming it is imperative that it finds its locus in a God of life. But who is this God of life? Various strands of liberation theology have cautioned us about how the semiotics of theological language, especially the way in which God is (con)figured, can impose strangleholds on communities and bind them with bonds of inequality and injustice. Therefore, they boldly called for the doing of our common faith.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen C. Barton, "The Epistles and Christian Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* ed. Robin Gill, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 54–64, at 63.

<sup>9</sup> Vitor Westhelle, "Margins Exposed: Representation, Hybridity and Transfiguration," in *Still At the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years After Voices From the Margins*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 68–87, at 69.

<sup>10</sup> Major portions of the two sections which follow have been drawn from my previous article Peniel Rajkumar, "In Witness to God's 'With-ness': Dalit Theology, the God of Life, and the Path towards Justice and Peace" *The Ecumenical Review*, 64, no. 4 (Dec 2012) 546–558.

From the perspective of women, Carol Christ in *The Laughter of Aphrodite* gives us an indication of how the symbol of the maleness of the Godhead can be counter-intuitive for the freedom and equality of women. According to Christ, «Religions centered on the worship of a male God create «moods» and «motivations» that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same legitimating the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society».<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, bearing in mind how the symbolization of God can be a constraint for the flourishing of women Elizabeth A. Johnson in her work *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, argues «[...] only if the full reality of women as well as men enters into the symbolization of God along with the symbols from the natural world, can the idolatrous fixation on one image be broken and the truth of the mystery of God, in tandem with the liberation of all human beings and the whole earth, emerge for our times».<sup>12</sup>

In the realm of social justice, Dalit theologians from the so called 'out caste' communities in India have grasped the political potential of theological symbolization and reimagined God in a way which has halted the un-flourishing of Dalits. Against the dominant narrative of a God who is 'pure', Dalit theologians have re-configured God by focussing on God's 'polluted' identity, which they interpret as an act of divine solidarity with the Dalit communities – who are discriminated on the basis of notions of purity and pollution. In one of the most provocative re-configurations of God Arvind P. Nirmal spoke of God as a servant God, a *bhangi* (a manual scavenger) and a *dhobi* (a person who washes clothes) – all professions considered to be polluting. According to Nirmal:

... the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He (sic) is a servant God - a God who serves. Services to others have always been the privilege of Dalit communities in India [...] Their servitude is even more pathetic than that of the Shudras (the lowest caste in the fourfold caste system). Against this background the amazing claim of a Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the *Svayambhu* does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the sva-dharma of the God; and since we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege. Let us be prepared for further shock. Are we prepared to say that my house-maid, my

<sup>11</sup> Carol Christ, *The Laughter of Aphrodite*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 118.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2002), 56.



sweeper, my bhangi (scavenger) is my God It is precisely in this sense that our God is a servant God. He is a waiter, a *dhobi* (washerman).<sup>13</sup>

Such a radical re-identification of the divine set in motion a theology which broke the debilitating process of demonising the Dalits as the 'polluted' and 'polluting' ones under the caste system. Theological imagination became a process of furthering life for those whom life was denied in the name of God. Such a re-imagination of the divine has a polysemic significance which is perceptively brought out by Joseph Prabhakar Dayam who points out, «In the ritual practices of the dominant religions, anything polluted and polluting distances the human from the divine. Inversely, in the Dalit imagination of the divine and the practice of the ritual, the dichotomy of purity and pollution is not only dismantled, but pollution is privileged as the necessity in the divine human interaction and the life-giving and life-saving acts of the divine. To be divine is to be polluted».<sup>14</sup>

As a counter-intuitive symbol, the Dalit re-symbolization of God as one who unambiguously identifies with the Dalits is a God of life for the Dalits. According to Sathianathan Clarke such a view of God bridges the gap between God and Dalit experience, in a way which funds human flourishing. According to Clarke this reconstruction of God can be linked to «the resolve of Dalit theology to remove the distance and aloofness of God from the toiling people and bring the divine close to what was thought to be polluting locations. God becomes so identified with (polluting) professions (that is, scavengers and the washerman, who epitomize polluting occupations, become images of the Divine in the world) that encountering God and embracing Dalits become synonymous».<sup>15</sup>

Such a process of re-imagining God is both a missional and political act. Margins help us to see God differently and engage in a God-talk which promotes life. Experiences of marginalization enable people on the margins to see through any God-talk that has a tacit-inclination towards privileging the powerful. This is especially true in the case of the different strands of liberation theology which, informed

<sup>13</sup> Arvind. P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), 1998), 214–230, at 224.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, "Gonthemma Korika: Reimagining the Divine Feminine in Dalit Christian Theology," in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, eds. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37–149, at 145.

<sup>15</sup> Sathianathan Clarke, "Dalit Theology: An Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition" in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 19–37, at 30.

by experiences of the margins, have exposed the redundancy of a God-talk that is divested of justice. This can also be said of the way in which people have affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ in uncommon ways.

## Believing in Jesus Christ?

What has been articulated above about God can also be reiterated in relation to how Christian communities have re-affirmed our common faith in Jesus Christ in uncommon ways, as a means of undoing structural injustices including colonialism and racism. Reflecting from a post-colonial perspective, Kenyan theologian Teresa M. Hinga points out how the symbolization of Christ «during the period of colonial and imperial expansionism» privileged the image of the conqueror. According to Hinga Jesus as «the warrior King» gave imperial Christianity «an imperial Christ to match», «in whose name and banner (cross) new territories, both physical and spiritual, would be fought for, annexed, and subjugated». Similarly, John M. Waliggo has critiqued imported Christologies within neoliberal empires, which perpetuate patronisation of African people even in post-colonial contexts through the politics of international aid:

For the Christians giving assistance and the Africans receiving it, the image of Christ becomes that of a grandfather who throws some sweets to the starving grandchildren, a Christ who comes in the relief 'container' or in the world food aircraft or the Red Cross vehicle. Such an image of Christ is no better than a *fac totum, a deus ex machina*. In this approach there is no desire to analyse the root cause (of poverty), since such an exercise would lead to greater commitment and, 'worse' still, to a clear taking of sides, which international charity organizations are not prepared to do or allowed by their constitutions.<sup>16</sup>

In such a context the call was for the undoing of our Christological affirmations of their colonial investments. Some good examples of such attempts to undo epistemic colonialism from our Christological affirmations can be found in India. Keshub Chander Sen, an early contributor to Indian theology (despite not being a Christian himself) wrote:

It seems that the Christ that has come to us is an Englishman, with English manners and customs about him, and with the temper and spirit of an Englishman in him [...] Is not Christ's native land nearer to India than England? [...] Why should we, then,

<sup>16</sup> John M. Waliggo, "African Christology in a Situation of Suffering," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, eds., J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, (Nairobi: Initiatives Ltd, 1989, 93–111, at 98.

travel to a distant country like England, in order to gather truths which are to be found much nearer our homes? Go to the rising sun in the East, not the setting sun in the West, if you wish to see Christ in the plenitude of his glory.<sup>17</sup>

In the American context Jesus Christ has also been reimagined to deal with the sins of racism. Many theologians incisively highlight how the symbolization of God can be proportional to reaping 'political' dividends for the dominant at the expense of the marginalized in contexts of structural discrimination and injustice and call for an undoing of commonly held Christological affirmations. One good example is James Cone's cogent and critical denunciation of the «white Christ» and re-constructive argument for a Black Christ. Problematising the prevailing semiotics of dominant Christologies from the perspective of the black community, Cone argues:

The task of explicating the existence of Jesus Christ for blacks is not easy in a white society that uses Christianity as an instrument for oppression. White conservatives and liberals alike present images of a white Jesus that are completely alien to the liberation of the black community. Their Jesus is a mild, easy-going white American who can afford to mouth the luxuries of 'love', 'mercy' long-suffering' and other white irrelevancies, because he has a multi-billion dollar military force to protect him from the encroachments of the ghetto and the 'communist conspiracy'. But black existence is existence in a hostile world without the protection of the law. If Jesus Christ is to have any meaning for us, he must leave the security of the suburbs by joining blacks in their condition. What need have we for a white Jesus when we are not white but black? If Jesus is white and not black, he is an oppressor, and we must kill him.<sup>18</sup>

In a context riddled with «Gods of Death», Christology, according to these articulations has to necessarily take an iconoclastic posture, and effectively put to death the oppressor Christ and, as a (sub)alternative, midwife the birthing of the life-giving Christ – who came so that we can have life in all its fullness (John 10.10).

Granting epistemological primacy to experiences and cultures of the margins re-inscribes what constitutes acceptable or appropriate resources for Christological re-imagination and thus is subversive because what is systematically recalled and creatively remembered is what has so far been silenced and side-lined.

<sup>17</sup> "India Asks 'Who is Christ?' – Notes of Lecture or Address by Baboo Keshub Chunder Sen, Delivered at Calcutta," *Friend of India*, April 25, 1879; reprinted in *The Missionary Herald*, (July 1, 1879), 201–202, at 202.

<sup>18</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis: 2011), 117.

## Believing in the Holy Spirit?

Similarly, the Holy Spirit has also been reimagined vis-à-vis some of the pressing demands of contemporary contexts. In the context of religious plurality, a pneumatological framework has always helped Christians to relate positively with people of other faiths. The Baar statement on ‘Theological Perspectives on Plurality’ produced by the World Council of Churches (WCC’s) Programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in January 1990 declared: «We affirm unequivocally that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths».<sup>19</sup>

Though at the outset it may seem easy to acknowledge God’s life-giving breath at work in the lives of people of other faiths, this has not always been an easy issue to engage with. The World Council of Churches’ mission text *Together Towards Life* while acknowledging that God’s Spirit [...] «can be found in all cultures that affirm life», goes on to say that «we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions».<sup>20</sup> Without getting into an extensive debate on the issue of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of other religions, one can say that pneumatology has provided uncommon theological frameworks to recognise the unfettered nature of God’s redemptive activity which transcends religious boundaries. When we talk about the need for understanding Christian discipleship as interreligious solidarity in the pursuit of justice and peace, such a pneumatological framework has been considered as being helpful in enabling us to move forward in creative ways. Such a framework can be useful for the task of affirming life in a world divided by conflicts and systematically being destroyed by capitalism and climate change.

<sup>19</sup> See Section IV “The Holy Spirit and Religious Plurality” of the “Barr Statement: Theological Perspectives on Plurality,” (Statement of a theological consultation held in Barr, Zurich, Switzerland in January 1990 organised by the WCC’s Programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation as part of preparations for the Canberra Assembly. The Barr statement says:

Everything which belongs to «love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control» is properly to be recognised and acknowledged as the fruit of the activity of the Holy Spirit. (Gal 5.22–23, cf. Rom 14.17).

We are clear, therefore, that a positive answer must be given to the question raised in the Guidelines on Dialogue (1979): «is it right and helpful to understand the work of God outside the Church in terms of the Holy Spirit?» (para. 23).

<sup>20</sup> *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012), para. 93.

Firstly, in the context of ravaging conflicts such a pneumatological framework has been considered to help Christians to think of our being in terms of the interdependency of the entire creation which is enlivened by the Spirit. The fact that the Spirit blows as it wills enlivening the entire creation provides us an alternative moral imagination of interrelationality, which is different from the narrative of fragmented and polarising relationality that current empires perpetuate. It provides us with a different moral imagination – an imagination which refuses the divisive rhetoric of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which depersonalises the ‘other’ and dehumanises the self. The challenge that the pneumatological framework poses for us is to understand our well-being in terms of our ‘inter-being’ – our interrelatedness. In this worldview it connects us with other faith traditions, which have at their core the interconnectedness of all life. The pneumatological overflowing of God’s love into and out of all God’s creation ascribes value not only to the ‘life within’ but also to the ‘life outside’ and the life ‘in-between us.’

Secondly, in the context of capitalism induced climate change, re-affirming our faith in the Holy Spirit might also hold potential for an integral ecotheology. An important idea associated with the Spirit is that its ministry is related to the redemption of the whole creation and not to humanity alone. Paul Santamire places creation within the Trinitarian history of God when he says that God’s «universal, evolutionary history with all things» is «actualized by the agency of God’s creative word and within the energizing matrix of God’s life-giving Spirit».<sup>21</sup> The Spirit at work within us pulls us towards this life-in-God in relation with creation. In this context, the image of «The Wild Bird who Heals» found in the Rothschild Canticles of the Middle Ages is a good image in which the Spirit emerges as «the green face of God» who helps Christians to articulate and practice a theology which is proactive in the healing and protection of the environment. Mark Wallace who employs this image argues that «If we allow the Spirit’s biophilic insurgency to redefine us as pilgrims and sojourners rather than wardens and stewards, our legacy to posterity might well be healing and life-giving, and not destructive of the hopes of the future generations».<sup>22</sup> This idea of the Spirit as the «green face of God» connects us again with those of other faiths who are already involved in the healing of the earth

<sup>21</sup> H. Paul Santamire, “In God’s Ecology: A Revisionist Theology of Nature,” *Christian Century*, Dec 13, 2000, 1300–1305.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, (New York: Continuum, 1996), 170 quoted in Marc C Grey, “Living Without Dreams: Is there a Spirituality for Justice in a Globalized World?”, in *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (London: T & T Clark 2004), 231–249 at 244.

through their spiritualities, their rituals and their day-to-day practices. Therefore, the Holy Spirit helps to root us in an economy of interrelationality, whereby we recognise that we are bound to the other and therefore need to act together. This can also resonate with the cosmic vision of the divine that is at the heart of the Nicene Creed where God is the «maker of heavens and earth», Jesus Christ is the one through whom all things come into being and the Holy Spirit is the «giver of life».

## Believing in The Un-Common Trinity:

While there are many ways in which proclaiming our common faith in uncommon ways can further justice, peace and the integrity of creation, there are also stumbling blocks that many Christians have experienced with our common faith from the perspective of their own identities and contexts. For example, though the Trinity is considered by many Christians as integral to Christian identity, indigenous theologians have problematised common understandings of the Trinity. George Tinker articulates this in an «un-common» manner by pointing out how «the third-century doctrine of the holy Trinity, which has become so foundational in euro-Christianity» in general «does not work for Indian people without significant cultural conversion». According to Tinker, while «Trinitarian thinking has been part of the cultural and linguistic foundation of nearly all Indo-european language communities, the fundamental sacred number for American Indian communities is four». Due to the «relentlessly tetradic» nature of American Indian communities, Tinker makes the following point

Forcing Indian peoples into the trinitarian mould of euro-western Christianity forces a collapse of a whole tetradic worldview and begins the process of crowding out the value system that is predicated by this worldview. From that point on, the stories and ceremonial traditions of a people will no longer work and eventually must be abandoned. The only possibility of maintaining indigenous identity and still appropriating Christianity is to take on Christian identity in some other modality than in its euro-western form.<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to provide a concrete example of how this is possible by drawing attention to his experience of visiting an indigenous community in the Philippines,

<sup>23</sup> George E. Tinker, «Towards an American Indian Indigenous Theology,» in *The Ecumenical Review*, 62, no. 4, (Dec 2010): 340–351, at 343, 344.

which according to him, «accomplished this goal by reshaping the Trinity into a tetrad, calling on God as Father, Mother, Son and Holy Spirit», which aligns with American Indian notions of the sacred, which «begin with the paired manifestation of male and female in virtually every Indian community».<sup>24</sup> This is an un-common' way of re-affirming our common faith in the Trinity.

## **In-Conclusion: Uncommoning our Common Faith**

Given the above examples, of how various communities in the face of their own challenges, have re-affirmed our common faith in Un-common ways, the challenge that the commemoration of 1700 years of the Council of Nicaea poses to us is to resist any imposition of the uniformity in the articulation of our common faith. What this commemoration should invite us into is a recognition that what binds us as Christians is much greater than what divides us as Christians, because what binds us as Christians who share a common faith are not chains which imprison us in prisons of uniformity, but umbilical cords which can become sources of life as they allow us to draw new life and inspiration from common sources of faith in uncommon ways. In this un-commoning of our common faith lies the hope and promise of becoming more fully the one body of Christ, because despite our differences, by being joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped [...] we promote the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph 4. 15) In other ways what we are invited to is a discipleship of the ligaments, whereby as marginal spaces we perform the important task of not letting differences divide us, but rather bind us beyond differences in ways that foster mutual flourishing.

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<sup>24</sup> Tinker, "Towards an American Indian Indigenous Theology," 344.

# The Nicene Creed: Towards a Confessional Presbyterian Church of East Africa

*Kevin Muriithi Ndereba*

## The Landscape of Kenyan Christianity

Christian missiologists correctly observe the Global South shift of Christianity, and note that Christian faith is growing in the continents of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.<sup>1</sup> Johnson and Zurlo note this shift was first reported by Barrett in 1970 in the *International Review of Mission* but according to their 2019 *World Encyclopedia*, the statistics have since expanded as follows:

In 1900, only 18 percent of all Christians lived in the Global South, with 82 percent in the Global North. By 2020 fully two-thirds of all Christians were in the Global South, with only one-third in the Global North. By 2050 we anticipate that 77 percent of all Christians will live in the Global South.<sup>2</sup>

Much of this Global South Christian growth can be attributed to several causes. First, some scholars posit that the growth can be attributed to increasing population demographics in the Global South than in the Global North. Zurlo, Johnson and Crossing for instance note that, «Christians in sub-Saharan Africa generally have high birth rates, and people from other religions continue to convert to Chris-

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<sup>1</sup> Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, “World Christianity and Mission 2020: Ongoing Shift to the Global South,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 44, no. 1 (2020): 8–19. <https://10.1177/2396939319880074>

<sup>2</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 4.



tianity in China, India, Cambodia, Mongolia, and elsewhere throughout Asia».<sup>3</sup> A second reason posited by some missiologists is the effective translation of the gospel within Global South cultural contexts in the forms of «contextualization, indigenization and acculturation» such that Christianity is being embraced in varied cross-cultural contexts, in place of traditional religions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Christianity has moved beyond its rationalistic roots of the Enlightenment, beyond the Westernization model of colonial Christianity, and has since been embraced as a vital faith within varied African regional contexts.<sup>5</sup> The growth of the World Christianity movement is a testament of this dynamic diversity of Christianity in the twenty-first century. A third cause is the contribution of the Pentecostal movement which some see as a successful approach in breaking the rigid colonial-inherited structures, leading to churches that embrace indigenous leadership and agency.<sup>6</sup>

In the Kenyan context, Parsitau observes how charismatic movements in the post-colonial context of 1960s and 70s were catalyzed by young people from mainstream churches.<sup>7</sup> Mainstream churches in Kenya include the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), the Methodist Church in Kenya (MCK) and the African Inland Mission (AIM). These churches were founded by missionary organizations.<sup>8</sup> The various waves of Pentecostalization have not only transformed religious life, but also the spiritual and political context. Kyama Mugambi more recently postulates the common features of urban Pentecostalism as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing, “World Christianity and Mission 2020,” 9.

<sup>4</sup> Elijah Jong Fil Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom and the Rise of Majority World Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Robert observes how influential the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910 was in charting a path for critiquing the westernization model of Christian mission, by seeing mission as an enterprise belonging to the whole church. She notes the wide denominational representation as a marker for the beginning of the ecumenical movement through the launch of the World Council of Churches in 1948. See Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity became a World Religion* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 53–54.

<sup>6</sup> Kim, *The Rise of the Global South*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Damaris Seleina Parsitau, “From the Periphery to the Centre: The Pentecostalisation of Mainline Christianity in Kenya,” *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 35, no. 3 (2007): 83–111.

<sup>8</sup> Wamagatta notes the PCEA missionary organizations Gospel Missionary Society (GMS) in Thembigwa and CSM (Church of Scotland Mission) in Kikuyu in 1898; Roman Catholic mission in Nairobi in 1899; Church Missionary Society (CMS) at Kabete in 1900 and African Inland Mission station at Kijabe in 1903. See Evanson N. Wamagatta, *The Presbyterian Church of East Africa: An Account of Its Gospel Missionary Society Origins, 1895–1946*, vol. 290 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 2.

A multigenerational faith engagement that stubbornly offers hope and security in the incessantly volatile, dynamic context on the continent [...] [Pentecostal churches] are not simply imitations of foreign church models but are, rather relevant iterations of an indigenous Christianity whose history stretches back a century. The churches are historically connected to their predecessors by orality, kinship and African cosmology, three strands which I use to probe this continuity.<sup>9</sup>

In the Kenyan Christian landscape, this Pentecostalization shift can be traced back to the beginning of the 1900s but also to the East African Revival Movement (EARM) of the 1930s and student revivalist movements such as FOCUS, which are prominent features within Kenyan church history.<sup>10</sup> This Pentecostalization led to ‘Newer Pentecostal Churches (NPCCs)’ such as the Redeemed Gospel Church (RGC), and Christ Coworkers Church (commonly known as CHRISCO) founded in Nairobi in 1978 by Harry Das (1930–2014) an Asian Indian from Guyana. In the urban centers of Nairobi, churches like Mamlaka, Nairobi Chapel, Mavuno Church, Christ is the Answer Ministries (commonly referred to as CITAM), and Assemblies of God churches are examples of NPCCs – even though some of them may have more evangelical and more formal church structures. This Pentecostalization is also evident within the PCEA, and Parsitau attributes it to the Pentecostalizing impulse of Very Rev. David Githii who served as the Moderator of the 17th and 18th General Assemblies of the PCEA from the year 2003 to 2009.<sup>11</sup> This move, premised on the charge that stained-glass windows included masonic and demonic elements,<sup>12</sup> changed the window architecture in the key PCEA churches like St. Andrew’s, introduction of praise and worship within the hymn singing tradition of the church as well as the practice of altar calls within Presbyterian churches.

<sup>9</sup> Kyama Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Damaris Seleina Parsitau, “Pentecostalising the Church of Scotland: The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) and the Pentecostal Challenge in Kenya (1970–2010),” in *Africa in Scotland, Scotland in Africa: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Hybridities*, eds. Afe Adogame and A Lawrence (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 228–238.

<sup>12</sup> Gifford cites Githii’s address to the 18th General Assembly that captures his thoughts on how even the concept of *Harambee* (translated as ‘pulling together for a common purpose’) had demonic undertones and influenced even the political life of Kenya. See Paul Gifford, “The Primal Pentecostal Imagination: Variants, Origins and Importance,” *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 34, no. 2 (2009): 44–52.

## From History to Contemporary Practice: The Presbyterian Church of East Africa

The origins of the PCEA can be traced to 1891 through the work of Rev. James Stewart and his formation of the East African Scottish Mission (EASM) among the *Kamba* and *Maasai* tribes at Kibwezi.<sup>13</sup> Under Rev. Thomas Watson's leadership, the mission was transferred to Kikuyu in 1898. The mission was handed over to the Church of Scotland in 1901, thus starting churches in Kikuyu (Church of the Torch) and later in 1908 at Tumutumu (Nyeri) and St. Andrew's (Nairobi), and eventually at Chogoria in 1915.<sup>14</sup> The Late Very Rev. Dr. John Gatũ, noted ecumenist and Moderator of the PCEA of the 9th and 10th General Assembly (1979–1985), observes the instrumentality of Marion Stevenson in the establishment of these missions.<sup>15</sup> Other key historical dates include 1926 which was the ordination of the first African Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 1943 which was the adoption of the constitution of the PCEA by the Synod and Church of Scotland Mission, 1945 the merger with the Gospel Missionary Society (GMS) Kambui, and eventually the foundation of the PCEA through a completed merger process in 1956.<sup>16</sup>

Wamagatta traces the history of the American missionary organization GMS from 1895, which seeks to supplement the abundance of historical work on the Church Missionary Society (CMS) roots of the PCEA in the works of Macintosh, Macpherson, and Muita.<sup>17</sup> Wamagatta observes the distinct evangelical and non-denominational ethos of the GMS seen in its mission comprising preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ, starting Bible studies and holding Bible conferences for the purposes of Christian fellowship.<sup>18</sup> Thus, there are these two streams within the PCEA, namely the American evangelical Presbyterian stream and the Scottish Presbyterian stream.

<sup>13</sup> Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), *Practice and Procedure* (Nairobi: Jitegemea Press, 1998), 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Gatu cites Henry Scott, *A Saint in Kenya, the Life of Marion Scott Stevenson* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932) for his biographical narrative of Marion. See John Gatu, *Fan into Flame* (Nairobi: Moran Publishers, 2016), 3.

<sup>16</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Brian G. Macintosh, "The Scottish Mission in Kenya, 1891–1923," (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1969); R. Macpherson, *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: Presbyterian Church of East Africa, 1970); Isaiah Wahome Muita, *Hewn from the Quarry: Presbyterian Church of East Africa 100 Years and Beyond* (Nairobi: Presbyterian Church of East Africa, 2003) cited in Wamagatta, *The Presbyterian Church of East Africa*, xii.

<sup>18</sup> Wamagatta, *The Presbyterian Church of East Africa*, 20.

The PCEA also has an ecumenical stream, which is connected to the theological training of the ministers of the church. While the Presbyterian University of East Africa is owned by the church and trains most of the recent clergy, St. Paul's University (formerly St. Paul's Theological College) has been the longstanding institution for training PCEA ministers. Started in 1875 by the CMS, the foundation stone of St. Paul's Divinity School was laid by the Rev. H. K. Binns at Frere Town, Mombasa, on the 28th of July 1903 and the foundation stone later moved to Limuru in 1930. The PCEA and the MCK joined the Anglican Institution in 1949 and brought in their ministerial candidates for training, to later form St. Paul's United Theological College on 1st of January 1955. The ecumenical stream is also tied to the involvement of the PCEA within the national life of the country, and especially within the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), where she is a member.<sup>19</sup> Rev. Dr. Timothy Njoya, a notable Presbyterian Minister and advocate for human rights through Kenya's political liberation struggles gives anecdotal accounts of his, and the PCEA church's, involvement in NCCCK in his book.<sup>20</sup> The Late Very Rev. Dr. John Gatũ also participated in the International Missionary Council Assembly at Achimota, near Accra Ghana from 28<sup>th</sup> December to 10<sup>th</sup> January 1958, a meeting held to bring the mission organizations to unite with the WCC. He also participated in the Ibadan conference of the All-African Conference of Churches (AACC) from 10<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> January 1958, and later its second General Assembly in 1969.<sup>21</sup> Larsen observing Gatũ's ecumenical service observes that:

Gatũ was not only chairperson of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) on more than one occasion but also president of the general committee of the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), 1974–1981. He was a member of the central committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC), 1975–1983, and also vice-chair of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order

<sup>19</sup> World Council of Churches, "Presbyterian Church of East Africa," accessed June 27, 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/presbyterian-church-of-east-africa>; National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), "Full Members of NCCCK," accessed June 27, 2025, <https://nccck.org/membership-of-nccck/>; World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), "Members," accessed on June 27, 2025, <https://wcrceurope.org/about/members/>

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Njoya, *We the People: Thinking Heavenly, Acting Kenyanly* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Gatũ, *Fan into Flame*, 156–157.

[...] and in 1965, Gatũ had been elected to the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) [*what is now the WCRC*].<sup>22</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, who was ordained on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1982 as the first Woman Minister in the PCEA,<sup>23</sup> is the first African to work in the WARC from 1992 to 1998 when she joined the WCC. She is a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and a member of the Kenyan chapter.<sup>24</sup> Her work, which has been formative for the PCEA has involved HIV/AIDS advocacy as well as female inclusivity and empowerment.<sup>25</sup> Nyambura elsewhere observes how ecumenical theological education has expanded the narrow focus of the evangelical theological education, by focusing theological reflection and praxis on issues of social concern.<sup>26</sup> This goal of connecting the gospel to social issues, has shaped the church's mission work in areas like education, healthcare, and peacebuilding. The ecumenical work of the PCEA is also noted through Pwani Presbytery's formation of the «Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) as a tool for peace building which works to promote peace in the coastal region of Kenya».<sup>27</sup> To date, PCEA embraces a holistic or 'integral' mission paradigm and has a strong ministry called the Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Committee (JPRC), recently expanding its scope to address matters of the environment and climate change.

The theological foundation of the PCEA is enshrined in the Fundamental Articles of the Practice and Procedure Manual of the Church. Article 2 observes that the PCEA «receives the historic Confessions of the Faith known as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and Short Catechism as containing the same substance of

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Larsen, "A Truly African Christianity: The Theology and Leadership of the Kenyan Presbyterian Minister John G. Gatũ (1925–2017)," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 16, no. 3 (2022): 226–245. *Italics mine*.

<sup>23</sup> "Presbyterian Church of East Africa Celebrates Four Decades of Women's Ordination," *Presbyterian Church (USA)*, published on October 25, 2022, accessed June 27, 2025, <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2022/10/25/church-east-africa-celebrates-four-decades-womens-ordination>

<sup>24</sup> Ezra Chitando, Esther Mombo, and Masiwa R. Gunda, "Introduction: That all may live!" in *That all May Live! Essays in Honour of Nyambura J. Njoroge* eds., Ezra Chitando, Esther Mombo, and Masiwa R. Gunda (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2021), 13–15.

<sup>25</sup> Nyambura J. Njoroge, "Dignity, Life-Affirming Advocacy and Compassionate Solidarity," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 25, no. 1 (2023): 1–11.

<sup>26</sup> Nyambura J. Njoroge, "An Ecumenical Commitment: Transforming Theological Education in Mission," *International Review of Mission* 94, no. 373 (2005): 248–263.

<sup>27</sup> Julius Guantai Mwamba, Dickson Nkonge Kageka, and Benjamin Mugambi Kanga, "Efficacy of the Presbyterian Church East Africa's Peace Building Strategies in Enhancing Inter-Ethnic Harmony in Kenya," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 16 (2019): 43–53.

faith of the Church».<sup>28</sup> Article 3 states that «this Church expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God which creates, sustains, rules and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love».<sup>29</sup> The church's governance system is Presbyterian, as stated in Article 4 which «is exercised through Parish Sessions, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly».<sup>30</sup> The Session is made up of Ruling and Teaching Elders in the Parish, which in PCEA parlance, refers to one or more congregations that have a singular pastoral oversight of a Session (usually styled 'Kirk Session' as per the Scottish heritage). A Presbytery is a geographical area defined by the General Assembly and is made up of a combination of several parishes in the area, for ease of mission, pastoral, and administrative oversight. Presbytery is charged with the «oversight of Sessions, congregations, ministers, projects and Church agents within those bounds».<sup>31</sup> The General Assembly is «the highest governing and legislative body of this church, and is representative of the unity of the Presbytery, sessions and congregations of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa».<sup>32</sup> The General Assembly meets every three years, with one annual meeting called the General Administrative Committee (GAC) and which carries the work of the General Assembly in between the assembly meetings.

Finally, the PCEA is also a liturgical church, whose liturgies are collected in *The Church Service Book* which so far has translations in Kikuyu, Kiswahili, and English. The *Church Service Book* is currently undergoing a more recent revision. It was first prepared in 1926, for use by the first ordained African Ministers and printed in 1950 as a guide for those leading public worship.<sup>33</sup> A second part was included in 1952, known as *Mahoya 2* (translates as prayer, but more appropriately means liturgy). These two versions were in the *Gĩkũyũ* language and later translated into English in 1969 through a committee sanctioned by the GAC comprising of Revs. R. Macpherson, C. Kiongo, I. C. Bengali, J. Njiraini and T. W. Ngumba, and later included Revs. D. M. Kirathi, A. D. Lament, J. Pasztor, J. Stein and Mr. J. Murega.<sup>34</sup> A diglot version was produced in 1972 and has since been expanded to include all the three languages in the *Combined Liturgy* book. Focusing on the argument of

<sup>28</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> PCEA, *Practice and Procedure*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> PCEA, *Church Service Book* (Nairobi: Jitegemea Press, 2011), iii.

<sup>34</sup> PCEA, *Church Service Book*, iv.

this paper, confessional retrieval is central for two key purposes: 1) providing theological coherence and depth within the dynamic Christian and religious pluralistic context of contemporary Africa, and 2) providing a basis for liturgical renewal as well as missional engagement in the context of apologetics. I now begin with the need for ‘confessionalism’ within the context of the PCEA and then move to how it can be practiced within the context of the PCEA ministry.

## Confessionalism Through Nicene Retrieval

Anecdotal experiences from my own ministry in the PCEA since 2013 show that our liturgical life across different congregations and parishes, is sometimes haphazard and lacks coherence. While some level of uniformity can be seen during special church services such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and burials, to list a few, there is wide variation when it comes to some ordinary elements of the worship services in Presbyterian churches. A reason for this diversity is the tension that Parsitau observes for the PCEA context which tries to balance her confessional heritage while at the same time seeking a more Pentecostal, and what some people term as ‘lively’ orientation for the purposes of retaining the next generations, who tend to be swayed to other non-denominational and Pentecostal churches at large.<sup>35</sup>

Underlying this tension is an implicit shift from theology to pragmatism as the dominant guide to the church’s self-understanding. These tensions are not new in the PCEA, and as argued earlier were central in the debates of the PCEA church in earlier years – but also have a long tradition within the wider and global Presbyterian context. The debates among the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Princeton – which was a hallmark Presbyterian theological institution through the likes of A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield – was based on two schools of thought.<sup>36</sup> One was the Scottish Common Sense Realism and Westminsterian confessionalism that held a high view of the Scriptures as inerrant.<sup>37</sup> According to Longfield, the second school of thought, influenced by biblical higher-criticism, challenged the sufficiency of the Christian Scriptures, championed by the work of Charles Briggs of Union Theological Semi-

<sup>35</sup> Parsitau, “Pentecostalising the Church of Scotland,” 228.

<sup>36</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices and Stories* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 191–195.

<sup>37</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, “For Church and Country: The Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict in the Presbyterian Church,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) 78, no. 1 (2000): 35–50.



nary in the late nineteenth century and the foremost biblical scholar of the time, and led to huge rifts in American Presbyterianism in the 1920s and 1930s. In its present formulation, American Presbyterianism comprises the more conservative Presbyterian denominations – Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and more progressive or liberal Presbyterian churches, such as the Presbyterian Church of the USA (PCUSA), the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Reformed Church in America (RCA) just to name a few. While I make a generalization on the theological perspectives of the different denominations, a thorough analysis is outside the scope of this work. Nonetheless, these debates were grounded in a subtle emphasis between pragmatism and theological fidelity. What I argue in this chapter is that retrieving confessionalism can help safeguard the theological core of the church, while at the same time strengthening our engagement with the world.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381) (from now on the Nicene Creed) provides a basis for bringing all these diverse streams within the PCEA i.e., the Scottish, evangelical, and ecumenical streams. First, the Nicene creed provides basic Christian beliefs that are shared across many church expressions and denominations, while covering the main aspects of Christian doctrine: the nature of God,

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.<sup>38</sup>

the person and work of Jesus Christ,

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds: God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead whose kingdom shall have no end.

the person and work of the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>38</sup> See the text of *The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* in the appendix.



And I believe in the Holy Spirit, The Lord, and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

the doctrine of the church,

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

and the doctrine of the last things,

And I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Second, the creed implicitly supports the African church's self-understanding, agency, and mission. Knoetze notes that the Nicene Creed is the product of two major ecumenical councils: the first held in Nicaea (modern-day Iznik, Turkey) in AD 325, and the second in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in AD 381.<sup>39</sup> The reason for convening the councils was to clarify on Trinitarian theology, especially the relationship of the Son to the Father and the Spirit as a response against the 'Arian heresy.'<sup>40</sup> Athanasius, the African presbyter from Alexandria, was a key figure in the councils and in the theological formulation of the creed, following through with the initial work of Bishop Alexander's (died AD 327) arguments against Arius.<sup>41</sup> Thus, following a key argument made by Thomas Oden on how African theologians shaped Christian theological discourse,<sup>42</sup> the creed stands as a testimony to the contribution of the African continent to theological discourse and formulations. This is a clear reminder and critique of the often-cited misconception of Christianity in Africa being shallow. As Kyama argues, Christianity has a long and venerable tradition in the African soil.<sup>43</sup>

Third, it offers a starting point for discussions around decolonization and contextualization. Looking at the concept of the creed and Trinitarian thought in two Indigenous cases: the Mizo tradition and the African Traditional Religions (ATR),

<sup>39</sup> Johannes J. Knoetze, "The Nicene Creed, the Church, and Christian Mission: A Creative Tension," *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024): 311–323.

<sup>40</sup> Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, "Confessing the One Faith in Many Tongues: A Decolonial Reading of the Nicene Creed," *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024): 341–354.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Whitworth, *Defining God: Athanasius, Nicaea and the Trinitarian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Sacristy Press, 2023), 1–2. Historical comment on Bishop Alexander obtained from personal correspondence with Henry S. Kuo.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Kyama Mugambi, "The Case for Christianity as an African Religion," in *Apologetics in Africa* ed., Kevin Muriithi Ndereba (Carlisle: Langham, 2024): 169–184.

Behera moves beyond the argument that the creed is a colonizing document by saying:

The Nicene Creed gave rise to discerning a complex network of new relations, and with them new questions arose. As with the emergence of the Nicene Creed, the responses vary but contribute to a deeper understanding of the triune God over time. In the Mizo case, it was to discern the nature of the Spirit and the relation to the Son. This offers new avenues for a more nuanced understanding of the triune God in an Indigenous context, rather than assuming a clear dichotomy between tradition and new faith.<sup>44</sup>

Behera notes the Western tradition's shaping of the creed, which is founded on «Hellenistic metaphysics of *ousia* and *hypostases*, and its Latin equivalents of *substance* and *personae*». However, she parallels this early church's wrestling with the understanding of Trinitarian categories using their common language, as a basis of inviting other global contexts to wrestle with their own questions and contexts. She says:

How do these metaphysical terms actually help in professing the faith and witnessing in a world with different holy scriptures, prophets and gurus, other symbolic idioms of life and conflicting truth claims? One question is, thus, how far 'the Christian faith summed up in the Nicene Creed [...] presents a distinctive and unique revelation, opening up a vision of God and his purpose for the future of creation that goes beyond all other revelations and visions of ultimate reality and ultimate meaning'.<sup>45</sup>

Behera here follows a long-held conviction of the Ghanaian Presbyterian scholar and missiologist, Kwame Bediako, who sees this patristic period as germane for African reflection of how the Christian gospel connects to Africa's cultural past and, we might argue, present and future.<sup>46</sup> After all, as Galgalo argues, we need theological models that auger well with everyday life.<sup>47</sup> What Behera, Bediako and Galgalo do for us therefore, is they move us beyond simplistic reductionism by inviting us to theological and spiritual discernment as to what the creed portends for our cultural, liturgical, and social contexts where churches minister.

<sup>44</sup> Behera, "Confessing the One Faith in Many Tongues," 352.

<sup>45</sup> Behera, "Confessing the One Faith in Many Tongues," 353.

<sup>46</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Accra: Regnum Africa, 2013), 63.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Galgalo, *African Christianity: The Stranger Within* (Nairobi: Zapf Chancery, 2012), 65.

## Implications for the Presbyterian Church of East Africa

### Liturgical Renewal

The implications for retrieving this ‘discerning’ confessionalism are therefore twofold. First, the Nicene Creed is helpful in grounding African Christians to their historical heritage of the faith. The creed, while formulated within a Greco-Roman context, is still part of our Christian story. The PCEA uses the Apostle’s Creed more than the Nicene Creed, and I propose that varying creedal confessions within the church’s liturgical life can help Christians to know what they believe in. The PCEA has a good heritage of catechetical instruction prior to the initiatory rites of membership, baptism, and confirmation. Ministers of Word and Sacrament can also confidently borrow phrases from the Nicene Creed and use them during the various sections of the liturgies of the church or incorporate them in the preaching ministry or during the administration of sacraments. For the PCEA church jostling for relevance within a dynamic religious and denominational landscape, this will be a breath of fresh air particularly for young people tired of church hopping and looking for ‘spiritual highs’. It settles them within the blowing of the Spirit’s wind down the annals of the church’s historical narrative.

Okwuosa et al, looking at the Nigerian context, argue that the reason young people belong to several churches, what they call ‘double denominational belonging’ is that these youth prefer churches that are more morally permissive, that focus on prosperity or motivational preaching, and not because of doctrinal reasons.<sup>48</sup> In my own previous research, I expand youth research by focusing on youth worldviews among churchd youth as well as de-churched youth.<sup>49</sup> Youth pastors have provided empirical data showing that young people are looking for clarity on Christian doctrine, as it engages with contemporary questions. For the de-churched youth, one of the reasons they actually left the church was the conflicting narrative of the prosperity preachers’ teaching and the differences between them and their congregants’

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence N. Okwuosa, Favour C. Uroko, Michael Mokwenye, Uchechukwu Monica Agbo, and Stella Chinweudo Ekwueme, “Double Denominational Belonging among Youths in Nigeria: Implications on Christianity,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 19, no. 1 (2020): 95–114.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, “Ubuntu Apologetics in Faith Formation: An Ethnography of Youth Ministry in Nairobi,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 21, no. 2 (2021): 107–122.

lifestyles,<sup>50</sup> in addition to contemporary discourses between faith and science.<sup>51</sup> This chapter responds to these different cohorts of young people, by arguing that one of the ways of clarifying Christian doctrine, is by centering the confessionalism of the church. The creed, as well as the reformed confessions, are a great tool for doing this within the church.<sup>52</sup> Use of the creed can be done in such a way that is lively, by contextualizing it using language and illustrations that young people living in a postmodern culture can identify with. This would support Okwuosa et al's recommendation on the need for lively and vibrant liturgies.<sup>53</sup>

## Missional Apologetics

Secondly, the Nicene Creed is useful for the purposes of missional apologetics. Elsewhere, I make the case of expanding apologetic understanding beyond the narrow 'intellectual' focus characteristic of apologetic discourses within the western and northern hemispheres – perhaps an emphasis still stuck in the old Enlightenment age. Apologetics, I argue, «remains central to the mission of Christianity in the world» since the faith we confess is a faith that is always on a move, translated across different cultural contexts.<sup>54</sup> This chapter brings the unique contribution of the Nicene Creed as a theological document for not only strengthening our doctrinal core, but also using this creed in our discussions with people of other faiths and none.

For instance, the opening statement «I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and of all things visible and invisible» already opens vistas for charitable conversations around the scientific (more appropriately, naturalistic or scientific-materialistic worldview) accounts of the origin of the universe, but also the underlying metaphysical assumptions about what is real. The eschatological portion, especially «I look» in «And I look for the resurrection of the dead

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, "Youth Worldviews among the Dechurched in Nairobi and Implications for Ministry," (master's Thesis, International Leadership University, Nairobi, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, "Faith, Science, and Nonreligious Identity Formation among Male Kenyan Youth," *Zygon*® 58, no. 1 (2023): 45–63.

<sup>52</sup> The Presbyterian Church of East Africa uses the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Other confessions used by other Reformed and Presbyterian churches include the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, among others. See Carlos E. Wilton, *Principles of Presbyterian Polity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 17.

<sup>53</sup> Okwuosa et al., "Double Denominational Belonging," 112.

<sup>54</sup> Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, ed., *Apologetics in Africa* (Carlisle: Langham, 2024), 3.

and the life of the world to come», beautifully connects the questions of human purpose and human destiny. These can provide wonderful opportunities for dialogues across different worldviews. For Christians in many of our villages, communities, and cities in the Global South, a multi-religious context is the reality wherein the Christian faith lives alongside Islam, and African traditional religions, among others.

In such a multi-religious context, Interreligious Dialogues (IRD) is one of the tools that has been recommended. Wang'ombe goes a step further in formulating how Christian-Muslim apologetics can be done by honoring other Abrahamic faiths, fostering relationships, and clarifying the belief contents in each faith, hence the famous 'cooperation before evangelization' model.<sup>55</sup> Van den Torren follows this same methodology which is crucial for cross-cultural apologetics. The first step is 'cross-cultural understanding' and then 'cross-cultural persuasion' which he sees are very vital for fruitful apologetic dialogue in a globalizing context.<sup>56</sup> The need to both understand Christian faith and formulate culturally-appropriate responses in religiously diverse contexts further strengthens the place of retrieving confession-alism via the Nicene Creed within the PCEA's context. Because the church is always in motion, or to use a theological term, in mission, *status confessionis* means that the church must confess the faith afresh in every context so as to retain the reformed identity, to maintain doctrinal integrity, and to both proclaim and witness to the gospel in unique African contexts.<sup>57</sup> In the context of the Reformed Church in South Africa, the *Confession of Belhar* is an example of *status confessionis* within the apartheid struggle in South Africa, showing an illustration of how confession-alism is a needed response for the African church on mission today.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the Nicene contribution to Christianity through the lens of Presbyterianism in East Africa. Noting the various streams and diversities within the PCEA, the Nicene Creed is a basis of unity within the church. The Nicene

<sup>55</sup> Judy Wang'ombe, "Christian-Muslim Apologetics: History and Contemporary Practice," in *Apologetics in Africa* 335–360 at 357.

<sup>56</sup> Benno Van den Torren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 155.

<sup>57</sup> Wilton, *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Wilton, *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*, 18.

Creed invites the African Christian today to ponder the conceptualization and relevance of the Christian faith considering our expansive multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts. What might it mean to confess anew:

He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead whose kingdom shall have no end. [?]

Despite calls to a shallow non-denominational and essentialist Christianity, the Nicene Creed drives us farther into the depths of our shared Christian faith. In a fast-paced world bombarding us with many ideologies, confessing our faith provides a restful space. It also provides a space for discernment and holy wrestling, as we reflect on what the resurrection and the concept of justice means for our war-torn countries, our socio-political and economic turmoil, where too often justice seems very futuristic. Nonetheless, it provides a basis for faithful action and responses to the Christian message. Those who lead public worship, particularly the church's Teaching Elders, have a basis for deepening liturgical life in our congregations through the creed. As those entrusted with the church's ministry, we all together are invited to a widening of God's covenant, as we engage those who seem to have lost hope on things «visible». To them, we can dare prod further concerning things «invisible» and tell them about «the world to come».



# Unbelievable? – The Creed of Nicaea Revisited from a Contemporary European Perspective

*Annemarie C. Mayer*

«I believe that there is a God who has made Godself known in Jesus Christ» – whether one assents to this statement is a popular question in surveys on religious affiliation and religiosity in Europe. However, in a 2023 opinion poll conducted in Germany, only nineteen per cent of the respondents ticked this answer.<sup>1</sup> At about the same time, in Austria, there were only sixteen per cent positive responses to the same question. We can infer three different implications from this fact. Firstly, believing can no longer be taken for granted in Western Europe. Secondly, the reference to Jesus Christ identifies this statement in the survey as referring to the Christian faith. For Christians, believing means believing in a Triune God, even if no biblical reference is made. This Christian faith is reckoned unbelievable by not ticking this answer. Thirdly, the statement touches on the question addressed by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 as to how people see the relation between Jesus Christ and God. It indicates that today, as 1700 years ago, the relationship between Jesus Christ and God is once again being questioned. Is Jesus Christ God, the Son? Or is he a religious genius, a model of humanity, a moral idol, but not God Godself? The question of «God or not God» goes to the heart of the Christian faith.

The first part of the present chapter, therefore, discusses the positions of Arius and Nicaea, the arguments which were exchanged then and the answer given by

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'Sechste Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung 2023,' commissioned by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference, 34, accessed May 7, 2025. [https://www.ekd.de/ekd\\_de/ds\\_doc/07490\\_EKD\\_KMU\\_Web\\_neu.pdf](https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/07490_EKD_KMU_Web_neu.pdf)



the Nicene Creed which has characterised Christian faith ever since. The second part turns to our present time and, given the staggeringly low percentage of people in Europe still believing along the lines of the Nicene Creed, asks the following questions: How are we to assess the situation? Do we have a case of neo-Arianism at hand? Or are other patterns of interpretation emerging? What do additional surveys on religion reveal about what people believe today, if they believe at all? A first step will be to take stock of what people actually believe, a second one to assess these findings, and a third and concluding one to weigh the challenges and chances that follow from there.

As a matter of fact, already Jesus himself asked the decisive questions during his lifetime: «Who do people say that I am?» – And when the disciples' answers did not satisfy him, he continued asking: «But who do *you* say that I am?» (Mk 8.29 par.). Since then, the dispute over fundamental Christological questions has always revolved around the same two poles or extremes: on the one side, there is the denial or reduction of the humanity of Jesus Christ, on the other the denial or reduction of the godhead of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> The decisive factor in categorising the attempted answers to the question of «God or not God» that have been presented in the course of church history is the consideration of two basic soteriological axioms: Firstly, *only God can bring about our salvation*, not human beings themselves. This axiom actually includes two statements. The first one is: human beings are in need of redemption; and the second one: God did not work the redemption of human beings by bypassing them. God is not some otherworldly despot who decided to redeem humankind in all God's glory. God does it by joining humankind as a human being in the incarnation. Hence, the second axiom: *What is not accepted is not redeemed*.<sup>3</sup> The debates in and around Nicaea were primarily concerned with ensuring that it is undoubtedly God who redeems us, because otherwise this redemption would not be real and reliable. How did this come to be questioned?

<sup>2</sup> More extensively on this cf. Annemarie C. Mayer, "Klärungen im christologischen Streit – die Tragik des Zerfalls der 'einen' Kirche," in *Zwischen Abgrenzung und Toleranz. Beiträge zur Biblischen Archäologie und Geschichte*, ed. Katja Soennecken (Münster: Aschendorff, 2024), 51–66; 54–5.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 5.22,1, trans. Norbert Brox, *Fontes Christiani* 8,5 (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2001).

## The Rather Convincing Answer of Arius

In ancient Greek philosophy, especially in Platonism, unity was the supreme principle from which the multiplicity of the world could be logically derived. Philosophically speaking, it would be illogical to assume two or even three principles. Ideally, the highest principle was a single one, transcendent and emotion-free. Back then everyone thought this way who wanted to be up-to-date. Given both their Jewish monotheistic heritage and this philosophical background, for Christians the fundamental question at the time was how the godhead of Jesus Christ could be combined with monotheism, i.e., with the godhead of the Father, without Christianity becoming a two-God-faith or even – if the Holy Spirit is also taken into account – a tritheism.

Arius († after AD 327), a presbyter from Alexandria, wanted to emphasise the unity and uniqueness of God in order to proclaim the Gospel in an adequate contemporary way. In the philosophically rather convincing solution which he presented, he radically underlined the transcendence of God and strongly advocated a strict monotheism. In addition to God the Father, one could not accept God the Son as a quasi-second God. For the sake of monotheism he assumed the subordination of the Son to the Father and made a clear cut between the Logos-Son and God: Arius held that the uncreated Father had created an independent being, the Logos-Son, before the beginning of the world in order to then create the world and to have a middle being as mediator between Godself and the transient world in order to preserve God's own transcendence. Father and Logos-Son could not be of the same essence, i.e., equally divine. Instead, Arius held – at least as can be inferred from fragments of his no longer extant work *Thalia* – the Son is of a different nature than the Father. The Son is subordinate to the Father in his being. The Son is the first creature of the Father. There was a time when the Son was not. The Son is neither equal to the Father nor consubstantial.<sup>4</sup> Arius does not deduce this in a purely philosophical way but also bases his arguments on biblical passages such as Proverbs 8.22 («The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago») or Hebrews 1.4, referring to the Logos-Son as «having become as much superior to angels as the name he

<sup>4</sup> The views of Arius that were rejected by Nicaea (DH 126) are summarised in the appendix to the Nicene Creed (DH 125); cf. Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünemann, eds., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) hereafter cited as DH. The history and theology of Arius are masterfully analysed in Rowan Williams, *Arius* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

has inherited is more excellent than theirs».<sup>5</sup> In the name of pure monotheism, Arius declares the inner-divine Father-Son relationship to be a secondary differentiation. For him God is neither Father nor Son, but an abstract monadic principle that due to its transcendence cannot be related to. Consequently, he rejects the godhead of Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Logos, and assigns him a subordinate position in relation to God. Yet in doing so, he violates the first axiom: *only God can bring about the salvation of humankind* not some middle being. As Alois Grillmeier stated in retrospect: «Arius only made us fully realise the problem that arises with the acceptance of a true Son of God».<sup>6</sup>

## The Alternative Answer of Nicaea

The answer of the Council of Nicaea is basically a soteriological one. In terms of argumentation, however, the council fires a full broadside against Arius and his followers: the creed itself, with four anti-Arian insertions, is flanked by a condemnatory formula, canons, and a synodal letter. Above all, the four insertions in the creed clearly reject any reduction of Christ's godhead in relation to God the Father.

The first insertion «begotten [...] from the substance of the Father» clarifies the title «Only-begotten» used repeatedly in the Gospel of John (cf. John 1.14,18; 3.16,18). The Son is not subordinate to the Father but equal to him. The second insertion «true God from true God» opposes Arius' expression «second God». The Son is equal to the Father in his being, even if the Father is the origin of the Son's godhead. The third insertion «begotten, not made» refers to the equality of the Son. In Psalm 2.7 «You are my son, today I have begotten you», the biblical metaphor of begetting expresses a very close connection of kinship, but negates a temporal sequence, as in «made». The Son belongs to God's reality from eternity. Arius' statement «There was a time when he was not» is exposed as wrong. The fourth insertion «consubstantial with the Father» clarifies what has been said so far. However, here a non-biblical term, *homousios*, becomes the touchstone of orthodoxy. Apparently,

<sup>5</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Anglicized Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 1 (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 1990), 363f.: «Arius hat erst so recht das Problem, das sich mit der Annahme eines wahren Sohnes Gottes stellt, bewußt gemacht».

it was a term suggested by Emperor Constantine.<sup>7</sup> Centuries later it prompted the question of whether this philosophical terminology caused a Hellenistic alienation of the Christian faith (as Adolf von Harnack claimed) or whether it set off an ingenious process of translation that contributed to the clarification of Christian thought and rather initiated the Christianisation of philosophical thinking.

Although *homousios* is not a biblical term, the text of the Nicene Creed is biblically based. It largely follows the prologue of John's Gospel (John 1.1–14) and, generally speaking, the wording «is drenched in biblical language, although it contains only two actual quotations:»<sup>8</sup> These are «through him [i.e., the Son] all things came into being» (John 1.3, 1 Cor 8.6) and, towards the end of the second article, that the Son will come «to judge the living and the dead» (2 Tim 4.1; 1 Pet 4.5).

If Christ were a mere (even if unique) creature, he could not have and impart authentic knowledge of God. And if there had been «once a time when the Son was not», there would have been a time when the Father was not Father and, thus, fatherhood could not be an unchangeable attribute of God. God would therefore only be a loving father by chance and unreliably in that he could also cease to be such a father. Clearly the scope of the Nicene Creed is to confess the one God, albeit this confession brings about a «revolution in the notion of God»,<sup>9</sup> as Joseph Ratzinger emphatically calls it, because God is in Godself a living relationship, not an abstract principle – or to put it in biblical terms: «God is love» (1 John 4.8.16). Thus, the message of Nicaea is that God has made Godself known in Jesus Christ; in him we encounter God Godself.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius explicitly states that Constantine «added only the single word *homousios*» (ἐνὸς μόνου προσεγγραφέντος ῥήματος τοῦ ὁμοουσίου) and gives the rationale behind the emperor's addition; cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, «Epistula ad ecclesiam Caesariensem», 7, §135b1, in *Faith in Formulae. A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-related Texts*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Wolfram Kinzig, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 286: «Such was the philosophical view of the subject taken by our most-wise and most-pious emperor».

<sup>8</sup> Wolfram Kinzig, «The Creed of Nicaea: Old Questions, New Answers,» in *The Creed of Nicaea (325): The Status Quaestionis and the Neglected Topics*, ed. Alberto Melloni and Costanza Bianchi (Göttingen: Brill / V&R, 2025), 25–46; 32.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum* (München: Kösel, 2000), 168 speaks of a «Revolution im Gottesbegriff».

<sup>10</sup> On the ecumenical impact of the Nicene Creed for Christian unity, for instance in Scotland, cf. the chapter by Liam Jerrold Fraser in this publication.

## Facing New Arianism?

Given that the connection between Jesus Christ and God is being questioned again today, are there any reasons to assume that the teachings of Arius are being revived in our times? Already in the late 1960s Karl Rahner observed: «Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere «monotheists»». <sup>11</sup> They ignore the living relationship within God. In praxis, if not in theory, many Christians are unaware of the implications that follow from the uniquely Christian confession of the full godhead of the Son. Rahner continues: «Nowadays when we speak of God's incarnation, the theological and religious emphasis lies only on the fact that «God» became man, that «one» of the divine persons (of the Trinity) took on the flesh, and not on the fact that this person is precisely the person of the Logos». <sup>12</sup>

Moreover, if one were to ask the remaining nineteen per cent of Christians in Germany, who still see a connection between Jesus Christ and God, <sup>13</sup> how they imagine that God has made Godself known in Jesus Christ, one might be surprised. Fairly often these days one might come across a conviction that resembles a form of latent 'secularised' adoptionism. Contrary to classical adoptionism, in this version it is not God who adopted Jesus of Nazareth as the Son. Rather Christians themselves are those who exaggeratedly elevate Jesus Christ as a god-like ideal of being humane; by an act of heroization or divinisation they 'make' Jesus God, but then, critically, the question is asked: Is Jesus really God? Behind today's fascination for the man Jesus of Nazareth, often lurks an implicit denial of Jesus' divine nature. «Even today, many Christians allow themselves to be touched by all the human dimensions of Jesus of Nazareth, while the Christian belief in Jesus Christ, the true God and true man, and therefore the church's belief in Christ, is more of a problem for them». <sup>14</sup> This Cardinal Koch observed in 2024 and added, referring to a saying from Pope Benedict XVI, that «behind the much-used statement «Jesus yes – Church no», there is an even deeper statement: «Jesus yes – Son of God no»». <sup>15</sup> In this development the cardinal detects the revival of Arianism, «because the Arian

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 2018), 10–1.

<sup>12</sup> Rahner, *The Trinity*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 'Sechste Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung 2023,' 1.

<sup>14</sup> 'Kardinal Koch: "Die Irrlehre des Arius ist heute wieder aktuell,"' interview with Cardinal Koch, *Tagespost*, May 22, 2024, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.die-tagespost.de/kirche/vatikan-und-papst/kardinal-koch-die-irrllehre-des-arius-ist-heute-wieder-aktuell-art-251474>

<sup>15</sup> 'Koch: "Die Irrlehre des Arius."'

heresy, which was widespread at the time and stated that Jesus could not be the Son of God, but merely a middle being between God and man, is not simply a thing of the past, but is also widespread today». <sup>16</sup> While the observation that many would assent to the statement «Jesus yes – Son of God no» is absolutely correct, it nevertheless seems questionable whether this tendency is in any way consciously linked to the teaching of Arius and can thus be labelled a form of neo-Arianism. Rather, it seems plausible that modern problems with the traditional Nicene Christology make recourse to the man Jesus of Nazareth such an attractive basis for the Christian faith.

From what we still can grasp of historical Arianism it is ascertained that Arius did not start with the earthly Jesus. Yet under modern conditions, the assumption of a pre-worldly creation of the Logos-Son seems to be about as improbable a myth as the competing Nicene doctrine. <sup>17</sup> The position of Arius in its historical form is therefore no convincing point of reference for explaining the modern crisis of the Nicene Creed in particular, let alone the Christian faith in God in general. Beyond doubt, it is true that historical Arianism caused a hitherto unknown crisis in Christianity, and it must be acknowledged that Nicaea would not have happened without the ideas and teachings of Arius. Yet although the Arian crisis was considered a deplorable misfortune, even a great catastrophe in its time, it produced a creed that has shaped the faith of Christians worldwide for the past 1700 years. If the current situation must once again be categorised as a crisis of the Christian faith, the question arises as to what positive outcomes might stem from it in the future.

To clarify this the first step is to take stock of what people actually believe in. This will be done by looking at several European and German surveys. <sup>18</sup> Although the weaknesses of quantitative sociology of religion are obvious, I am convinced that advantages, such as the easy compatibility of the results or the ability to in-

<sup>16</sup> 'Koch: "Die Irrlehre des Arius."'

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Bernd Oberdorfer, 'Die Wiederkehr subordinatianischer Christologien als theologische Herausforderung,' in *Nizäa: Das erste Konzil*, ed. Uta Heil and Jan-Heiner Tück (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2025), 347–63; 354: «Unter neuzeitlichen Bedingungen ist die Annahme einer vor-weltlichen Abkömftigkeit freilich kaum weniger mythisch-überschwänglich als die konkurrierende nizänische Trinitätslehre in ihrer vormodernen Gestalt».

<sup>18</sup> These polls are the PEW Report *Being Christian in Western Europe* of 2018 that covers 15 European countries, the *Sechste Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung* in Germany of 2023, because it sheds light on the church context of the two major denominations in Germany, and the *19th Shell Youth Study* of 2024, since some of the trends of the future are already prefigured in what young people think as they will determine the future development also in the sphere of religion.

clude the social context of religion and church in the analyses, outweigh the pitfalls of this method.<sup>19</sup> A second step will be to assess these findings using hermeneutical patterns and instruments from the sociology of religion; a third and concluding step will be to weigh the challenges and chances that follow from there.

## Some Insights into What People in Western Europe Believe Today

In May 2018 the Pew Research Center published its survey on *Being Christian in Western Europe* with shocking results on Christian belief and practice in this area. It revealed that the majority of Europe's Christians are non-practicing, but although they do not practice their faith, they differ from religiously unaffiliated people, the so called 'nones', i.e., those who tick 'none' when asked about their religious affiliation. These differences show themselves for instance in their views on God, their attitudes towards Muslims and immigrants, and their opinions about religion's role in society. The study draws the conclusion that «Western Europe, where Protestant Christianity originated and Catholicism has been based for most of its history, has become one of the world's most secular regions».<sup>20</sup>

The 'nones' are an increasing group in this region, while the non-practicing Christians form the largest cohort and practicing Christians are in a minority situation. «Indeed, the survey shows that non-practicing Christians (defined, for the purposes of this report, as people who identify as Christians, but attend church services no more than a few times per year) make up the biggest share of the population across the region».<sup>21</sup> They still outnumber the 'nones'. There seems to be a trend that 'non-practicing Christians' tend to become 'nones' rather than 'practicing Christians' again. For between the beliefs of practicing and non-practicing Christians there exist decisive differences

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Detlef Pollack, "Vorzüge und Schwächen der quantitativ arbeitenden Religionssoziologie. Ein Kommentar zur 6. KMU und ihrer kirchlichen und theologischen Rezeption," in *Christsein in der Minderheit. Debatten zur 6. Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung*, ed. Tobias Kläden and Jan Löffeld (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2025), 96–110.

<sup>20</sup> PEW Research Center, *Christianity in Western and Northern Europe*, accessed May 7, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/> Cf. the assessment of this survey in Annemarie C. Mayer, "Christianity in Western and Northern Europe," in *Change title to: Christianity in Western and Northern Europe*, ed. Todd Johnson, Kenneth Ross and Annemarie C. Mayer, *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity*, vol. 8 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 15–37; 24–6.

<sup>21</sup> PEW Research Center, *Being Christian*.

Most non-practicing Christians in Europe believe in God. But their concept of God differs considerably from the way that churchgoing Christians tend to conceive of God. While most church-attending Christians say they believe in God (as described in the Bible), non-practicing Christians are more apt to say that they do *not* believe in the biblical depiction of God, but that they believe in some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe.<sup>22</sup>

While the survey questions that mention the Bible do not specify a particular biblical notion of God but leave that up to the understanding of the respondents,

it is clear from other questions in the survey that people who say they believe in God as described in the Bible generally envision a deity who is all-knowing and all-powerful, and who loves all people and, ultimately, will judge all people. By contrast, respondents who say they believe in some other (higher power or spiritual force) – but *not* the God of the Bible – are much less likely to envision a deity with these characteristics.<sup>23</sup>

The differences between these two groups continue regarding their attitudes towards other religions and the role they think religion should play in society. The attitude of non-practicing Christians seems to be to establish a quasi-Christian bulwark against any non-European influence, or what they regard as such. This attitude is called ‘reactive Christianity’.<sup>24</sup> To sum up, since the non-practicing Christians currently are the largest group, the

prevailing belief in Western Europe is in a higher power or spiritual force that is not the God of the Bible; in 11 of the 15 countries surveyed, pluralities of respondents choose this option. For instance, in Germany, 28 % of adults believe in God as described in the Bible, while 38 % believe in some other higher power or spiritual force. An additional 26 % of Germans do not believe in any higher power, and 8 % say they do not know or decline to answer.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> PEW Research Center, *Being Christian*.

<sup>23</sup> PEW Research Center, *Being Christian*, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/beliefs-about-god/> These differences also come to the fore in other chapters of this publication, e.g. in “‘True God from true God’: Speaking Truthfully About God in a Secular Society” by Matthias Zeindler who asks «The Question Today: Who is God?»

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Rogers Brubaker, “A New Christianist Secularism in Europe,” *The Immanent Frame*, October 11, 2016, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2016/10/11/a-new-christianist-secularism-in-europe/>; id., “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Movement in Comparative Perspective,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191–226.

<sup>25</sup> PEW Research Center, *Being Christian*.



These findings are corroborated and even exacerbated by the results of two more recent surveys conducted in Germany. The 2023 *Sechste Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung* has already been quoted. It focussed on the relation between religiosity, church and society and proved that today all Christians together make up less than fifty per cent of the German population. The second survey, the *19th Shell Youth Study* of 2024 shows that belief in God is declining rapidly, especially among Catholic young people between twelve and twenty-five years of age:

for young people who belong to the Roman Catholic Church, belief in God has steadily lost importance over the last 20 years: in 2002, 51 % stated that it was important to them, whereas this figure has now fallen to 38 %. Among Protestant young people, the changes are moving in the same direction, although the proportion of young people for whom belief in God was important was already significantly lower back then (38 % then to 35 % now).<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, this trend is not shared by Muslim young people, where «the relevance of belief in God is significantly higher and stable over time with fluctuations at a high level (72 % to 79 %)».<sup>27</sup>

The *Shell Youth Study* presents a similar picture of decreasing importance of faith in everyday life that can be measured by practices such as prayer.

Of all 12 to 25-year-olds, 18 % pray at least once a week, 31 % pray less often and 49 % say they never pray – only 29 % said the latter in 2002. Members of both major denominations show very similar patterns over time – albeit at slightly different levels.<sup>28</sup>

Once again a comparison with Muslim young people shows that they

clearly integrate their faith much more strongly into their everyday lives. 37 % of young Muslims pray once or several times a day (regular prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam), with a further 26 % praying at least once or several times a week. Only a minority of 13 % say they never pray.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *19th Shell Youth Study 2024*, English Summary, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.shell.de/about-us/initiatives/shell-youth-study-2024/>, 21.

<sup>27</sup> *19th Shell Youth Study 2024*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *19th Shell Youth Study 2024*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> *19th Shell Youth Study 2024*, 21.

## From 'Believing Without Belonging' to 'Belonging Without Believing'?

In the light of these recent surveys, concepts such as 'multiple modernities'<sup>30</sup> or perhaps even 'multiple post-modernities' become increasingly plausible. For these trends are not the same everywhere and in all religions. The downward trend does not necessarily apply to religion per se but rather to Christianity and its link with the church.<sup>31</sup> Regarding the question of belief in God the surveys show that the non-practicing Christians develop a blurred view of the Christian notion of God, one that is no longer biblical, but equates trust in an impersonal higher power. In the course of time members of this group become 'nones' – initially they might be called 'benevolent nones' who

describe themselves as neutral towards religion, by which they mean that they are not members of a particular religion or church and would never seriously consider this as an option for themselves. Yet they do not mind the fact that such religions or churches exist.<sup>32</sup>

The next stage is that they develop into more 'rigid nones' which means that their indifferent tolerance towards religion changes into an attitude that attributes to religion a total lack of relevance. Religion no longer has a place in their own lives, nor in the lives of others or in society. Moreover, research shows that this development is accelerating. While the number of church members in both major churches in Germany was predicted to halve around 2060, this is now expected to already happen in the 2050s or even by the mid-2040s.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Shmuel Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129 (2000): 1–30; 1: «The notion of 'multiple modernities' denotes a certain view of the contemporary world – indeed of the history and characteristics of the modern era – that goes against the views prevalent in scholarly and general discourse. [...] They all assumed, even only implicitly, that the cultural programme of modernity as it developed in modern Europe [...] would ultimately take over in all modernising and modern societies; with the expansion of modernity, they would prevail throughout the world».

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Annemarie C. Mayer, "L'esodo silenzioso dalle Chiese: il caso tedesco," *La rivista del clero italiano*, fasc. 4 (2022): 314–33.

<sup>32</sup> Annemarie C. Mayer, "Mission in Secularised Contexts of Europe: A Roman-Catholic Perspective," in *Mission in Secularised Contexts of Europe: Contemporary Narratives and Experiences*, ed. Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, Michael Biehl and Knud Jørgensen (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2018), 99–110; 102.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. David Gutmann and Fabian Peters, *#projektion2060. Die Freiburger Studie zu Kirchenmitgliedschaft und Kirchensteuer. Analysen – Chancen – Visionen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Aussaat, 2021); idem, "Freiburger Studie 2.0. Ein Update der

Contesting a secularisation theory that assumes a disappearance of religion, British sociologist Grace Davie pointed to religion's continued existence in the private sphere. For this she coined the formula «believing without belonging».<sup>34</sup> Moreover, to better understand the situation of religion, she developed the concept of «vicarious religion».<sup>35</sup> This means that religion is lived by an active minority for a non-religious majority of the population, which understands the actions of the minority at least to a certain extent, and even affirms and supports them. Does her theory still fit the data and is it applicable beyond the Church of England?<sup>36</sup> Are the still practicing Christians those who perform «vicarious religion» and the non-practicing those «believing without belonging»? Should the attitude of the latter not rather be called «belonging without believing» because the content of their faith is no longer genuinely Christian, but they do not want to give up the self-designation 'Christian'? Does Davie's concept not underestimate the situation on a larger scale, as manifested by the shifts caused by the phenomenon of religious indifference that has increased?<sup>37</sup> This means that many people not only do not know one or the other smaller item of content of the Christian faith, but they are no longer familiar with the fundamental idea of transcendence. Instead, many increasingly satisfy

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Prognosen zur Kirchensteuerentwicklung bis 2060," *Herder Korrespondenz Spezial*, no.1 (2023): 33–35.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); ead., "Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge," in *Everyday Religion. Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21–35; ead., "From Believing Without Belonging to Vicarious Religion: Understanding the Patterns of Religion in Modern Europe," in *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies*, ed. Detlef Pollack and Daniel V. A. Olson (New York / London: Routledge, 2008), 165–176; ead., "Vicarious Religion: A Response," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (2010): 261–66 responding to Steve Bruce and David Voas, "Vicarious Religion: An Examination and Critique," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (2010): 243–59.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Annemarie C. Mayer, "Die Kirche von England und der Anglikanismus als Hintergrund zu Grace Davies Theorie," in *Kirche für andere sein? Transdisziplinäre Beiträge zu Grace Davies Konzept der vicarious religion*, ed. Benjamin Dahlke and Michael Quinsky, *Theologie in pluraler Gesellschaft*, vol. 3 (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2024), 37–58.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gert Pickel, "Religiöse Indifferenz – Freundliche Beschreibung für eine drastische Entwicklung?," in *Die soziale Reichweite von Religion und Kirche*, ed. Detlef Pollack and Gerhard Wegner, *Religion in der Gesellschaft*, vol. 40 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2017), 165–82; Jan Löffeld, *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt: Das Christentum vor der religiösen Indifferenz* (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2024); *Die Gottesfrage zwischen Umbruch und Abbruch. Theologie und Pastoral unter säkularen Bedingungen*, ed. Julia Knop, *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 297 (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2019).

their desire for transcendence through substitute actions, for example in a ‘fun culture’. They are unlikely to attach much importance, in the sense of tacit agreement, to the fact that a small minority continues to attend religious services; they are likely to be indifferent to it.<sup>38</sup>

Given these circumstances, another theoretical approach seems to be more promising. Already in 1954 Charles Glock<sup>39</sup> introduced a key framework for understanding religious commitment and behaviour by defining five major dimensions of religiosity: belief (which he initially called the ideological dimension), experience (defined in the sense of arousing religious feelings or emotions), practice (overt behaviour traditionally defined as religious), theology (the knowledge-related or cognitive side of religion), and consequences (the effects of the other four dimensions applied in the secular world, also labelled ‘ethics’). For Glock belief in God is the core element of belief, i.e., the first, faith-related dimension, and it is closely linked to the other dimensions of religiosity: belief in God is experienced in the feeling of God’s closeness, it comes to mind in the knowledge about the existence of God and the contents of faith, it is expressed in religious practices. Belief in God cannot be separated from the other areas of Christian religiosity, since a notion of God is important to establish a direction for religious communication.

## Challenges and Chances for the Christian Faith

It has become clear that in the twenty-first century, it is a matter of revisiting the decision of Nicaea under greatly changed intellectual-historical and religious-cultural conditions. What conclusions can we draw, if we compare and correlate what people tend to believe with the Christian faith that, in Jesus Christ, we encounter Godself – the faith that the Nicene Creed underlines so boldly against Arius and his followers? How can the discourse on the Triune God be developed in such a way

<sup>38</sup> Sceptics on Davie remain Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel, “Religious Individualisation or Secularisation. An Attempt to Evaluate the Thesis of Religious Individualization in Eastern and Western Germany,” in *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies*, 191–220; Winfried Gebhardt, “Believing without Belonging?” Religiöse Individualisierung und neue Formen religiöser Vergemeinschaftung,” in *Im Dialog. Systematische Theologie und Religionssoziologie*, ed. Ansgar Kreutzer and Franz Gruber, *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 258 (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder, 2013), 297–317; Detlef Pollack, “Über unsichtbare Religion und sichtbare Spiritualität,” *Herder Korrespondenz Spezial*, no. 10 (2021): 11–3.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Charles Y. Glock, *Toward a Typology of Religious Orientation* (New York: Columbia University, 1954).

that it does neither skip over the earthly existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth nor forget that this Jesus is not only a messenger and witness to God's gift of salvation, but that in him, we encounter Godself who turns to us?

What effects does the phenomenon of religious indifference have in this context? What requirements must church proclamation and pastoral care fulfil under secular conditions? Is the problem already solved with new forms of inculturation of Christianity in the post-modern fluid conditions of society?<sup>40</sup> Is it already enough if one switches to «hospitality, spontaneity and (possible) anonymity and thus the renunciation of the principles of control and duration»<sup>41</sup> in the new methods and places of pastoral care?

At the time of the first councils, one particularly striking difference to today was the fact that people were publicly talking about their faith and discussing different stances they took. It shows that the Nicene Creed and the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea were very much embedded in the life of the congregations. Even if there is a good chance that Gergory of Nyssa exaggerated when he caricatured the unending theological arguments at the time, there must have been some vivid discourse in public. Otherwise, the joke that people discuss issues of faith on squares, at crossroads, on the streets and lanes, would not have got across:

old-clothed men, money changers, food sellers: they are all busy arguing. If you ask someone to give you change, he philosophizes about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of a loaf [of bread], you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater and the Son inferior; if you ask «Is my bath ready?» the attendant answers that the Son was made out of nothing.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast, today not only is faith in God crumbling, but also religious communication about God. The discontinuation of religious socialisation is accompanied by a

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Rainer Bucher, '... wenn nichts bleibt, wie es war', *Zur prekären Zukunft der katholischen Kirche* (Würzburg: Echter, 2013), 188: «Die Umstellung auf Gastfreundschaft, Spontaneität und (mögliche) Anonymität und damit der Verzicht auf die Prinzipien Kontrolle und Dauer ist nicht einfach und erfordert viel. Er charakterisiert aber das Neue an den neuen Orten der Pastoral und markiert den Vorschein einer zukünftigen Sozialform von katholischer Kirche».

<sup>42</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "De deitate filii et spiritus sancti," in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* X, 2, ed. Ernest Rhein et al. (Leiden / New York / Cologne: Brill, 1996), 117–44, at 121, lines 7–12: Ἐὰν περὶ τῶν ὀβολῶν ἐρωτήσης, ὁ δὲ σοι περὶ γεννητοῦ καὶ ἀγεννήτου ἐφιλοσόφησεν· κἂν περὶ τιμήματος ἄρτου πύθοιο, Μείζων ὁ Πατὴρ, ἀποκρίνεται, καὶ ὁ Υἱὸς ὑποχείριος. Εἰ δὲ, τὸ λουτρὸν ἐπιτήδειόν ἐστιν, εὔποις, ὁ δὲ ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων τὸν Υἱὸν εἶναι διωρίσατο. Trans. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* – Church History, accessed July 12, 2025, [http://www.synaxis.org/catechist/Orthodox\\_Church](http://www.synaxis.org/catechist/Orthodox_Church).

feeling that it is inappropriate to confess one's faith in public. One's own religiousness is not a very popular topic of communication in everyday life to the extent that it seems difficult to communicate it to strangers and even among friends.

Since there are fewer and fewer people with whom one can talk about one's personal notion of God, this notion becomes more and more diffuse in its contours – and ultimately it disappears from one's everyday life. As a result of a seemingly outdated communication, the acquisition of knowledge about religion, social ties to religious social forms and the opportunity for religious experience are also decreasing. Due to the close interlocking of these dimensions of religiosity, as we have seen in Glock's theory, it is likely that belief in God also becomes less and less attractive. On the other hand, given the modern means of communication, there has been an explosion of 'non-normative' religious knowledge online, purporting 'home-brewed' rigid interpretations of the Bible, the creed, the Catechism, in short, all aspects of the Christian faith which immensely complicate the picture, especially for the religiously illiterate.

It gets even more difficult to come to terms with God when the religious language itself is alien, when one cannot understand what theologians, priests or pastors are saying from the pulpit or elsewhere. This applies to the majority of the religiously unaffiliated today. It can be said that if religion is not learnt in some form, one simply lacks the ability to connect to any conversation about God.

Without ties to people and institutions who responsibly teach what the Christian faith is, the knowledge of one's own religion or religion in general becomes just as diffuse as the experiences with it break off. The ability to recognise and interpret religious experiences as such also dwindles. For this also has to be learnt. Otherwise, individual religious experiences remain just indeterminate experiences. William James already knew this.<sup>43</sup> However, this social bond to religion and the church has become fragile today.

Is there still hope if communication about God and witness to believing in God increases? Can we come to some sort of transfiguration rather than a simple fading of faith in God? In my opinion two factors need to play together to achieve this, a 'hardware' and a 'software' factor.

German sociologist of religion Gert Pickel explains the hardware factor. According to him, Christianity becomes attractive for people when it becomes socially

<sup>43</sup> Cf. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902).

visible and is oriented towards and helping fellow human beings. This aspect has a completely different image to that of the church as an institution. Even the church is viewed more positively when the 'pro-sociality' inherent in Christianity comes to the fore. According to Pickel, the possibility of offering pro-social commitment is the most sustainable strength of religious communities in the present situation. One builds 'social capital' together, but one freely chooses the people with whom one engages. This connection is highly modern, unlike obligatory large institutions. It meets the requirements of a modern civil society. Small social communities flourish around churches and in congregations. And this is where God comes into play again. It may not be faith that drives people to make contact with religion but the social dynamics of these communities, yet they render the question of God relevant (again).

Here the software factor of personal witness comes into play, for the question «Who do you say I am?» is still asked of us today. It is no longer Jesus himself who asks it, but non-Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and, most frequently, the religiously unaffiliated. They all ask: «What are your religious experiences as a Christian?» We cannot answer this question with book knowledge, biblical analyses, critical comments on church history or even sociological evaluations of our own and other religions. For the questioners want to know: «How do you yourself feel about religion?» They could just as well ask: «But you, who do you say Jesus of Nazareth is?»

What do we answer at a time when the variety of possible viewpoints makes it increasingly difficult to make our own decision and the superficiality of the information we receive often encourages arbitrariness; what do we answer when we are asked about the reason for the hope that is within us (cf. 1 Peter 3.15)? One possible answer is the answer of Easter: «on the third day he rose again, ascended into the heavens, will come to judge the living and dead» – as we profess in the Nicene Creed. This is not about a Christian conviction of faith that we can read up on, not about a mere answer of knowledge, but about an answer of life. Our response needs to be anchored in the living testimony of a lived faith. Christians who take their profession of faith seriously must express by what they live who Christ is to them and what their discipleship consequently consists of. The speechlessness that we Christians often seem to fall into can only be overcome if we allow ourselves to be empowered to bear witness from our inner bond with Christ in his community of followers. To this end, however, faith in Jesus Christ's reconciling and liberating ministry should be proclaimed more resolutely in such

a way that all people, especially those who are searching and suffering, doubting, and struggling, can hear God's inviting voice in this proclamation. Only where this is the case will the interest in other people's points of view not become an alibi with which we conceal our own difficulties, perhaps also our inner distancing from the Christian faith. In times of social and religious pluralism, a personal confession of Christ is not contradicted by an interest in the understanding our contemporaries have of Jesus. But this interest should not lead us Christians to stop at the provisional question of Jesus: «Who do *people* say that I am?» We should enter into conversation, a conversation of life that lives who *we* say he is.





# From Creed to Life: The Nicene Influence in Thai Christian Education

*Chananporn "Oan" Jaisaodee*

## Introduction

The Nicene Creed, a cornerstone of Christian doctrine, has profoundly shaped the faith and practice of believers for centuries. As a fundamental confession of faith, it encapsulates core Christian beliefs and serves as a unifying statement across diverse Christian traditions. In the context of the Thai church, the Nicene Creed holds significant potential to influence Christian education, guiding both the spiritual formation of individuals and the collective life of the community. This article explores the ways in which the Nicene Creed can shape Christian education in the Thai church. By viewing Christian education as a form of spiritual formation, it argues that the teachings of the creed should resonate with the real-life experiences of believers, fostering a deeper understanding of faith and its practical implications. Through incorporating confessions into educational practices, the Thai church can help believers engage with their faith in a meaningful and transformative way.

In particular, this chapter argues that confession must impact the daily lives of Christians. It encourages reflection on their actions and their influence on others, fostering moral and ethical development. This guidance helps individuals live in accordance with Christian values, striving to be more compassionate, just, and loving in their daily interactions. By incorporating confession into their lives, Christians can experience profound spiritual benefits and cultivate a faith deeply rooted in self-awareness, humility, and grace. Confession may be expressed in both

private and communal contexts – either as a personal engagement between the individual and God or as a component of corporate liturgical practice within the church. By fostering an understanding of confession that is both personal and spiritually dynamic, the Thai church can enable believers to encounter it as a living and transformative aspect of their faith journey, rather than merely a ritualistic or formulaic recitation.

## Christianity in Thailand

Thailand is widely recognized as one of the most devoutly Buddhist nations in the world. Theravāda Buddhism, the dominant tradition, is practiced by approximately 93–95 per cent of the population. Islam constitutes the second-largest religious group, with around 4.9 per cent of Thais identifying as Muslim, primarily residing in the southern provinces. Christianity, encompassing both Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations, accounts for approximately 1.2 per cent of the population. Other religious traditions – including Hinduism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Taoism, and animist beliefs – collectively represent less than 1 per cent of the population. A very small proportion, estimated at around 0.1 per cent, identify as having no religion.<sup>1</sup>

Within Thailand, Christianity is represented by several major denominations, each with its own distinct historical development and community presence. Here are some of the key ones:

- **Roman Catholic Church:** The Catholic Church has a significant presence in Thailand, with a history dating back to the sixteenth century. It is well-established with numerous parishes and institutions across the country.
- **Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT):** This is the largest Protestant denomination in Thailand, formed in 1934 by merging American Presbyterian and Baptist missions. It includes a diverse range of congregations, including Thai, Chinese, Karen, Lahu, Hmong, Akha, and Lisu communities.
- **Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT):** This umbrella organization includes many smaller evangelical denominations, churches, and mis-

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<sup>1</sup> globalEDGE, “Thailand: Introduction.” *Michigan State University, International Business Center*, accessed June 15, 2025. <https://globaledege.msu.edu/countries/thailand/>.

sionary organizations. It facilitates cooperation and coordination among various evangelical groups.

- **Thailand Baptist Convention:** This denomination was established by American missionaries and includes several Baptist churches throughout Thailand.
- **Seventh-day Adventist Church:** Present in Thailand since 1905, the Adventist Church operates various educational and health institutions.
- **Anglican Church in Thailand:** Part of the Anglican Church in the Province of Southeast Asia, this denomination includes several congregations and is involved in various social and educational activities.

These denominations, along with many independent and smaller groups, contribute to the diverse Christian landscape in Thailand.<sup>2</sup>

Being a Thai church involves a unique blend of cultural and religious practices that reflect both Thai traditions and Christian beliefs. Here are some key aspects:

- **Cultural Integration:** Thai churches often incorporate local customs, language, and traditions into their worship and community activities. This helps make Christianity more accessible and relatable to Thai people.
- **Community Focus:** Like many churches worldwide, Thai churches emphasize community and fellowship. They often engage in social services, charity work, and community-building activities, reflecting the Thai value of community support.
- **Festivals and Celebrations:** Thai churches may celebrate traditional Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter, but they also participate in local festivals such as Songkran (Thai New Year), blending Christian and Thai cultural elements in their celebrations.
- **Language and Worship Style:** Services are typically conducted in Thai and the worship style may include traditional Thai music and instruments, creating a familiar and welcoming environment for congregants.
- **Interfaith Relations:** Given Thailand's predominantly Buddhist population, Thai churches often engage in interfaith dialogue and activities, promoting

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<sup>2</sup> Prawate Khid-arn, 'National Report: Christian Mission in Thailand,' *Asia Missions Association*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.asiamissions.net/national-report-christian-mission-in-thailand/>.

mutual understanding and respect between different religious communities.<sup>3</sup>

Kosuke Koyama's *Water Buffalo Theology*<sup>4</sup> offers significant insights that are highly relevant to the Thai church's engagement with cultural and religious practices. Koyama developed his theology during his time as a missionary in Thailand (1960–1968), where he sought to communicate the Christian message in a way that resonated with the lives of Thai farmers, particularly those who worked with water buffalo. His approach was deeply contextual, emphasizing that theology must begin with the lived experiences of local people rather than being imposed from Western frameworks. Here are several ways Koyama's theology offers insight into how the Thai church navigates the blending of cultural and religious traditions:

- **Contextualization over Westernization:** Koyama criticized the tendency to present Christianity «in the mold of the mind of the West», arguing that such theologies often feel irrelevant to non-Western contexts. For the Thai church, this affirms the legitimacy of developing a theology that is authentically Thai – one that respects and integrates local culture, symbols, and even religious sensibilities, rather than mimicking Western expressions of faith.
- **Respect for Local Religious Worldviews:** Koyama did not advocate for a wholesale rejection of local religious traditions. Instead, he believed that elements of these traditions – such as the Thai Buddhist emphasis on compassion, humility, and interconnectedness – could enrich Christian theology. This supports a Thai Christian identity that is not in conflict with cultural heritage but is instead deeply rooted in it.
- **Theology from the Margins:** By focusing on the experiences of ordinary people – like Thai farmers – Koyama's theology encourages the church to listen to and learn from the grassroots. This approach validates the

<sup>3</sup> James W. Gustafson, *Syncretistic Thai Religion and Church Growth* (MA Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1971), accessed June 14, 2025, <https://thaimissions.info/gsd/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH8867.dir/doc.pdf>. This foundational study analyzes rural Thai Buddhism and its syncretistic nature, particularly how Thai peasants blend Buddhism with Brahmanism and animism. Gustafson explores how these blended beliefs affect the growth and contextualization of the Christian church in Thailand. He emphasizes the importance of understanding local religious frameworks to effectively engage in ministry and church development.

<sup>4</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999).

spiritual insights and practices of local communities, even when they don't fit neatly into Western theological categories.

- **Dialogue and Pluralism:** Koyama was committed to religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue. In a Thai context, where Buddhism is deeply woven into the fabric of society, his theology encourages respectful engagement rather than confrontation. This can help the Thai church navigate the blending of cultural and religious practices with sensitivity and grace.

Koyama's theology provides valuable perspectives on how the Thai church can thoughtfully integrate cultural and religious practices. This theological framework is reflected in the ways Thai churches contextualize their faith, blending local traditions with Christian beliefs to make worship accessible and relatable. His emphasis on a theology that emerges from the lived experiences of local communities is particularly relevant in the Thai context, where churches have developed expressions of faith that are both theologically grounded and culturally resonant.

Contemporary Thai Christian communities are encouraged to incorporate indigenous traditions into their worship, conducting services in the Thai language and utilizing traditional music. Celebrations frequently include both Christian liturgical feasts and culturally significant festivals such as Songkran. Moreover, Thai churches are actively involved in social outreach, providing charitable services and community support. They also participate in interfaith dialogue, fostering mutual respect and understanding in a religiously plural society. These practices reflect a theological commitment to incarnating the gospel within the cultural fabric of Thai society, in line with Koyama's vision of a contextual and compassionate Christianity.

## **Promoting the Use of the Nicene Creed in Christian Education Within the Thai Church**

The Nicene Creed, originally formulated in AD 325 and subsequently revised and expanded in AD 381, constitutes a foundational statement of Christian doctrine. It articulates core theological tenets, including the concept of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God the Father, the role of the Holy Spirit, the nature of the church, the significance of baptism, and the belief in the resurrec-

tion. The Nicene Creed is a foundational statement of Christian faith that can be especially useful in Christian education today.<sup>5</sup>

Christopher Seitz's *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* presents the Nicene Creed as a unifying foundation for the global church.<sup>6</sup> Leading theologians examine each phrase, highlighting its theological depth and lasting relevance. Key themes include God's oneness as Creator, Christ's full divinity and humanity, the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification, the church's unity in apostolic faith, and the hope of resurrection. The book argues that these affirmations are both doctrinally essential and a shared language for ecumenical dialogue in a divided Christian landscape. Certainly, other chapters in this volume will assess critically the theology, history, and impact of the Nicene Creed. However, the book title *A Study Guide* by Marcellino D'Ambrosio provides a detailed analysis of the Nicene Creed, exploring its historical context, theological significance and, importantly for this chapter's reflections, implications for Christian faith and practice.<sup>7</sup> It delves into the creed's statements about the nature of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and explains how these beliefs shape the core of Christian doctrine and worship.

The Nicene Creed emphasizes several key teachings and content that are central to Christian faith:

- The Trinity: The creed affirms the belief in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is central to Christian doctrine and helps students understand the nature of God.
- The Divinity of Jesus Christ: It declares Jesus Christ as «true God from true God», emphasizing his divine nature and his role in salvation. This can help students appreciate the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.
- The Incarnation: The creed states that Jesus «came down from heaven» and «was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man». This teaching underscores the belief that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human.

<sup>5</sup> In the context of this article, the term "Nicene Creed" refers to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, formulated in AD 381.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Marcellino D'Ambrosio, *The Nicene Creed: A Study Guide* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2012).

- The Crucifixion and Resurrection: It highlights the importance of Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, his death, burial, and resurrection on the third day. This is central to the Christian faith and can be a focus for discussions on redemption and hope.
- The Ascension and Second Coming: The creed mentions Jesus' ascension into heaven and his future return to judge the living and the dead. This can be used to teach about the hope of eternal life and the importance of living a life of faith.
- The Holy Spirit: It affirms the belief in the Holy Spirit, «the Lord, the giver of life», who proceeds from the Father (and the Son). This can help students understand the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding and empowering believers.
- The Church: The creed professes belief in «one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church». This can be used to teach about the unity and universality of the church, as well as its mission and authority.
- Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins: It acknowledges «one baptism for the forgiveness of sins», highlighting the importance of baptism as a sacrament of initiation and cleansing.
- The Resurrection of the Dead and Life Everlasting: The creed concludes with the hope of the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. This can be a powerful teaching on the Christian hope and the promise of life after death.

These teachings from the Nicene Creed can provide a comprehensive framework for Christian education, helping learners to understand and articulate their faith more deeply.

Although the Nicene Creed is not widely used in worship or teaching in most Thai churches, it remains a vital expression of Christian faith. I would like to suggest some ways it could be more meaningfully incorporated into church life and theological education.

- Liturgical Use: The Nicene Creed can be recited during Sunday services, particularly in denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, and certain Protestant traditions. Its use as a communal declaration of faith reinforces doctrinal unity and affirms the shared beliefs of the congregation.



- **Christian Education:** The creed can serve as a foundational element in religious education programs. Teaching it to children and new converts can help them grasp the core tenets of Christianity. This approach may include memorization, exploration of its historical development, and theological reflection on each article of faith.
- **Catechism Classes:** For individuals preparing for sacraments such as baptism or confirmation, the Nicene Creed should be a central component of catechetical instruction. Detailed discussions of its content can ensure that participants understand the depth and significance of the Christian faith they are professing.
- **Interfaith Dialogue:** In Thailand's predominantly Buddhist context, the Nicene Creed can be a valuable tool for articulating Christian beliefs in interreligious conversations. Its clarity and structure provide a concise summary of Christian doctrine, fostering mutual understanding and respect across religious boundaries.
- **Personal Reflection and Prayer:** Beyond corporate worship, the creed can be used in personal devotional practices. Reflecting on its affirmations can deepen individual faith and offer a structured way to meditate on the mysteries of the Christian tradition.

Despite its theological significance and historical authority, the Nicene Creed occupies a relatively marginal role in the liturgical life of Thai churches. Although it is referenced in church history and Christian theology courses and included in the Thai Protestant hymnal, it is seldom used in regular worship services. In contrast, the Apostles' Creed is recited more frequently and holds a more prominent place in congregational practice. Consequently, most Thai Christians are more familiar with the Apostles' Creed than with the Nicene Creed. This limited liturgical exposure may contribute to a diminished awareness of the Nicene Creed's doctrinal richness and its ecumenical importance within the global Christian tradition.

The limited liturgical use of the Nicene Creed in Thai churches compared to the Apostles' Creed can be understood through several interconnected factors:<sup>8</sup>

- **Historical and Missionary Influence:** Early Protestant missionaries in Thailand primarily came from traditions that emphasized the Apostles' Creed rather than the Nicene Creed. Since the Apostles' Creed is widely used in

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<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is drawn from personal observations within Thai church practices.

evangelical and reformed traditions, it naturally became more familiar to Thai Christians. The Nicene Creed, being more associated with Catholic and Orthodox traditions, did not receive the same level of emphasis in Protestant missionary efforts.

- **Liturgical Simplicity and Accessibility:** The Nicene Creed is longer and more doctrinally complex than the Apostles' Creed. Many Thai churches prioritize simplicity and accessibility in worship services, making the Apostles' Creed a more practical choice for congregational recitation. The brevity of the Apostles' Creed allows for easier memorization and participation, which is particularly important in churches where formal liturgical traditions are less emphasized.
- **Educational Exposure and Theological Awareness:** While the Nicene Creed is included in theological education and hymnals, it is not a central part of regular worship. This means that many Thai Christians may encounter it in academic or historical contexts rather than as a living part of their faith practice. The Apostles' Creed, on the other hand, is more frequently used in worship settings, reinforcing its familiarity among congregants.
- **Ecumenical Considerations:** Since Thai Christianity exists within a predominantly Buddhist cultural context, there may be less emphasis on ecumenical Christian traditions that highlight the Nicene Creed's role in global theological unity. The Apostles' Creed, being more commonly used across Protestant denominations, aligns more closely with the worship practices of Thai churches.
- **Doctrinal Focus and Worship Practices:** The Nicene Creed was developed to address specific theological controversies, particularly regarding the nature of Christ and the Trinity. While these doctrines are foundational to Christian belief, Thai churches may focus more on practical aspects of faith, such as discipleship, evangelism, and community-building, rather than doctrinal formulations. As a result, the Nicene Creed may be perceived as less immediately relevant to everyday worship.

As a Thai Christian educator, seminary teacher, and practical theologian, I see the need for Thai Christians to recognize the significant role the Nicene Creed plays in Christian living. I would like to introduce the Nicene Creed to many Thai believers, especially the new generations, and to point out to them that the Nicene Creed is important because it affirms the fundamental beliefs about the Holy Trinity (the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and the divinity of Jesus Christ. This creed can help to create unity in the faith and practices of the church in Thailand. Its influence on Christian education in the Thai church can be profound, providing a structured framework for teaching core Christian doctrines.

The teachings of the Nicene Creed also closely align with my dissertation on *Trinitarian Transforming Praxis*, where I explore a practical theological approach for the Thai church, emphasizing the spiritual formation of Thai Christian women and the redefinition of gender roles in ministry.<sup>9</sup> In this work, I examine how Trinitarian theology can foster a more inclusive and transformative faith practice, advocating for a shift in traditional gender norms within Thai Christian communities. Here is how the creed's key affirmations apply:

- The Trinity as a Model for Community – The creed affirms the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which I use to advocate for a more relational and egalitarian approach to faith and ministry. I argue that a Trinitarian understanding fosters inclusivity, breaking hierarchical structures that limit women's roles in Thai Christianity.
- Christ's Incarnation and Redemption – The creed highlights Christ's full divinity and humanity, a theme I connect to Christian identity and spiritual formation. I suggest that embracing the humanity of Christ allows Thai Christian women to see themselves as fully empowered within the faith, challenging patriarchal traditions.
- The Holy Spirit's Role in Transformation – The creed affirms the Holy Spirit's work in sanctification, which I incorporate into my practical theological framework. I emphasize the Spirit's transformative power in shaping a new vision for Christian gender roles, encouraging Thai churches to embrace a renewed, Spirit-led identity.
- The Church's Unity and Apostolic Tradition – The creed calls for a unified, holy church, grounded in apostolic faith. I apply this by advocating for a theological approach that integrates Thai culture, ensuring that Christianity in Thailand is contextualized rather than imposed through Western traditions.

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<sup>9</sup> Chananporn Jaisaodee, *Trinitarian Transforming Praxis: A Practical Theological Approach for the Thai Church to Engage in the Spiritual Formation of Thai Christian Women and a New Way of Gender Practice* (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2013)

The Nicene Creed offers a valuable complement to a practical theological framework within the Thai church, reinforcing foundational themes such as ecclesial unity, spiritual formation, and gender inclusivity. By integrating the creed into ecclesial practice and theological reflection, this approach enhances discipleship, fosters deeper engagement with doctrinal traditions, and contributes to the cultivation of a holistic, Spirit-led community.

By incorporating the Nicene Creed into educational programs, the Thai church can ground learners in foundational Christian beliefs, ensuring a consistent and unified understanding of faith. This integration helps shape curricula, guides theological discussions, and fosters a deeper comprehension of Christian doctrine, which is crucial for the spiritual growth and formation of believers. I found Bruce Riley Ashford's book, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, to be helpful in probing how such integration can be achieved.<sup>10</sup> This book discusses how theological confessions like the Nicene Creed can shape mission and education in the church by grounding it in core Christian beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. These confessions provide a doctrinal foundation that informs and guides the church's educational and missional activities.

Here are some ways these principles can be integrated into contemporary Christian education and daily life, particularly in the Thai church context:

- **Understanding Diversity and Unity:** In Thailand, where religious and cultural pluralism is prominent, the concept of the Trinity can provide a theological framework for unity amid diversity. By emphasizing both distinctiveness and interconnectedness within the Godhead, Christian education can encourage respect for diverse perspectives while reinforcing the unity of faith among believers. Further exploration of Thai theological perspectives on this topic could enrich the discussion.
- **Emphasizing the Value of Humanity:** The incarnation's message of divine presence in human form resonates deeply within Thai culture, where concepts of dignity and respect are central to social relationships. Christian teachings on the incarnation can be integrated into church education programs to promote human rights, equality, and compassion, especially in contexts where marginalized groups seek recognition and empowerment.

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford, ed., *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011).

- **Hope and Resilience:** The teachings on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection hold profound relevance for Thai Christians facing socio-economic and spiritual challenges. In a nation shaped by rapid globalization and shifting cultural values, these biblical narratives can inspire resilience, perseverance, and trust in God's redemptive plan, offering hope amid uncertainties. In a time where many face personal and global crises, these teachings can inspire perseverance and faith in the promise of new beginnings.
- **Ethical Living and Accountability:** In Thai society, moral conduct is highly valued, often influenced by Buddhist ethical principles. By framing Christian ethical teachings – such as Jesus' second coming and the concept of divine judgment – within the Thai worldview, Christian educators can emphasize personal accountability and integrity, reinforcing the importance of living a life that reflects biblical values.
- **Empowerment and Guidance:** The Holy Spirit's role as the giver of life and guide can be particularly meaningful in the Thai church, where believers navigate the complexities of modern life while balancing traditional and contemporary influences. Teaching about the Holy Spirit can encourage personal spiritual discernment, empowering individuals to seek divine guidance in their decisions, whether in family life, career, or faith practices.
- **Community and Belonging:** The Thai church, though a minority religious group, plays an essential role in fostering community and belonging. The creed's affirmation of the church as «one, holy, catholic, and apostolic» can strengthen communal bonds among believers, providing spiritual support, fellowship, and shared mission amidst a broader society shaped by collectivist traditions.
- **Sacraments and Spiritual Growth:** The significance of baptism and forgiveness of sins can be presented in ways that resonate with Thai cultural values of purification and renewal. Integrating these teachings into church practices can encourage believers to embrace spiritual transformation as they journey in faith.
- **Eternal Perspective:** The hope of resurrection and eternal life offers a counter-narrative to contemporary anxieties about the future. By framing this eschatological promise in ways that address Thai believers' concerns – such as personal fulfillment, generational legacies, and spiritual security – church teachings can provide encouragement and perspective on long-term spiritual goals.

Integrating these teachings into contemporary Christian education within the Thai church setting can help believers cultivate a faith that is both spiritually grounded and culturally relevant. By addressing the unique challenges faced by Thai Christians – such as navigating faith in a predominantly Buddhist society, preserving Christian identity amid rapid social change, and fostering unity within diverse congregations – these theological principles can empower individuals to engage with their beliefs in meaningful ways. Strengthening this integration can encourage a faith that is not only doctrinally sound but also adaptable to the realities of Thai daily life, equipping believers to live out their convictions with wisdom, resilience, and a deep sense of community.

## **The Role of Confession in Shaping Daily Christian Life and Spiritual Formation**

Christian education is a teaching ministry of the church which aims to educate and enable people to come to faith, grow in faith, and live out faith in daily life. It is a lifelong journey dedicated to teaching and learning God’s word through many ways. Its purpose is to deepen individuals’ knowledge of God and God’s will, foster spiritual growth, and empower them to live as disciples of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Christian education is both personal and communal. It integrates individual spiritual growth with community-building, ensuring that believers can grow personally while also contributing to the collective faith community. By balancing personal study and communal learning, Christian education ensures that individuals gain a comprehensive understanding of their faith, rooted in both individual experiences and shared wisdom.

In summary, Christian education is a dynamic and multifaceted process that nurtures individual faith while fostering a keen sense of community. It is about growing personally in one’s relationship with God while also engaging with others to build a vibrant and supportive faith community. Therefore, the church must provide relevant teachings that make sense and connect with real-life situations. The church must also provide a safe space and opportunity for learners to explore openly and freely their questions and discuss the teaching of the church and the meaning of Christian faith for their personal lives and their participation in the

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout this section, I will use the terms, “teaching ministry of the church,” “teaching,” “Christian education,” and “educational ministry of the church” interchangeably.

society. Christian education must be Scripture-based, Christ-centered and Holy Spirit empowered.

I view Christian education as a form of spiritual formation because it acknowledges and emphasizes a collaborative divine-human interaction.<sup>12</sup> When I mention ‘spiritual formation,’ I am not just thinking about prayers, contemplative silence, or spiritual direction. Rather, I am thinking about the many different forms of church ministry that cooperate with the work of the Spirit, and how the church can be a medium of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit forms and transforms persons toward the likeness of Christ. Christian education is distinct from other kinds of education in the sense that its goal is the transformation of the whole person into the likeness of Christ (Col 1.28). Educators and leaders of the church can learn the basic principles and methods of education, but the triune God convicts and guides people to change. There are two components to Christian spiritual formation: (1) the work of the Holy Spirit, and (2) the willingness of a person to follow Christ. The formative teaching and practices of the Christian faith community is, therefore, a significant form of spiritual formation.

Christian education must help people to be sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. After all, the Holy Spirit applies, complement, and corrects human teaching.<sup>13</sup> The human quest for truth in education must be seen in relation to God being the source of all truth. The Holy Spirit is the agent working for personal and social transformation among people in the world. Christian educators must therefore be sensitive to the working of the Holy Spirit in the areas of renewal and transformation. This powerful working of the Holy Spirit continues throughout the lives of believers as they are progressively formed and transformed into greater and greater conformity with the image of Christ (2 Cor 3.18).

Christian education is a lifelong process, and effective teaching from a Christian perspective should be powerful, transformative, and life-giving. It must equip

<sup>12</sup> See Robert E. Clark, Lin Johnson, and Allyn K. Sloat, eds., *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991): This book offers various perspectives on the role of Christian education in spiritual formation. The book encourages the incorporation of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, and service into the educational process, fostering a deeper relationship with God. It also emphasizes the importance of building a sense of community and fellowship among students, which supports their spiritual growth and provides a network of encouragement and accountability. Christian education helps individuals to grow spiritually, develop a strong faith foundation, and live out their beliefs in everyday life.

<sup>13</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Spirit-Filled Teaching: The Power of the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry* (Waco: Word Publishing, 1998).

Christians to live a life of faith in response to what the triune God has done, is doing, and will do. Confession plays a vital role in shaping daily Christian life and spiritual formation. It is a practice deeply rooted in biblical teachings, emphasizing the necessity of admitting one's sins to attain spiritual cleansing and renewal.<sup>14</sup> Confession fosters humility and accountability, essential traits for spiritual growth. By acknowledging their sins, believers demonstrate their willingness to accept responsibility for their actions and their desire to realign with their spiritual values. This practice not only reconciles individuals with God but also strengthens the community of believers, as it involves seeking guidance, support, and absolution from fellow Christians. Regular confession helps maintain relational intimacy with God, promotes spiritual maturity, and cultivates a faith deeply rooted in self-awareness and grace.

## Approaches to Incorporating Confessions into Christian Education

Elizabeth Newman's article "Practicing the Nicene Faith" in the book *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness* explores how the Nicene Creed can be lived out in the daily life of the church. Newman emphasizes the importance of the creed in shaping Christian identity and practice, arguing that it is not just a historical document but a living confession that guides worship, theology, and mission. She discusses how the creed's affirmation of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ provides a foundation for understanding God's relationship with humanity and the world. Newman also highlights the role of the creed in fostering unity among different Christian traditions, suggesting that it can serve as a common ground for dialogue and cooperation. Overall, her article encourages evangelicals to embrace the Nicene Creed as a vital part of their faith, integrating its teachings into their spiritual and communal practices.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "The Role of Confession in Christian Faith and Daily Practice," *Divine Narratives*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://divinenarratives.org/the-role-of-confession-in-christian-faith-and-daily-practice/>.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Newman, "Practicing the Nicene Faith," in *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 123–138.



Considering her article, I realize that to effectively incorporate confessions like the Nicene Creed into Christian education, the Thai church can adopt several practical approaches:

- **Curriculum Development:** Design curricula that include the study of the Nicene Creed and its theological significance. This ensures that learners are well-versed in foundational Christian doctrines. Create lesson plans that cover the historical context, theological significance, and key doctrines of the Nicene Creed. Include activities such as memorization, discussion, and reflection on the creed's meaning. Use assessments like quizzes and essays to evaluate students' understanding of the creed and its implications for their faith.
- **Interactive Learning:** Incorporate discussions, workshops, and hands-on activities that actively engage learners with the teachings of the Nicene Creed. For instance, educators can use sorting cards to help students memorize and sequence the lines of the creed while exploring their theological significance. Guided meditative readings followed by reflective discussions can deepen understanding and personal connection. Group dialogues that invite students to share their interpretations and insights further enrich the learning experience. This interactive approach fosters a more accessible and meaningful engagement with the creed, making its content relevant to contemporary learners.<sup>16</sup>
- **Personal Reflection:** There are several meaningful ways to integrate the Nicene Creed into communal worship and educational settings, particularly through practices of personal reflection. First, learners can be encouraged to keep spiritual journals, where they regularly reflect on how the creed influences their personal faith and daily actions. Journaling promotes introspection, helping individuals articulate their beliefs, recognize spiritual growth, and internalize theological truths. Second, educators can provide guided reflection questions that prompt students to engage deeply with the creed's content – exploring its relevance to their identity, ethical choices, and relationship with God. Third, meditative practices can be incorporated, allowing students to contemplate the creed's teachings in silence or through structured prayer. These reflective activities not only

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<sup>16</sup> "Nicene Creed Lesson Plan & Activities," *The Religion Teacher*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.thereligionteacher.com/nicene-creed-lesson-plan-activities/>.

enhance theological understanding but also foster a more personal and transformative engagement with the Christian faith.

- **Community Practices:** Integrate confession into communal worship and liturgical practices, making it a living part of the faith journey. Some possible ways to integrate confession into communal worship and educational settings include: 1) incorporate the Nicene Creed in regular worship services, encouraging communal recitation and reflection; 2) create opportunities for situational confession, where students can confess and reflect on their actions in specific contexts, such as during retreats or special events; and 3) develop programs that integrate faith, values, and learning, ensuring that confession is a central part of the educational experience. This communal aspect reinforces the interconnectedness of the faith community and supports collective spiritual growth.

These approaches can help the Thai church effectively incorporate the Nicene Creed into its educational practices, fostering a deeper understanding and application of Christian faith among its members.

## Conclusion

The Nicene Creed, as a foundational statement of Christian faith, holds significant potential to enrich Christian education within the Thai church. By integrating the creed into educational practices, the church can cultivate a deeper understanding of faith and its practical implications in the lives of believers. Framing Christian education as a form of spiritual formation, this article has argued that the teachings of the creed should resonate with real-life experiences, encouraging both theological reflection and moral development.

Confession – whether private or communal – plays a vital role in this formative process. It enables individuals to become more attuned to the work of the Holy Spirit and to discern the good news they are called to embody and proclaim. When taught in a personal and dynamic manner, confession becomes a living word – an integral part of the believer's spiritual journey. Incorporating the Nicene Creed into Christian education also invites reflection on contextual theology, which emphasizes that God speaks and acts within specific cultural and historical settings. For Thai Christians, this means discerning what it looks like to follow Christ

faithfully in their particular time and place. Thai culture, with its rich traditions, communal values, and spiritual depth, is not a barrier to faith but a gift from God – a context in which the gospel can be embodied and expressed.

Ultimately, integrating the Nicene Creed into Christian education can yield profound spiritual benefits, nurturing a faith rooted in self-awareness, humility, and grace. As the Thai church continues to evolve, it must ensure that its teachings remain both theologically grounded and culturally relevant – guiding believers to live out Christian values and to foster communities marked by compassion, justice, and love.

# Nicene Creed: An African-Jamaican Reformed Missio-cultural Reflection

*Roderick R. Hewitt*

## Introduction

The Nicene Creed is a key pillar in the doctrinal, liturgical, and missional growth of Christianity and its global spread. The ecumenical assembly that formulated the creed aimed to create a faith statement that would resonate with all church communities. Over the centuries, many later adherents regarded it as universal and consistent in its concept and application, despite differences in social, historical, and cultural contexts. A Roman imperial worldview dominated the world where the Nicene Creed was established. Therefore, for people whose nations were affected by Western colonialism and slavery, the Nicene Creed must be recognised as a complex theological statement rooted in contradiction, shaped by religious, political, and cultural forces.

As Christianity spread into other contexts of the Global South, its Eurocentric Western imperial political order was characterised by autocracy, feudalism, and colonialism.<sup>1</sup> In such an environment, diversity in religious and political beliefs and practices was perceived as a threat to national peace and well-being. It could, therefore, be argued that for many centuries, the Nicene Creed and the accompanying evangelisation project were embedded within Western colonisation, and they did so in an environment lacking reciprocity in human relationships between the

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Global South' describes how developing economies, most of which are in the southern hemisphere, cope with the socio-economic impact of globalization. State formation with 'Western-style' democratic models of governance has failed in many contexts to meet the basic needs of people in the global South.

powerful and the powerless. The creed embraced a universal identity and vocation intentionally designed to unify the 'Christian world' under a standard belief system of what constitutes sound Christian doctrine.

## The Reformed Tradition and the Nicene Creed

As part of the universal church, the Reformed tradition embraced a faith understanding and practice that developed from the sixteenth-century Genevan Reformation led by the French theologian John Calvin. It affirms the Nicene Creed as a foundational statement of the Christian faith, establishing the standard for essential beliefs. It connects the Reformed tradition with other Christian traditions through the opening statement «[...] We believe». However, most importantly, it does not limit any future theological development or confession of the Christian faith. Nor does the Reformed tradition elevate the creeds above the centrality of Scripture. Instead, it has faithfully interpreted scriptures and is regarded as a doctrinal standard that safeguards biblical truths. It is also valued as a vital ecumenical theological resource to oppose heresies. It has served for many centuries to inform and influence other Reformed creeds, such as the Augsburg and Heidelberg Confessions, in maintaining doctrinal standards within various communities prone to deviations. The creeds have acted as a faithful partner to the European colonising project, offering ritualisation and routinisation that reinforced European supremacist values through cultural identity, religious authority, and social hierarchies within oppressed slave societies, such as in the British colonial Jamaican territory.

## British Colonialism Within the Caribbean

British rule in Jamaica commenced in 1655, and the Christianisation of Africans in Jamaica began shortly after the trade brought enslaved Africans to provide labour for the plantations. In the mid-seventeenth century, British imperial powers shaped the Anglo-Caribbean world, competing with other European imperial powers to assert ownership over Caribbean lands.

The British colonisers defined the identity of the peoples and the lands they inhabited for centuries as «the West Indies and the people as West Indians». This designation stemmed from a misguided belief that they had discovered a western

route to India in their quest to reach the Indies. The term transformed into a colonial and imperial construct for categorising and defining colonised indigenous peoples along with those of African and Asian ancestry, rooted in an inherent contradiction.

This mass movement into the Caribbean resulted in a mosaic of ethnic diversity. This ethnic diversity with competing cultural traditions also became a distinctive feature of Caribbean Christianity. Within the Anglo-Caribbean context, Christianity is experienced in a contested religious tradition because it was transported and transplanted through partnership with colonialism, imperialism, and Eurocentrism. European culture in its colonial project within the Caribbean made the subject of race central as a political-economic strategy that divides rather than unites peoples, and designates those required to provide cheap labour as racially inferior. This article is written from the perspective of the Afro-Jamaican context, a subset of the wider Anglo-Caribbean region, in which the legacy of a Eurocentric system of thought and epistemologies has led to a White person's way of life being perceived as superior to that of African descent. This permeated every facet of colonial society, in which Christianity and its accompanying pedagogy, as outlined in the Nicene Creed, were deeply embedded.

## The Reformed Missionary Heritage in Colonial Jamaica

The Africans brought their strong oral tradition by sharing their religious beliefs, myths, and practices. Their forced contact with British culture inevitably led to an acculturative process in which they 'pick and choose' what they needed to survive in a strictly controlled socio-political environment. The Church of England (Anglican tradition), which was the state church, did not regard the evangelisation of Africa as their priority. A chaplaincy ministry to the colonialists was their prime mission. The Nicene Creed was central to their liturgy and worship, yet it had no impact on their relationship with the oppressed and enslaved Africans. It was promoted as a statement of faith without practical implications for Christian witness. Its use of the Nicene Creed excluded the acceptance of the enslaved African-Jamaicans from participating in their environment of Christian worship and witness.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> M. N. Beasley, *Christian Liturgy and the Creation of British Slave Societies 1650-1780*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2006).

According to Jane Dempsey Douglass,

English-speaking Calvinist people have generally called themselves Presbyterians, after the form of government by presbyters (pastors and elders), the most common type of government in Reformed churches. Most churches descended from continental European Reformed churches still retain the name Reformed, and the term is also widely used to designate the whole family related to the Genevan Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

The European Reformed heritage has evolved and adapted with diverse and multiple identities shaped by different socio-political contexts. Therefore, the term is not fixed or unchanging. Each definition of 'Reformed identity' reflects a biased perspective from those whose interests are served—those who set the agenda and define the concept. The Reformed identity of the Jamaican church developed from the mission work of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Scottish Reformed Mission. The LMS, established in 1795, identified itself as a catholic, ecumenical, and evangelical mission entity, intended to be non-denominational.

However, the movements required support from existing churches, which led the British Congregational and Presbyterian churches to adopt the LMS as their Missionary Society. This action bestowed upon the movement a Reformed identity. Their mission work in Jamaica began in 1834 with the founding of the Congregational Church. The Presbyterian Church of Jamaica was established through the efforts of Scottish missionaries from the Glasgow and Edinburgh missionary societies in 1824, which the Church of Scotland later took over.

The arrival of non-conformist missionaries, such as the Moravians, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, working within a slave society with limited literacy, demonstrated less allegiance to a creedal tradition, despite occasionally using creeds in their liturgy. The Presbyterian and Congregational Missions in Jamaica also emphasised the shorter Apostles' Creed, which is considered older and dates back to the second century, unlike the Nicene Creed, formulated in AD 325 and later expanded in AD 381 at Constantinople. Although the Apostles of Jesus did not write the Apostles' Creed, it is centred on the apostolic teachings. The brevity of the Apostles' Creed aims to summarise the Christian faith for believers ready for baptism. In contrast to the Nicene Creed, it does not seek to define or explain differing beliefs. Instead, the Apostles' Creed presents a more personal confession of faith: «I believe», unlike the Nicene Creed's corporate affir-

<sup>3</sup> J. D. Douglass, "A Reformed Perspective on the Ecumenical Movement," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 18 (1996): 19, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.oldsite.religion-online.org/showarticleabf0.html?title=421>, 21.

mation, «We believe». In the early Reformed tradition, the Apostles' Creed served as a comprehensive summary of the Christian faith derived from Scripture, affirming key doctrines such as the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and the universality of the church. The Reformed tradition has traditionally used the creed to differentiate itself from Roman Catholicism, emphasising «justification by faith alone». The arrival of Reformed missionaries in Jamaica incorporated the Apostles' Creed into worship and liturgical catechisms. However, this chapter suggests that the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, the two dominant creeds within the Protestant church environment in Jamaica, played a role in advancing the colonisation project.

## **The Reformed Identity and Intercultural Communication**

The chapter posits that the Achilles' heel of the Reformed churches' mission in Jamaica has been their slowness in embracing the multilingual context in which they operated, and this has led to their arrested development in Jamaica. With English being the dominant language of religion, politics, commerce, and security, it evolved as the language of «domination and power over others».

The African-Jamaican languages evolved into what is now known as Patois or the Jamaican language; however, they never gained respect or acceptance from the church. Language shapes culture. The Reformed missionaries did not focus on learning the people's language. Instead, it was the oppressed individuals who faced the challenge of learning the language of the missionaries. Because African-Jamaicans were considered functionally illiterate by British educational standards, their oral traditions were disrespected, leading to the mistaken belief that the opposite of literacy is illiteracy.

This failure to recognise and respect the language and culture of African-Jamaicans became a significant barrier that hampered the accessibility of the gospel to their deep cultural systems. It was further worsened by the hidden texts of missionaries who came from a White supremacist European culture, whose communication of the gospel was unaffected by their ingrained European socio-political biases and prejudices. Therefore, their mission work could be contradictory; their expected missional outcomes overlooked the people's lived experiences. The Reformed churches did not see their mission as one aimed at liberating the socio-po-



litical and economic status of the local community. Their mission was «evangelisation through education». Their mandate was to spread the evangelical faith of the gospel. The evangelical faith they taught contained the following features:

- Faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ
- The need for Godly righteousness, sober life, and holy living
- Emphasis on the futuristic eschatology and promise of life after death
- The need for forgiveness of sins through repentance and,
- Condemnation of sex outside of marriage.<sup>4</sup>

This teaching summarises much of the Nicene Creed's content; however, the pedagogy used to communicate with the African-Jamaicans lacked intercultural communication, which meant the creed did not resonate with the lived experiences of the people. The missio-cultural critique of the Nicene Creed within the Jamaican Reformed context calls for de-centring the Eurocentric system of thought and epistemologies through intentional decolonial hermeneutics in the church's ministry and mission. European colonialism's alliance with the Western missionary movement led to a misguided approach that has hurt the understanding of the Triune God, which is central to the creed, and continues to shape the church's ministry and mission, as well as its community of evangelised believers.

An inherent contradiction existed in the creed's focus on the nature of God, how the *imago Dei* embedded dignity in all human life, and how it was transported and transplanted in the lives of colonised and enslaved peoples who came under the missionary movement. However, the legacy of the Nicene creed prophetically calls into question any context that embraces systemic dehumanisation and violence, especially among the marginalised, crying out for life because the Triune God of life desires fullness of life for all (John 10.10). Within such a landscape of troubled waters, the chapter argues for an enculturative process of localising the creed. There is an urgent need to move beyond the desire for uniformity and the mere regurgitation of words within worship spaces to a process that demands the incarnation of those words, thereby investing them with life-affirming meaning.

The creeds' misappropriation within the Jamaican colonial society through an «umbilical cord» relational link between the church and the British Empire ensured

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<sup>4</sup> F J. Osbourne & G. Johnson, *Coastlands & Islands: First Thoughts on Caribbean Church History* (Kingston: UTCWI, 1972).

that the allegiance to the beliefs of the creed was synonymous with one's loyalty to the British crown and empire.

## The Post-colonial Landscapes

The Europeanisation of African-Jamaican consciousness and culture has continued since the early days of African arrivals and the guerrilla warfare fought against the British colonial system by the Maroons. This was followed by uprisings, including the 1830 revolts led by Baptist Deacon Sam Sharpe and later the Morant Bay Rebellion, led by Deacon Paul Bogle. Despite intense colonial repression of African-Jamaican decolonial resistance, their oppressive system contributed to the rise of Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887–1940) and his Black Consciousness movement in the 1920s. These uprisings were part of a continuous decolonial African resistance, employing both passive and active strategies to oppose the imperial system of oppression.

Marcus Mosiah Garvey, a pan-Africanist Jamaican, developed a Black theological perspective that challenged the universal claims of the Nicene Creed. At the centre of his critique was his rejection of the White supremacist European underpinning and portrayal of God, which they offered as the universal standard. He argued that for people of African descent, their understanding and experience of God is that God is Black.<sup>5</sup> He therefore called for a decolonial interpretation of Eurocentric Christianity by Africans to one that empowers and offers fullness of life to Black peoples. Unlike traditional Christianity, which places emphasis on the after-life or eternal life, Garvey argued that the oppressed Black people needed liberation in this life. Therefore, a liberative God's mission is to provide transformative, life-changing economic, social, and political redemption. Garvey's famous rallying cry was, «Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand» (Ps 68.31).<sup>6</sup> Africa was Garvey's organising and operating principle. His fresh and radical Afrocentric biblical hermeneutics affirmed that the Blackness of God influenced the early Rastafari community to identify the Emperor of Ethiopia as their chosen messiah.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> L. N. Erskine, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007) 33.

<sup>6</sup> L. N. Erskine, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology*. Rastafari sought to offer a counter spirituality and understanding of salvation, especially for people of African descent.

<sup>7</sup> Sw. Anand Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom: Proverbs in Jamaican Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 8.

## Rastafari and the Nicene Creed

The dominant role played by the Eurocentric missionaries who founded churches within Jamaican society also contributed to the rise of Rastafari.<sup>8</sup> Within the contemporary Jamaican environment, Rastafari serves as the most potent indigenizing force and movement, representing the most consistent and radical Afrocentric Christian sect that sets the agenda for influencing social and cultural change, especially among young people.<sup>9</sup> Rastafari is not a homogeneous religious and cultural movement. It has no central headquarters that issues veto power and authoritative pronouncements or decrees over its belief system. The foundations of Rastafari religion were laid by Garvey, who was not a Rastafari but a Methodist by upbringing. However, his African philosophical discourse led him to embrace a substantial Afrocentric reinterpretation of colonial Christianity and its cultural subservience to the European worldview.

Following Garvey's teachings on fidelity to the God of Ethiopia, some Rastafari have expressed their faith through affiliation with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For example, the late Bob Marley, a Rastafari, became a baptised member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church near the end of his life.<sup>10</sup> This church is a faith community whose identity and vocation are centred on confessing and living out the historic creeds, including the Nicene Creed. The former Emperor of Ethiopia, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, belonged to this church and was its Patron. When Bob Marley died in 1981, priests from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church conducted his official funeral using an orthodox funeral liturgy that did not accommodate traditional Rastafari religious rites.

Rastafari functions as an Afro-Christian hybrid indigenous sect because its faith was formed, shaped, influenced, and developed in reaction to European missionary Christianity and the church as a religious institution. Therefore, Rastafari represents an epistemological break with the classical missionary model of Eurocentric Western Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Within Rastafari, there is an inherent contradictory relationship with creeds such as the Nicene Creed. On one hand, they are part of a

<sup>8</sup> R. R. Hewitt, *Church and Culture*, (Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications, 2012), 30–34

<sup>9</sup> R. R. Hewitt, *Rastafari Counter-Liturgical Response to Eurocentric Missionary Christianity in Jamaica in Liturgy and Identity* (Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> R. R. Hewitt, "Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* in Conversation with de Gruchy's *Olive Agenda*," in *Alternation Special Edition*, no. 14 (2015) 169–189.

<sup>11</sup> P. Sherlock & H. Bennett, *The Story of the Jamaican People* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998).

creedal confessing church, and on the other hand, they are fierce critics of creeds that perpetrate a Eurocentric vision of the world. Rastafari Afrocentric spirituality profoundly impacts the Jamaican religio-cultural context of hybridity and contradiction, prioritising God's justice and liberative character in overcoming threats to the fullness of life. It is fiercely monotheistic, but its concept of God is nuanced, such as Jah (Jahovah), which emphasises God's immanence within individuals. Their understanding of Jesus does not follow what the European model communicated because such a Jesus has been compromised through the oppressive Babylonian system of colonialism and slavery. Jesus is best experienced through the life and work of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie. In addition, Rastafari reject the European missionary Christianity's portrayal of the Nicene Creed as conceptually mentally enslaving and controlling. Hewitt argues that:

Although Rastafari embraces an Afrocentric identity, it employs a radical discontinuity with African religions that embrace polytheism. At the root of its identity is an Afrocentric ideology that seeks to unmask the false foundation of life used by the 'Babylonian Europeans' in their strategy of colonising Jamaica. It has unleashed attacks on all fronts of the cultural landscape to neutralise the dominant Eurocentric bias within the local culture.<sup>12</sup>

The birth of the Rastafari movement in 1930, followed by the workers' revolt in 1938, became telling signposts to the British colonial government that their days were numbered. The fallout from the Second World War on Britain and its empire led to its political and economic retreat within the Caribbean region and the rise of the USA sphere of influence. The failure of the West Indian Federation project led to the independence movements among the British territories.

Jamaica gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, while the United States' political, religious, cultural, and economic influence in the Caribbean region grew stronger. Therefore, it is now more fitting to use the term 'Euro-American' influence, which masks cultural hegemony and has a damaging impact on people of African descent whose identity was sacrificed to serve Western imperial interests. Colonialism and slavery do not willingly relinquish their political, social, economic, and religious power; instead, they mutate and transform into other hidden forms of exerting power and influence. The advent of independence led to the emergence of local political actors; however, the system remained essentially unchanged, maintaining its pyramid-like structure of power relations.

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<sup>12</sup> Hewitt, *Church and Culture*, 33.

The Jamaican Reformed Churches, through the Congregational Union of Churches and the Presbyterian Church of Jamaica, opted for union in 1965, hoping to arrest their dysfunctional model of ministry and mission bequeathed by the missionary heritage.<sup>13</sup> This model has become overly dependent on external theological, economic, and human resources. Their union became the United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman, but failed to respond with genuine enculturation through meaningful ministry and mission to the African-Jamaican religious experience.

The religious and cultural influence of Rastafari on Jamaican society continues to grow, while churches founded on European missionary heritage experience a decline in numbers. The liturgical rites that served the church during the colonial era no longer satisfy the needs of the people. Their standard of participation in worship, through hymns for the church hymnary, written prayers, and reciting the creed, was facilitated by a clergy-led paradigm in which the (mostly male) clergy occasionally became the sole leaders of worship, inadvertently contributing to the de-skilling and disempowering of local congregations' gifts. To a considerable extent, the colonial era of worship required African-Jamaicans to 'wear a mask' to conceal their multiple spiritual identities and felt needs.

The Rastafari aimed to bridge this religio-cultural gap and void by creating a counter-European worship tradition and rituals that affirmed their identity, without centralised headquarters, cathedrals, or temples to house their faith. Their faith was an Exodus «Movement of Jah People». Through the compelling medium of reggae music, they communicate their faith and utilise the Jamaican language of patois to connect with people, especially those from economically deprived communities. This challenged the Eurocentric musical heritage and the dominance of standard English as the official language within the church and society.

According to the Reformed scholar Ashley Smith,

Except for the innovations introduced in worship services by the more daring leaders of public worship, worship is, to a great extent, little more than a few meaningless motions for most of our people. [...]To get people to share the worship experience across gaps in age, wealth, race, and denominational traditions, we will have to devise ways of capturing people's moods as expressed in their poetry, dance, music, and drama.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hewitt, *Church and Culture*, 128–129.

<sup>14</sup> A. Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections on the Caribbean Church* (Mandeville: Mandeville Publisher, 1984), 47.

The role of the Nicene Creed as a pedagogical tool for faith education within the Reformed Church failed because it was inconsistent, unlike the Rastafari movement, which engaged in a process of routinization that involved making theological adaptations in response to religious, social, political, and economic resistance within the Jamaican context. The Nicene Creed remained a confessional element of worship rather than functioning as a life-affirming creed that invites the people to resist imperial oppression.

## The Contemporary Relevance of the Nicene Creed

This chapter concludes that the Nicene Creed within the Jamaican reformed tradition's ministry and mission model must move from merely cerebral to genuinely transformative creedal hermeneutics for contemporary relevance. This approach will better equip worshippers to model its values, which remain indispensable to the mission action of the ecclesial community. Failure to do so renders the Christian faith a potted plant rather than one with authentic roots thriving within the local context.<sup>15</sup> Although the creed sought to establish a universal standard of acceptance on Christian doctrine, its intolerance towards the plurality of faith and its experiences within the Jamaican context shaped by imperial and colonial forces of oppression require the church to have a genuine enculturative baptism into the African-Jamaicans' religious retention informed by the indigenising Afrocentric Revivalists, Rastafari, and Pentecostals' religious practices.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A.A. Smith, *Emergence from Innocence* (Mandeville: Eureka Press, 1991), 52–63

<sup>16</sup> Olive Senior, *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage* (Jamaica: Twin Guinep Publishers, 2003).



# A New Song: Nicene Elements in Hymns at ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ

*David Kim-Cragg*

## Introduction

What can Indigenous Christianity tell us about the place of creeds in Christian life at the edges of Christendom and of a possible post-Christendom Christianity? This paper addresses this question by examining the advent of hymns sung in the language of the ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ (Maskekowiiniwak) on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in the mid-nineteenth century. As the church reflects on the historical Council of Nicaea and the creed it produced, the process of how elements of that creed reached a community of Indigenous people in their home at the heart of the North American continent has things to tell us about the nature and persistence of creedal Christianity through disparate historical, geographical, and cultural spaces. This article contrasts the Nicene Creed, Christendom's formative written creed, with the oral and highly enculturated adoption and adaptation suggested by the singing of the above-mentioned hymns. It explores how these hymns were a collaborative creation that may have impacted settler missionaries' faith and the faith of the church that sent them. Like the return of water to the ocean, the story of the journey of creedal elements from Nicaea to ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ (Kinosêw Sîpîy) suggests a return to a pre-biblical witness, a Christianity that was more often sung than it was transcribed and it is possible that these Indigenous Christians helped shape the current understanding of creedal faith in the United Church of Canada.

The narrative of this article revolves around the printing in 1841 of a hymn-book in ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ ᑭᓂᓂᑦᓴ (cahkasinahikan), transliterated as 'spirit markers' and often



referred to as Cree syllabics, a syllabic alphabet used by various Indigenous communities in present-day Canada. The hymnbook remains the oldest extant example of the only syllabic script known to have been developed in the territory now covered by Canada.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the hymnbook is the first book ever printed northwest of the Great Lakes.<sup>2</sup> But for church history, the hymnbook is significant because it represents the distillation of a pivotal encounter with Christianity yielding insights into the meaning of Christian creeds for new believers and missionaries far from the centre of Christendom.

We will start by introducing the community that received this special gift of a hymnbook. We will then examine how the creedal elements that were systematized, formalized, and inscribed in the Nicene Creed made their way to the the ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ (Maskekowiyniwak) who sung them on the banks of the ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ (Kinosêw Sîpiy). We will explore what the existence of the hymnbook and its contents tells us about how creedal elements were selected, adopted, adapted, and transformed by the community. Finally, we will examine how this process explains some of the unique aspects of Canadian Christianity today.

## Author's Location, Methodology and Scope of the Article

I, the author, am not an Indigenous person. I have not lived in or had any direct relations with the ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ (Maskekowiyniwak) of present-day Norway House. For this article, I have relied entirely on the written record available in libraries and online sources. These sources represent Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars but some of the non-Indigenous contributions are susceptible to negative bias regarding Indigenous people and so I have stated when a source is of non-Indigenous origin.

I descend from European settlers who have benefitted from centuries of violence against Indigenous people that has dispossessed them from their land and culture. And I am a member of a church that is directly implicated in grave injustices against Indigenous individuals, communities, and cultures. Notably, my church, the United Church of Canada, ran thirteen residential schools and absorbed

<sup>1</sup> Winona Stevenson, "Calling Badger and the Symbols of the Spirit Language: The Cree Origins of the Syllabic System," *Oral History Forum*, vol. 19–20, (1999–2000): 19–24.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Peel, "How the Bible Came to the Cree," *Alberta Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (1958).

the legacy of at least two others, which were condemned by the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in its 2015 report summary as having committed cultural genocide.<sup>3</sup> From birth, my view of history has been significantly distorted by this legacy and I am often reminded that I live with a negative bias towards Indigenous people, a bias which I strive to overcome but at times unknowingly and unwillingly perpetuate.

Currently, my church, along with others in Canada, is making efforts to repent of this history and live into right relations with Indigenous people, many of whom are members of these churches. In 1986, the United Church apologized and asked for forgiveness for the ways it «imposed [settler] civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel» and «twisted and blurred» the image of the Creator in the process. This apology was received by Indigenous members of the church as «an important step forward».<sup>4</sup> In 1998 another apology was offered «for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused». In 2012, the crest of the church was changed to reflect the important contribution of the Indigenous members of the United Church to its life and faith. This included the addition of the Mohawk words «Akwe nia'tetewâ:neren» meaning «all our relations».<sup>5</sup>

This chapter deploys sophisticated postcolonial theories and draws on the work of respected non-Indigenous ethnographers to frame its understanding of the history it presents. Notably, the concept of a «contact zone» put forward by Mary Louise Pratt is used to imagine a «space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving condition of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict».<sup>6</sup> Pratt argued that this space was one of transformation, not only for the Indigenous people that inhabited them but for colonizers as well. Equally important and perhaps even more relevant for an understanding of the geographical and

<sup>3</sup> "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," 1, accessed 16 May 2025, [https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/Executive\\_Summary\\_English\\_Web.pdf](https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> "1986 Apology to Indigenous Peoples, and "The 1988 Response," The United Church of Canada, accessed 16 May 2025, <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/apologies-response-crest.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> "Revisions to The United Church of Canada Crest Reflect Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples," The United Church of Canada, accessed 16 May 2025, <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/apologies-response-crest.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge Press, 1992), 6.





Empire had granted them exclusive rights to trade in the land dubbed Ruperts Land. It is here that this community came in contact with missionaries from the Methodist faith who introduced them in a distinctive Methodist way to elements of the Nicene Creed in the form of hymns. Let us now turn our attention to how the Creed of Nicaea came about and how it eventually travelled from a city between the Black and Aegean Seas to be carried by Methodists missionaries to the community of Swampy Cree in the middle of the North American continent.

## Nicene Creed and its Journey to Pᓄᓴ° ᓵᐱ+ (Kinosêw Sîpîy)

One thousand five hundred years before the first Methodist Missionary arrived at Fish River, in a land removed by thousands of kilometers and separated by vast oceans, the leader of an ancient empire convened a council to codify the core teachings of the Christian religion. Empires and codified religious belief systems were things that Christians of this time and place took for granted and this was reflected in the form of the creed that the council produced, a written statement spelling out the foundational precepts to which all those who desired the privilege of the Christian name were expected to adhere. This was a watershed moment for the church. We might even call it the headwater of Western Christendom; the systematized and authoritative version of Christianity linked to Western culture and power.

Though the creed that emerged from the Council of Nicaea had the appearance of a legal document, this is not the form that all creeds in the history of the faith had taken. Prior to the Council of Nicaea creedal elements of the faith were often embedded in song. The song of Miriam that proclaimed the God's role in the liberation of the Hebrews at the Red Sea found in the Book of Exodus (15.21) may be earliest example of a creed in Christian and Jewish religious traditions. It may indeed comprise the oldest extant verses in the Hebrew canon, preserved in song long before they were committed to writing. Prior to the creation of the New Testament, many elements central to what later became known as the creeds of the church were likewise preserved as song or poetry to be performed at specific moments in the church's life, such as baptism.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Routledge: 2014), 13–14.

Scholars have argued that these creedal elements were not the work of religious authorities so much as products of the community working together. As the church historian J.N.D. Kelly puts it, «they owed their immediate authority, no less than their individual stamp, to the liturgy of the local church in which they had emerged». Prior to the great conciliar creeds of which the Nicene is the prime example, the practices and experiences of the Christian religion were embedded in the communities and their culture.<sup>15</sup> The objective of the Emperor Constantine in calling the council and framing the Nicene Creed, Kelly contends, «was to consolidate the church, which represented in his eyes the spiritual aspect of his empire, on the basis of the widest possible measure of doctrinal unity».<sup>16</sup> But it also limited creedal expressions of the faith in important ways.

The act of condensing a religious or spiritual identity to something resembling a legal document suggests that cultural and performative aspects of that identity are somehow less important. Creedal absolutism is a symptom of such a view. «The creedal absolutist», says historian John Leith, «is likely to believe that propositional statements are fully adequate vehicles for truth». That is to say that religion can be known in a «final and definitive way» through its statements of belief and that true belief can be discerned based upon «full agreement of the truth propositionally stated».<sup>17</sup> This attitude leaves little scope for diversity of expression and understanding and tends to play into the hands of those in power who define the meaning of such statements for everyone. Indeed, the Nicene Creed played an important role in the imperial project of Christendom, a project that contributed greatly the unjust suffering of Indigenous people in present-day Canada.<sup>18</sup>

The Christians of the Nicene Council inscribed Christian truth propositions for use as a yardstick to ensure conformity and adherence to a central religious and political authority. The Nicene Creed, particularly the assertion of the *homoousios*, reads like a list of philosophical propositions and historical facts. Once committed to paper, this list could be promulgated across the empire and used as a legal document to command conformity. Political authority behind the creed was a given. Objective truth was assumed. The cultural packaging of that message was taken for granted and became invisible to those with power. This created fault lines in the

<sup>15</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 205.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* 211.

<sup>17</sup> John Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: Knox Press: 1982), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, *An Ecumenical Confession of Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press: 1979), 28.

church which often opened along cultural divides. Whether insensitivity to different cultural nuances may have had something to do with the early Christian schisms and adoption of Islam in Arabic speaking communities is a question that has been raised by at least one scholar.<sup>19</sup>

With the collapse of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, the inscribed and propositional approach to religious truth persisted through the Medieval period as did the commitment to the central authority of the Pope in Rome. Theology was considered the queen of the sciences and treated as an objective endeavour that transcended cultural particularities. When religious authority and truth were contested during the Protestant Reformation, greater cultural expression of the Gospel was permitted through the translation of Scripture into the vernacular but the assumption that religion was something inscribed and objective remained largely unchallenged.

While the centrality of certain creeds such as the Nicene Creed lessened for Protestant churches, the emphasis on the written word increased. The ability of believers to read the Bible became the ultimate measure of true faith, while creeds remained useful for concentrating and interpreting the biblical text. And the printed word continued to be closely associated with spiritual/temporal authority. In England, one translation of the Bible was 'authorized' by the monarch of the land. Adherence to this translation was not only an important indication of religious orthodoxy but also political loyalty. The Church of England produced its *Book of Common Prayer* at about the same time, a standard for Christian liturgy, which also contained the Nicene Creed and other accepted creeds of the church, all written down and used as a standard of correct worship and political obedience for the national church.

When Methodism took shape as a movement to reform the Church of England in the late eighteenth century, a shift occurred. While the Bible remained central to Christian belief and practice, hymns came to do more of the work of communicating the propositional truths of Christianity.<sup>20</sup> John Wesley codified the central beliefs of the Methodist movement in the *Twenty-five Articles of Religion*, but it was the hymn lyrics of his brother Charles which were most effective in this role. People encountered and engaged with them through song in public worship more often than they sat down to read theology. Thus, the relationship between creed and

<sup>19</sup> Ovey N. Mohammed, *Muslim-Christian Relations: Past, Present, Future* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Clarke, *British Methodist Hymnody* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group: 2018), 1.

culture, particularly the culture and aesthetics of music, became more obvious in the lives of more Christians. The intellectual and emotive aspect of Christianity were combined in a practical activity through weekly liturgy and in daily spiritual practice.<sup>21</sup> It has been said that Methodism was «born in song» and has always «sung its creed».<sup>22</sup>

When Methodism migrated to North America it kept its emphasis on song. Revival meetings, often led by Methodists, relied heavily on the experience of communal singing and on hymns to communicate what was deemed the central tenets of Christianity. Numbers of Indigenous people were introduced to Christianity at these camp meetings. And hymns were used extensively by those called to engage Indigenous people with the gospel.<sup>23</sup> In the northeastern area of British North America hundreds of hymns were translated into Anishinaabemowin and were soon published in a series of hymnbooks. These hymns in their published form were the product of the efforts of Indigenous Christian leaders and missionaries who adapted their initial efforts based on feedback from the Indigenous communities who sang them. A contribution to a Methodist paper, *The Christian Guardian*, by one Indigenous missionary illustrates this process:

Dear Brothers, - It has occurred to our minds that it would be profitable for our Chippeway Indian Societies to have a newly translated hymn inserted in the *Guardian* every week, that they may have an opportunity of singing them in their religious meetings, and when a number have been translated they can be added to the collection of Chippeway hymns which are now out of print. In the meantime, we can make any alterations or improvements that may be suggested. For this purpose I will undertake to furnish you weekly a Chippeway hymn for insertion in a corner of your paper.<sup>24</sup>

Missionaries discovered that hymns were most effective in attracting the attention of Indigenous people and conveying the essence of the religion they sought to impart.<sup>25</sup> Translated hymns were not only a draw for Indigenous people, they literally put words in the mouths of non-Indigenous missionaries who struggled to express themselves in Indigenous language. «[Non-Indigenous] missionaries were completely dependent on the little Ojibwe (sic) books to command an audience», claims

<sup>21</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> *The Methodist Hymn Book*, (London: Methodist Church, 1933), iii.

<sup>23</sup> Becca Whitla, "Hymnody in Missionary Lands: A Decolonial Critique," in *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions*, eds. Lamport, Forrest and Whaley (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 286.

<sup>24</sup> *Christian Guardian*, April 24, 1835.

<sup>25</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 69.



McNally, because it was sometimes the only way they knew how to put coherent sentences together.<sup>26</sup> For Indigenous people, on the other hand, the hymnbooks played quite a different role. Favourite hymns were committed to memory and hymnbooks served only as occasional reminders of the words. It should be emphasized that for Indigenous communities, hymnody was an oral tradition and hymns were subject to «alterations and improvements» as they were sung and re-sung in the unique style and words of a given community.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Indigenous singers made them their own.

## ᑭᓂᓂᓂ ᑭᓂᓂᓂ (Kinosêw Sîpîy): The Middle Ground

Though by the early 1800s Methodist missionaries had been active for many decades among the Anishinaabeg in the area of the lower Great Lakes, none as yet had reached the ᑭᓂᓂᓂ ᑭᓂᓂᓂ (Maskekowiiniwak) of ᑭᓂᓂᓂ ᑭᓂᓂᓂ (Kinosêw Sîpîy). This is not to say that the Muskego knew nothing of Christianity. They had been trading with the Hudson's Bay Company for two centuries and would have been familiar with the religion of the newcomers. They most certainly would have heard stories about the workings of missionaries to the east and south, as well, through the extensive trade networks that crisscrossed the continent. There were Catholic missionaries nearby, who also would have been a source of knowledge of the new faith.

Methodists were introduced directly to the world of the ᑭᓂᓂᓂ ᑭᓂᓂᓂ (Maskekowiiniwak) when the Hudson's Bay Company formally requested Methodist missionaries for Rupert's Land in the hopes that their presence might be able to keep the Swampy Cree and other Indigenous peoples closer to their trading posts.<sup>28</sup> This was a purely self-interested move by the Hudson's Bay Company as it depended on the Muskego for their trade in furs. But there was at the time also a great interest in missionaries on the part of Indigenous people who were eager to learn as much as possible about western ways and gain the benefits of a western education.

The central trading post for the company in the vast territory known as Rupert's Land that the British crown had granted for their monopoly in the fur trade

<sup>26</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Mason, *Travels in the Shining Island* (Toronto: Dundurn Press: 1996), 28.

was Norway House, a small settlement on the northeastern shore of Lake Winnipeg. The lives of the ᑭᓄᐸᐅᐃᓂᐱᖅ (Maskekowiyiniwak) had come to revolve around trade with the company. As a result, it seems, they had set up a more or less permanent community at ᑭᓄᐸᐅᐃᓂᐱᖅ (Kinosêw Sîpîy) within easy reach of the trading post. It was to this location that a missionary by the name of James Evans was sent to bring the Gospel and convey some of the benefits of ‘civilization.’

Evans had been collaborating with Indigenous missionaries in the work among the Anishinaabeg of Upper Canada for almost two decades by this point and had spent a great deal of time translating hymns. He had developed some fluency in Anishinaabemowin and had begun to think deeply about how Indigenous languages with their very different range of sounds from English could be expressed in a writing system developed specifically for them. While it has long been claimed that Evans single-handedly developed a syllabic system of writing for Indigenous languages, this claim is contested. There is extensive documentary evidence to show that throughout his career in missions Evans collaborated closely with Indigenous partners. Some Indigenous interviewees and scholars insist that he learned the syllabary from them.<sup>29</sup> Others suggest the syllabary was the product of a collaborative process.<sup>30</sup> What is known for sure is that very shortly after his arrival at Norway House, he published a hymnbook for the Muskego language using that new syllabary, the ᑭᐩᓂᐱᐅᐃᐅ (cahkasinahikan) or spirit markers. The hymn translations and the syllabary were shared accomplishments drawing from the contributions of Evans, the Indigenous missionaries with him, and the people of ᑭᐩᓂᐱᐅᐃᐅ (Kinosêw Sîpiy) themselves.

The means that Evans used to produce the physical hymnbook is a fascinating story in itself. Scavenging materials from the fur traders and his environment he managed to fashion a typeset for the unique writing system, as well as the paper, the ink, and the press. The result was simultaneously the oldest extant printing of «Cree syllabics» that we are aware of and the first book ever to be published north-west of the Great Lakes. But the significance of this event for our study is that it

<sup>29</sup> Stevenson, "Calling Badger and the Symbols of the Spirit Language: The Cree Origins of the Syllabic System," *Oral History Forum* 19–20 (1999–2000); Geoffrey Wilfong-Pritchard, "'An Answer to Prayer': James Evans, William Moon, and the Cree Syllabary" (unpublished manuscript in the author's possession); Verne Dusenberry, *The Montana Cree: A Study in Religious Persistence*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998, 271.

<sup>30</sup> Samara mikiwin Harp, "Origins of Cree Syllabics," Library and Archives Canada Blog, March 9, 2023, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://thediscoverblog.com/2023/03/09/origins-of-cree-syllabics/>

provides us with a distilled example of the ways that hymns and the singing of them were themselves central to the Christian faith in this time and place.

The specific historical context of this expression of Christianity needs to be understood to properly appreciate the significance of this event. Postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt emphasized the ways in which Indigenous people encountered and contested colonial cultural influences on an unequal playing field.<sup>31</sup> The context at ᑭᓂᓂᑦ ᑭᓂᑦ (Kinosêw Sîpîy), however, may be closed to the «middle ground» described by Richard White, a place where meanings and relationships and trade were negotiated on more or less equal terms.<sup>32</sup> Though Rupert's Land was designated by the British Crown as the exclusive trade zone for the Hudson's Bay Company and prevented other European powers from participating, ᑭᓂᓂᑦ ᑭᓂᑦ (Kinosêw Sîpîy) was not yet under colonial control. The British had no soldiers in the area to enforce its own rule or an «authorized version» of Christianity. The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the trade depended on reciprocity and good will, a state of affairs that would continue up until Canadian confederation in 1867.

Missionaries, then, when they arrived in 1841 did not wield excessive influence by virtue of their alignment with colonial power. The Christian creeds could not be imposed. This created a context more closely resembling first-century New Testament Christianity at the edges of the Roman Empire than fourth-century Christianity forged at its heart. The Christian belief system was not presented in an official document to be accepted or rejected in toto by the ᑭᓂᓂᑦ ᑭᓂᑦ (Maskekowiyniwak). Instead, creedal elements were embedded in cultural fragments such as songs and accepted piece by piece as they made sense to those who were free to receive them or not.

Of course, the hymns that missionaries introduced, both in content and form, had a colonizing thrust. As the apology of the United Church made clear, they almost always «confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ» and «imposed [their] civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel».<sup>33</sup> Methodist hymnody at the time emphasized the «reign of God» in terms that mirrored the reign of European monarchs over their colonial subjects. It also spoke in stark terms of the dire need to convert «pagans» in order to save them from a demeaned life in this world and eternal damna-

<sup>31</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

<sup>32</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*.

<sup>33</sup> 1986 Apology to Indigenous People.

tion in the next.<sup>34</sup> Missionaries also assumed that their tunes and ways of singing should be adopted – a reflection of their own culture which they assumed to be superior.<sup>35</sup> But the translations in Indigenous language such as those found in the ᑭᓂᓂᑦ ᑭᓂᑭᑦ (Kinosêw Sîpîy) hymnbook tend to soften these edges.<sup>36</sup> And the singing of them was modified in ways befitting the Indigenous musical aesthetic.<sup>37</sup>

It has been the practice of colonizers to imagine Indigenous culture as something ahistorical and incapable of change without being corrupted and lost. In other words, it has been assumed that Indigenous ways of life existed in a “pure” form prior to contact but were either tragically polluted or justly expunged (depending on one’s point of view) by European ideas and materials. This view disregards and dismisses Indigenous peoples’ freedom to choose and to act for themselves. Indeed, significant numbers of Indigenous people rejected Christianity outright. But some Indigenous people did accept some form of Christianity not always unwillingly or naïvely. Nor, did they, as some postcolonial scholars have suggested, always do so in such a way as to resist and subvert Christian, though some did that also. Indeed, there was a genuine acceptance of some aspects of European culture by Indigenous people, such as the materials they traded for furs. Christian faith was also genuinely received by some. To this day Christianity remains an authentic feature of Indigenous cultures across North America. But neither should we assume that the expression and understanding of Christianity was accepted ‘as is’ from European settlers. There was a selective process involved that differed from community to community. Some refused to adopt the new religion. Most, if not all, rejected missionary assertions that their own culture was entirely inferior or evil. Those that did accept the new faith or some part of it made changes to the cultural form and teachings to fit the ways of life and thought appropriate to their particular community and its context.<sup>38</sup>

In his study, for example, McNally denies that the singing of Christian hymns for the Ojibway amounted to «a capitulation to missionary Christianity».<sup>39</sup> While the missionary intended that the introduction of the Christian story would influ-

<sup>34</sup> Whitla, “Hymnody in Missionary Lands”, *Hymns and Hymnody*, vol. 2, 269.

<sup>35</sup> Clarke, *British Methodist Hymnody*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Lamport, Forrest, and Whaley, *Hymns and Hymnody*.; Erin McIntyre, “United Church of Canada Cree Hymnody in Translation” (MA thesis, St. Andrew’s College, 2018), 4.

<sup>37</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*.

<sup>38</sup> Kim-Cragg, “‘We Take Hold of the White Man’s Worship with One Hand, but with the Other Hand We Hold Fast Our Fathers’ Worship’.”; in Gray, “*I Will Fear No Evil*,” 155–162.

<sup>39</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 56.



singing at a service in 1925 described how they were curious to hear “the familiar gospel hymns and the musical tones of the Cree.”<sup>42</sup>

Proof of the scope that existed for adapting the creedal statements to a new cultural context is found in the retranslation of the Cree lyrics of the hymns from that first hymnbook.<sup>43</sup> Of the hundreds of hymns that had already been translated for Anishinaabe communities by 1841 this little book contains only a small fraction. The reasons for this selection were likely myriad. But among those reasons it would have been important to choose hymns that both communicated key teachings of the faith and were accessible musically and theologically. Inevitably Indigenous singers and missionaries made this decision together.

The hymnbook contains eight hymns, three of which have been identified as *Jesus my All to Heaven Is Gone* by John Cennick, *Behold the Saviour of mankind* by Samuel Wesley, Sr., and *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* by Charles Wesley. The other five, in the words of one commentator, «have been so freely adapted that it is most difficult to identify the originals».<sup>44</sup> In essence, then, we are dealing with hymns that may have been inspired by specific hymns found in the Methodist repertoire but have been modified to the point that they are in essence something new.

The following aspects of the Nicene Creed are reflected in these eight hymns:

1. God is the maker of heaven and earth – appears 1 time
2. Jesus is God – appears 1 time
3. Jesus is our Saviour (life giver) – appears 3 times
4. Jesus was crucified – appears 1 time
5. Jesus suffered – appears 2 times
6. Jesus was buried (died) – appears 2 times
7. Jesus rose again – appears 2 times
8. Jesus ascended into heaven – appears 1 time
9. Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead – appears 1 time
10. The Holy Spirit – appears 1 time
11. We look forward to life in the world to come – appears 1 time

<sup>42</sup> *The Christian Guardian*, April 15, 1925.

<sup>43</sup> A copy of the hymnbook can be viewed here: <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/209/reader.html#13>

<sup>44</sup> James Evans, *Cree Syllabic Hymnbook* (Fish River, 1841); accessed 22 May 2025, <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/209.html>

Given the themes that repeat themselves we can surmise that Jesus' role as Saviour was most important for the ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ (Maskekowiiniwak) as ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ (Kinosêw Sîpiy), as was the fact that he suffered, died, and rose again. The Cree word for Saviour used in the hymns is ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ *opimâcihiwew*, translated sometimes as «a lifesaver; one who saves lives; a provider».<sup>45</sup> The word contains the same root as the word for the Good Life, ᑭᓄᓂᑦ ᓂᓴᓂᑦ *pimâtisiwin*, thus potentially linking the person of Jesus to a foundational concept of wellbeing in Ojibway and Cree philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

Hymns, of course, are much more than statements of belief. They also explore themes and experiences of religious life. The eight hymns of the first Muskego hymnbook emphasize the human experiences of lostness and suffering as well as the longing for happiness. The very first hymn, for example, contains the following lines:<sup>47</sup>

Long where it is dark  
 Here have I walked  
 Suffering  
 For I was not good.  
 Now I am in pain  
 I make pitiful sounds  
 Jesus hear me, and say  
 Come, I am the way.  
 [...]  
 Jesus who is God  
 Ill-treated himself  
 Sympathize with Him  
 You who would please Him.  
 Praise Jesus  
 Who saves.  
 By his blood, by his blood  
 Who blesses all.

Another hymn expresses a desire to be blessed:

He who made us all  
 Who are living  
 We will implore  
 That you bless us.

<sup>45</sup> Word Search for 'saviour,' *Online Cree Dictionary*, accessed April 7, 2025, <https://www.creedictionary.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Evans, *Cree Syllabic Hymnbook*.

[...]  
 We look above  
 I hope  
 To be given  
 A blessing.  
 Now holy ghost  
 Throw to us  
 Christ's blessing  
 That we may be glad.  
 He who heals  
 Is crucified  
 Who loves me so much  
 That he died.

Creedal elements are thus blended with stories of human life to give both context.

## Influence of Indigenous Hymns on Contemporary Canadian Christianity

This history of creedal translation and incantation prefigures later developments of Canadian Christianity, particularly in the United Church of Canada, the denomination that most absorbed the legacy of Methodist missionaries who lived and worked in what is now Canada. This is evident in its hymnody. As it evolved, it started to allow itself to be shaped by the North American context in which it found itself, adopting new sensitivities and locating itself in new geographies. It has also incorporated new musical forms, including those of Indigenous people.<sup>48</sup>

Striking, too, is the fact that the United Church's latest effort to express the foundational creedal elements of the church was done so in the form of a *Song of Faith*. The preamble to this modern creed states that while the truths of the faith are «timeless», they must be articulated anew in each time and place. As to why they adopted the form of a song for this creed, the writers of the document explained that they «intentionally opted for a form and a tone that would be more evocative than definitive», and that «[it] is a song that is open to the possibility of other songs, in the hope that others might add their own counter-melodies, des-

<sup>48</sup> David Bjorlin, "Standard Idioms in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia," in *Hymns and Hymnody*, Volume 3: *From Catholic Europe to the Barbadian Shore*, 126–28.





# Creeds, Catechisms, Confessions

*Gemma C. King*

This chapter will examine the ways in which the Nicene faith has been translated for people of different times and contexts through the various catechisms of the church. A particular focus will be the catechisms of the Reformation era and the lack of distinctly Reformed catechisms written in the present day. It will assess the question of what was at stake if the Nicene faith was not translated in line with the Reformed theology of the Reformation era and what is at stake now if the Reformed churches fail to resource their members with catechisms reflecting the Reformed theology of today.

## Nicene Creed and its Relationship to Catechism

The Nicene Creed, developed at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, emerged in a context where, as Frances Young describes, «school-based Christianity was giving way to episcopal authority and the political demand for ecclesial unity.»<sup>1</sup> Those involved in the Council of Nicaea were largely teachers who had been teaching their understandings of the faith to those in their area preparing for baptism. These creeds were typically developed for use in local contexts. These early creeds emerged from the types of faith statements found in the New Testament such as the one found in the story of the Ethiopian in Acts 8.26–40 where «Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may'. And he replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is

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<sup>1</sup> Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, 2nd. ed. (London: SCM Press, 2010), 48.

the Son of God.»<sup>2</sup> In these early days, the key part of a form of confession of faith was the statement of belief in Jesus. During the first century this developed into an early expression of faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed developed at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 marked a turning point from the sorts of creeds and confessions of early Christians made in preparation for baptism and during martyrdom trials. It became a tool of empire to define and control what the acceptable doctrines of the Christian faith were. In the years following the Council of Nicaea the process of preparation for baptism became more lengthy and elaborate and there was a shift from a more loosely defined set of questions to a relatively fixed formula. From the time of the Council of Nicaea, candidates for baptism (typically those over seven years) were expected to memorize the creed and, as part of the liturgy for their baptism recite it from memory. This process was often understood as being handed the creed orally from their bishop and being instructed in the details of the various clauses, before handing it back through recitation at or just before their baptism.<sup>3</sup> The recitation typically took place in public with individuals standing in front of the congregation and reciting the creed. A part of this process involved the preaching of sermons on the creeds. Oddly, the majority of sermons in Latin commentating on creeds which have survived are based on the old Roman Creed or the Apostles' Creed. There are very few that appear to have survived based on the Nicene or Constantinopolitan Creed. Furthermore, the catechetical material that seems to have been used to train priests in this time period seems to have been based on the Apostles' Creed. The material took the form of a series of questions and answers. This is perhaps the form of material which is closest to the Reformation era catechisms.<sup>4</sup>

With this shift to a more prescriptive formula came a move towards the creeds serving as a test for a person's orthodoxy. Kinzig helpfully notes that:

Synodal creeds were no longer simple aide-mémoires which helped to recapitulate the basics of the Christian faith, rather, from the synod of Antioch of early 325 onwards they were also legal documents which defined that faith. Thus they became

<sup>2</sup> Wolfram Kinzig, "4 In the Beginning: Confessing Christ without Creeds," *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, (Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter, 2024) 54–144. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110318531-004>

<sup>3</sup> Kinzig, "11 Creeds and the Liturgy," 486, <https://www-1degruyterbrill-1com-12jv2x-hep0098.hanproxy.gwlb.de/document/doi/10.1515/9783110318531-011/html>.

<sup>4</sup> Kinzig, "13 Preaching the Creed," 523–34, <https://www-1degruyterbrill-1com-12jv2x-h0x003f.hanproxy.gwlb.de/document/doi/10.1515/9783110318531-013/html>.

instrumental in establishing doctrinal orthodoxy in that they offered a legal tool by which deviation could be measured and sanctioned, if necessary.<sup>5</sup>

This application was even more the case for the clergy than the laity. In the years following the Council of Nicaea rather than the creeds serving primarily a catechetical function of summarizing the core tenets of the faith, they became legal weapons to control the clergy and to a lesser extent the laity. C. H. Turner, in his book *The history and Use of Creeds and Anathemas in the Early Centuries of the Church* (1910), observes this change noting, «In a word, the old creeds were creeds for catechumens, the new creed was a creed for bishops».<sup>6</sup> This new creed was one which contained anathemas – clauses directed at bishops who were expected to be the final authority on matters of doctrine.

## Reformation Era Catechisms and Confessions

The Reformation era was a time of great activity where many different confessions and catechisms were written and developed. Each confession and catechism reflected the context of where it was written. The two best known Reformed catechisms of the Reformation era are the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The former was developed in the German church context and was commissioned by Frederick III, the Elector of the Palatinate. It was written in 1563 by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus (pupils of Melancthon and Calvin respectively). Developed eighty years later in London, the Westminster Shorter Catechism emerged out of the work of the 1643-49 Westminster Assembly whose main work was to write the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Westminster Assembly brought together English Puritans and six Scottish Presbyterian commissioners with the aim of producing a confession of faith for the whole of Great Britain to unify the Scottish and English churches along presbyterian lines. However, on this aim it was unsuccessful just as the Council of Nicaea was unsuccessful in unifying the church in the fourth century. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the supporting catechisms failed to be adopted by the English church and was

<sup>5</sup> Kinzig, “10 Creeds as Means of Control in Synodal and Imperial Legislation,” 465, <https://www-1degruyter-1com-12jv2xh6j004a.hanproxy.gwlb.de/document/doi/10.1515/9783110318531-010/html>.

<sup>6</sup> C. H. (Cuthbert Hamilton) Turner, *The History and Use of Creeds and Anathemas in the Early Centuries of the Church* (London: S.P.C.K., 1910), 24, <http://archive.org/details/thehistoryanduse00turnuoft>.

only adopted by the Scots. Similarly, the Westminster Shorter Catechism was developed in an era abounding in catechisms just as the Nicene Creed was developed in an era abounding in creeds. In both cases there was an attempt to define the institutional faith and present it in a form which meant it could be used as a test of right knowledge of doctrinal theology. This chapter will use the Westminster Confession of Faith and the accompanying Shorter Catechism as a case study examining the ways in which the latter translated the former into language to teach the key precepts of the faith to ordinary parishioners. The relative longevity of the Shorter Catechism in the Scottish and wider context will also be assessed.

## Creative Translation of Catechisms

From the start of the nineteenth century in Britain, novelists began to creatively engage with the texts of the British catechisms including the Shorter Catechism. However, from its inception, the Shorter Catechism represented a creative engagement with theology for pedagogical purposes. This section will begin with an assessment of the Shorter Catechism as a creative translation of the theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The section will go on to explore the ways in which the Shorter Catechism itself was later creatively translated for the nineteenth century. This interest initially came from children's novelists of the time but evolved into a more critical interaction between novelists and poets in the early twentieth century.

During the meeting of the Westminster Assembly, it was decided that a catechism was needed to enable the theology which had been agreed upon to be taught in parishes across Britain (though the texts were only adopted in Scotland). A committee was formed which included twelve men who had all written catechisms or teaching aids prior to the meeting of the Assembly. Joseph H. Hall observes that «since these catechists represented at least three pedagogical approaches to catechetical training it is understandable that the Assembly had to settle on a given methodology before writing the catechisms».<sup>7</sup> He goes on to note the three Puritan approaches the Westminster Assembly had to choose from: scriptural catechism,

<sup>7</sup> Joseph H. Hall, "The Westminster Shorter and the Heidelberg Catechisms Compared," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan and W. Duncan Rankin, vol. 2 (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2003), 159.

paraphrased answers from scripture, and paraphrased answers with subordinate 'yes' or 'no' responses. Ultimately, a modified version of the third option without the 'yes' or 'no' responses was chosen. As the work progressed it became clear that two different catechisms were needed – one for ministers and the other for lay people and children. The former became known as the Larger Catechism while the latter became known as the Shorter Catechism. Samuel Rutherford, one of the Scottish Commissioners at the Assembly, described how those working on the catechisms «found it very difficult to satisfy themselves or the world with one form of catechism; or to dress up milk and meat both in one dish».<sup>8</sup> Ultimately Hall argues that the resultant Shorter Catechism has come to be regarded as one of the most precise and «biblically sophisticated teaching aids ever devised».<sup>9</sup>

The Shorter Catechism quickly became the basis of the teaching of the Reformed faith to children across Scotland. Writing in the late seventeenth century, Scotland's national poet Robert Burns in his poem 'The Inventory' depicts his narrator character describing to a Surveyor of the Taxes how on a Sunday night he teaches his children by drilling them in the catechism:

And aften labour them completely.  
And aye Sundays, duly nightly,  
I on the questions tairge them tightly;  
Till faith, wee Davock's turn'd sae gleg,  
Tho' scarcely langer than my leg,  
He'll screed you aff Effectual Calling,  
As fast as ony in the dwelling.<sup>10</sup>

This is portrayed as the rightful method of a father teaching his children. The questions referred to in line three of the quote are the questions of the Shorter Catechism. 'Effectual Calling' is a characteristic point of Westminster doctrine found in the Shorter Catechism at Question thirty-one. Here Robert Burns is depict-

<sup>8</sup> Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards*, Baird Lecture 1882 (J. Nisbet, 1883), 418.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, "The Westminster Shorter and the Heidelberg Catechisms Compared," 160.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Burns, *The Beauties of Burn's poems: Consisting of the Most Admired Pieces of that Celebrated Scots Poet* (T. Johnston, 1819), 119. My translation into contemporary English:  
And often labour them completely.  
And every Sunday, duly nightly,  
I on the questions examine them tightly;  
Till faith, young Davock became so clever,  
Although scarcely taller than my leg,  
He will recite off Effectual Calling to you,  
As fast as any in the dwelling.

ing that the imparting of doctrine to children through cross examination on the questions of the Shorter Catechism is a key element of good and upright living for Scottish parents of the late eighteenth century.

However, by the mid-nineteenth century the condensed precision had begun to be regarded as inappropriate for teaching young people. From the early nineteenth century in Britain, there was an attempt by some female novelists to revive interest and interaction with the British catechisms through novels. The first was by the popular children's novelist Mary Martha Sherwood in 1817 whose *Stories Explanatory of the Church Catechism* reinterpreted the Anglican Church Catechism through conversations between members of the Mills family. This was shortly followed by *Chapters on the Shorter Catechism, a Tale for the Instruction of Youth* (1850) by Eliza Smith, a Scottish clergyman's daughter. In this tale, Smith takes the questions and answers of the Shorter Catechism and explains them using the conversations of the Grey family – a manse family in an unspecified parish in Scotland. The sterile responses to the Shorter Catechism's questions are transformed into lively narratives where the children in the manse family encounter situations which force them to confront the deep questions the Shorter Catechism asks. Eliza Smith explores the theology of the first question through a pastoral visit the minister's wife, Mrs Gray, and her daughter Margaret conducted. Margeret comments, «How strange it is [...] to see Sarah [a sick parishioner] so very happy when she is ill; surely she glorifies God».<sup>11</sup> In this way the abstract questions are lived out by the characters allowing young readers to think about the questions in terms of experiences in their own lives.

This text appears to have been received with acclaim by Scottish readers of the early nineteenth century with many Scottish newspapers of that time giving positive reviews.<sup>12</sup> A common suggestion in many of these reviews is that it would be a very helpful resource for Sabbath School teachers and parents to impart the doctrines of the Shorter Catechism to children of the day. Throughout the nineteenth century the Shorter Catechism remained the doctrinal basis of religious education in Scottish schools, with the Church of Scotland and leading figures in the Free Church of Scotland advocating for its place in religious instruction to be enshrined

<sup>11</sup> Eliza Smith, *Chapters on the Shorter Catechism, a Tale for the Instruction of Youth*. By a Clergyman's Daughter, 2nd. ed. (Edinburgh: Paton & Ritchie, 1850), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Eliza Smith, "Opinions of the Press," in *Chapters on the Shorter Catechism*, 369–372.

in law in the debates leading to the Education (Scotland) Act 1872.<sup>13</sup> All of this suggests that, although, throughout the nineteenth century, the teaching of the Shorter Catechism appears to have continued to be taken seriously, it was becoming more challenging for young people of the time to engage with and understand it. Christian educationalists were beginning to be of the view that memorising the highly “condensed” statements in the Reformation era catechisms was an improper method of teaching theology to the young people of the nineteenth century. Here while the theology contained in the Shorter Catechism was not being argued against, it was the format which was considered unhelpful for the sort of deep considered engagement educationalists hoped for.

From as early as 1657, theologians began to produce expositions and explanations of the Shorter Catechism to help people understand the principles of religion contained in it. The first was John Wallis’ *A Brief and Easie Explanation of the Shorter Catechism* in 1657 – this book was according to Alexander Mitchell «presented by the Divines at Westminster to both Houses of Parliament and by them approved».<sup>14</sup> This suggests that this book was some sort of authorized textbook for use in the implementation of the Shorter Catechism as a teaching document. This was followed by many other unofficial texts analyzing and explaining the Shorter Catechism anew for successive generations throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While its place in religious instruction in Scotland was waning by the early twentieth century, the Shorter Catechism retained a place in the popular imagination of those who had grown up in the late nineteenth century Free Church of Scotland, albeit as a document from yesteryears which old fashioned sort of people used to explain their faith. Hodder and Stoughton’s bestselling author in the late 1910s and 1920s and daughter of a Free Church of Scotland manse, O. Douglas (Anna Buchan), casually refers to the Shorter Catechism in her 1917 novel *The Setons*. In it, her daughter of the Free Church manse heroine, Elizabeth Seton, remarks to Arthur Townsend, an English visitor:

<sup>13</sup> John Stevenson, “The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 and Its Significance for the Church of Scotland,” *Scottish Church History* 53, no. 2 (March 27, 2021): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-05302004>; Ryan Mallon, “Presbyterian Dissent and the Campaign for Scottish Education Reform, 1843-72,” *Scottish Church History* 53, no. 2 (27 March 2021), 61, <https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-05302005>.

<sup>14</sup> Westminster Assembly, *Catechisms of the Second Reformation* (Edinburgh: James Nesbit, 1886), lxxiii.



You seem to find our knowledge of the Bible almost indecent. Remember, please, that you have never lived before in Scots clerical circles, and that ministers' children are funny people. We are brought up on the Bible and the Shorter Catechism – at least the old fashioned kind are. In our case our diet was varied by an abundance of poetry and fairy tales, which have given us our peculiar daftness. But don't you take any interest in the next world?<sup>15</sup>

Here the Shorter Catechism is used as a shorthand for an explanation of why Elizabeth has such a strong understanding of the theology of heaven. Meanwhile, Anna Buchan's brother, John Buchan, explores the Shorter Catechism in a more critical light in his 1912 poem entitled 'Shorter Catechism.' In the poem Buchan depicts a Reformed church Elder who is reflecting back on their life and wrestling with their faith. In the middle stanza, the Elder comments:

I've read the Bible in and oot,  
I ken the feck o't clean by hert; –  
But, still and on I sair misdoot  
I'm better noo than at the stert.<sup>16</sup>

This sense of questioning the good that reading the Bible and having faith brings for an individual is a running theme throughout the poem and sets it up in critique of the definite faith in the Bible and the doctrines of the church which those who are examined in using the Shorter Catechism are expected to hold. The closing two lines of the poem express a sense of dishonesty «There's nae man deid honest – *I ken by myself*».<sup>17</sup> This dishonesty might be read as an expression of that felt by some Free Church Elders by this time, when they are asked to affirm their belief in the doctrine of the Confession of Faith. Certainly, in the Church of Scotland context, this was the case. Finlay Macdonald notes, «As far back as the 1880s concern had been expressed that very few Elders had ever read the Confession of Faith. By the 1960s it was unlikely that the number would have increased!»<sup>18</sup> The doubts expressed in the poem contrasts with the ways in which the answers in the Shorter

<sup>15</sup> O. Douglas, *The Setons* (London: Thomas Nelsons, 1917), 174.

<sup>16</sup> John Buchan, *The Moon Endureth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921), 80–81, [http://archive.org/details/bwb\\_KU-410-527](http://archive.org/details/bwb_KU-410-527). My translation into contemporary English:  
I've read the Bible inside and out,  
I know the majority of it off by heart  
But, still and on I sorely doubt  
I'm no better than at the start.

<sup>17</sup> Buchan, *The Moon Endureth*, 80–81. My translation into contemporary English: There is no man dead honest – I know by myself.

<sup>18</sup> Finlay A. J. Macdonald, *From Reform to Renewal: Scotland's Kirk Century by Century* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 2017), 192.

Catechism are given – that is, in a manner which indicates a form of certainty about doctrines of faith. They are also in direct contrast to the certainty with which his sister’s character Elizabeth describes her faith using the Shorter Catechism. The contrasting examples of John and Anna Buchan reflect the increasingly tenuous status of the Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith in the life of the people of Scotland.

From the earliest of days, the Westminster Shorter Catechism has inspired people to reinterpret it for their own days through different creative mediums. For Burns and the Buchan family, writing more than a century apart, their creative engagement with the Shorter Catechism has largely focused on a single element of its doctrines. In contrast, Smith in the early nineteenth century, attempted to convey all of the points of the Shorter Catechism. In all cases they creatively reinterpreted its theology in the most popular mediums of their time, enabling readers to read anew the doctrines contained in it. From Nicene times the main creative engagement with the creeds was by bishops in their sermons preparing people for baptism, each aimed to explain afresh the creed in a style that enabled their audiences to understand it. In the Reformation era there was a shift from individual clerics preparing supplementary resources to a single resource written by a committee which was later reinterpreted by lay people.

## Longevity of the Shorter Catechism

In terms of the longevity of the Shorter Catechism, in the Scottish context it remained in active use in the mainstream presbyterian churches up until the early twentieth century. The *Report of the Scottish Sub-committee on Creeds and Formulas of Subscription to the General Presbyterian Council to be Held at Philadelphia in 1880* is revealing of the extent of the usage of the catechisms in the various presbyterian churches in Scotland. Of all the presbyterian churches, the one which maintained the greatest use by this time period was the United Presbyterian Church. It is noteworthy that the Church of Scotland barely makes reference to the Catechism in its response to the survey. It confines the discussion of the Shorter Catechism to sections discussing the historical positions of the Church of Scotland. It notes that from 1649 each household where someone could read was required to have a copy of the Shorter and Larger Catechisms, the Confession of Faith and Directory for Family Worship. However, the respondent also observed that by the early 1800s

this practice had largely fallen out of use. It was replaced by a looser use of the Shorter Catechism as being a document used by ministers in preparing individuals for baptism. A handbook for Church of Scotland ministers *The Scotch Minister's Assistant* (1802) suggests to ministers that they should use this question for interrogating parents presenting their child for baptism:

Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain the mind and will of God, and that the Confession and Catechisms of this National Church are agreeable to and founded upon the Holy Scriptures, and are you sincerely desirous that your child should be baptized in this faith?<sup>19</sup>

However, it is unclear the extent to which ministers explored the Confession and Catechisms with parents planning on having their child baptised. It may have been that many parents offered a verbal assent without actually understanding what they were agreeing to. Also, *The Scotch Minister's Assistant* was not an official document in the Church of Scotland, so not every minister was required to make use of this wording. Some ministers might have required more detailed engagement with the Catechism. It is also possible that some ministers by this time in the early nineteenth century might have abandoned making reference to the Shorter Catechism altogether.

Speaking in Aberdeen in 1913 to the Tenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System, Henry Cowan Professor of Church History at the University of Aberdeen observed:

The Catechism has not had the same place and power which it had a century, or even half a century ago, in the religious instruction of home and school, partly owing to its alleged difficulty for children, but chiefly because its thorough Calvinism is no longer the doctrine of Presbyterian Christendom as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

This observation very much reflects the state of play depicted in the Buchan siblings' works discussed earlier in this chapter. By the twentieth century the Shorter Catechism, which had been a key teaching document in the years following the Reformation, was rapidly becoming a relic of the past in mainstream presbyterian

<sup>19</sup> According to *The Scotch Minister's Assistant, or A Collection of Forms, : For Celebrating the Ordinances of Marriage, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper* (Printed, and sold by Young and Imray; Sold also by F. & C. Rivington, London; A. Guthrie, Edinburgh; Brash & Reid, Glasgow; and Angus & Son, and A. Brown, Aberdeen, 1802), 35, <http://archive.org/details/scotchministersa00unse>.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Cowan, "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," in *Proceedings of the Tenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System Held at Aberdeen, 1913*, ed. R. Dykes Shaw (London: Office of the Alliance, 1913), 124.

churches in Scotland. *The Westminster Confession in the Church today: Papers Prepared for the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine* (1982) does not have a chapter on the Westminster Shorter Catechism and simply mentions it in passing.<sup>21</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, writing in *To Glorify and Enjoy God* (1994), a publication celebrating the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly, notes that the main question at stake then was «precisely how viable is the Shorter Catechism in our contemporary culture?»<sup>22</sup> To attempt to answer that question, Kelly explores what he identifies as the three main areas of challenge to the Shorter Catechism – theology, philosophy, and educational theory. In his examination of the ways the Shorter Catechism could be criticized, Kelly offers a rebuttal to the perceived weaknesses of the Shorter Catechism in modern twentieth century culture attempting to prove its continued relevance. While his questioning is relevant, Kelly’s hopeful assertion of the continued relevance of the Shorter Catechism is characterized by his Puritan background.

Today in the Scottish context, the Shorter Catechism has largely fallen out of active usage except for a tiny minority of churches – namely (the conservative) Free Church of Scotland. The majority of the creative reinterpretations of the Shorter Catechism which have been produced in the past decade have been produced in Puritan circles in the United States of America. These include several illustrated editions of the Shorter Catechism. In contrast, the Nicene Creed is undergoing a revival in the Church of Scotland. Liam Fraser describes in his chapter the new place of prominence the Nicene Creed has been given in the revised vows for ordination of Elders and Ministers.

## Contemporary Catechisms and Confessions

Into the present day, the lack of contemporary systematic catechetical material from a Reformed perspective for use in the Reformed Churches in Scotland and more broadly will be considered. In this section, the chapter will observe that we are in an age of confessions and statements of faith without catechisms. The Reformed confessions of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – Barmen

<sup>21</sup> Alasdair I. C. Heron, ed., *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today: Papers Prepared for the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine*. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” in *To Glorify and Enjoy God: A Commemoration of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. John L. Carson and David W. Hall (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 118–19.

(1934), Belhar (1986) and Accra (2004) – are all highly significant timely political theological statements like the Westminster Confession and others were in the Reformation era. There is one significant difference to Reformation times – the type of catechetical material which accompanies them. The catechetical material that has been produced has been of a different sort especially in the case of the Accra Confession. This, I will argue, has led to them being the preserve of those engaged in international political ecumenical dialogue – for example, church leaders, theologians, and advocates.

In the British context, most of the contemporary catechetical material designed for use in local congregations is being developed by those on the more conservative evangelical wing of the church. Alpha, which is one of the most prominent catechetical programmes in the British church context, emerged out of Holy Trinity Brompton – a charismatic evangelical Anglican Church. While this programme is used by Reformed Churches in Britain, the theology and teaching has an Anglican inflection. ‘Christianity Explored’ also emerged out of the evangelical Anglican tradition. However, it has been embraced by churches across the denominations, particularly those on the more conservative evangelical wing. In the Scottish context, the main denominations which have churches running this programme are the Free Church of Scotland and the Baptist Union. There are a few Church of Scotland (CoS) churches which also participate, however they are largely those on the more conservative evangelical wing. The theology taught through these programmes in the case of Alpha emphasizes the Holy Spirit and spiritual experiences, while ‘Christianity Explored’ emphasizes Mark’s Gospel and the relationship between grace and sin. Both of these programmes are designed to promote personal conversion. In some ways these programmes are similar to the Nicene Creed and the Shorter Catechism in defining the doctrines of an orthodox Christian faith and providing a system with which to teach new believers or those who wish to explore faith further.

In terms of catechetical materials aimed at young people, one of the most prominent programmes in the British/Scottish context is Messy Church. As a programme, it is in use in a wide range of churches including Reformed Churches. In terms of doctrinal basis, it holds a very light touch creed/confessional statement which is «Jesus is at the heart of everything we do and the way we do it».<sup>23</sup> This

<sup>23</sup> “Christ-Centred,” *Messy Church* (blog), accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.messy-church.brf.org.uk/what-messy-church/christ-centred/>.

statement is aimed at those leading Messy Church. What this statement lacks is any reference to God or the Holy Spirit as well as the trinitarian understanding of God, which is so central to the Nicene theology and the later Reformed confessions. However, the Messy Church programme does encourage creative engagement with theological ideas amongst leaders and children. In the case of leaders, the programme encourages them to consider ways in which theological concepts can be taught through the mediums of art and play. For the children participating, they learn the theological ideas through creating pieces of art, playing and listening to simplified Bible stories. As a programme, it is in line with modern pedagogical understandings of how to teach concepts to children, just as the Shorter Catechism was in line with sixteenth century theories of education.

In the contemporary Reformed churches in Britain/Scotland, both the CoS and the United Reformed Church (URC) have developed new statements of faith in the last decade of the twentieth century. The former developed the '1992 Statement of Faith' while the latter developed the 'Statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the URC.' Both are similarly designed to be used in the context of liturgical worship. What is distinctive about each of them is that the CoS follows the pattern of the Nicene Creed but expresses it in modern language, while the URC observes a different pattern and focuses more on describing the institutional history of the church. In terms of the development of catechetical material or lesson plans for exploring the beliefs contained in these statements, only the URC has developed material which directly guides people through the points in the Statement of Faith. The CoS developed a resource *Learn: Understanding Our Faith* fifteen years after the adoption of the 1992 'Statement of Faith'. This resource does not directly guide people through the theology of the 1992 'Statement of Faith,' however it does attempt to reinterpret and translate the theology of the Nicene Faith into catechetical material for today.

While these courses and statements of faith enable engagement with doctrinal theology today, none of them engage directly with the theology contained in the Reformed confessions of the twentieth century. The final text of the 2004 Accra Confession emerged out of a *status confessionis* process in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches General Council in Accra. The relationship of the Accra Confession to its related catechetical material is quite different. As it was developed as part of a longer *processus confessionis* beginning in 1997 in Debrecen, some of the catechetical materials were produced as part of the preparatory materials for the Accra General Council. These included the *Reformed World* Volume 53: 2&3 in Oc-

tober 2003, which contained study texts and Bible studies on the General Council theme «That all may have life in fullness». Alongside the issue of the *Reformed World*, a study guide *Crossing the Ten Seas* was produced to help congregations explore the themes of the upcoming General Council. These documents, along with others, were part of the process of theological reflection that ultimately led to the drafting of the Accra Confession at the General Council meeting. There delegates responding to the experience of visiting the slave castles in Ghana observed:

Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners and others of us are descendants of those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger and lamentation [...] as we listened to the voices of today from our global fellowship, we discovered the mortal danger of repeating the same sin of those whose blindness we decried.<sup>24</sup>

Out of this experience, the Accra General Council developed the theological conviction that the economic and ecological injustices of today's global economy require the Reformed family to respond as a matter of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In terms of supplementary materials to the Accra Confession, produced in Accra, the main resource produced was the Liturgical Supplement to the Message, which contains the same 'Confession of Faith' that was used in the Closing Worship at Accra. This Liturgical Supplement was intended «to enable member churches to share in worship the same confession, commitments and promises» which were made at the General Council.<sup>25</sup> In style, the 'Confession of Faith' in the Supplement is similar to the Statements of Faith developed in the 1990s by the URC and the CoS. However, in content they are quite different.

Despite agreement at the Accra General Council, the Accra Confession was not embraced positively by all member churches. The CoS, like many European churches, took a cautious approach in responding to the Accra Confession. Following the 2004 Accra General Council, the CoS stated at its 2005 General Assembly that, «The General Assembly acknowledging the importance of the churches of the North hearing the voice of the churches of the South, commend the Letter from

<sup>24</sup> Setri Nyomi and World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational), eds., *Accra 2004: Accra, Ghana, 30 July - 12 August 2004*, Proceedings of the... General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational) 24 (World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2005), 216.

<sup>25</sup> Nyomi and World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational), 220.

Accra for study by Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries».<sup>26</sup> The extent to which the Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries engaged with the Letter from Accra is unclear as no mention of the responses to it are made in the subsequent reports of the Ecumenical Relations Committee. In 2007, the Ecumenical Relations Committee of the CoS reiterated its hesitation to embrace the Accra Confession. They comment:

Not unrelated is the insistence of WARC to refer in all of its recent literature to the Accra Statement on economic justice as the 'Accra Confession.' This was a statement which the Church of Scotland noted with reservation. On several occasions in recent years the Church of Scotland has found it impossible to add to or alter its current recognised confession. It is, therefore, unlikely that it would accept a statement as its confession about which it has some ambivalence.<sup>27</sup>

The position on being able to modify the recognized confession of the CoS has shifted as Liam Fraser describes in his chapter in this publication. In the *Book of Confessions* which has been prepared by the Theological Forum of the church, the following documents are included alongside the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed: The Scots Confession, The Westminster Confession, and The 1992 Statement of Faith. While the process of discerning the documents to include in the Book of Confessions opened up discussion, it seems that the Accra Confession was either ignored or discounted, presumably on the basis of the uncertainties which were expressed twenty years earlier. Therefore, in the Scottish context, the Accra Confession remains a historical document belonging to an organisation to which the CoS belongs. It is the preserve of historians of institutional ecumenical history, not a living document in use in the life of the CoS today.

Since 2004, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) has and continues to run several programmes which attempt to enable churches and church leaders to think more deeply in terms of the economic theology confessed in the Accra Confession, namely the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) and ZacTax programmes. However, neither of these programmes can be accurately described as catechisms in the same sense as those which were instrumental in the promotion of the theology of the Reformers were. In addition to these programmes, the Caribbean and North American Area Council produced *Power to Resist, Courage to Hope: Caribbean Churches Living out the Accra Confession*

<sup>26</sup> Church of Scotland General Assembly, *General Assembly Proceedings* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Church by Blackwood, 2005), sec. 26/1.

<sup>27</sup> Church of Scotland General Assembly, *General Assembly Proceedings*, (Edinburgh: Printed for the Church by Blackwood, 2007), sec. 21.1.2.



– *A Christian Education Resource Book on Economic and Ecological Justice* in 2009. This material was produced as part of their engagement with the tenth anniversary of the Accra Confession and is the most extensive and significant catechetical material produced to teach the theology of the Accra Confession. These resources, combined with the demographic makeup of that region, appear to have resulted in it being the area which engages most actively with the Accra Confession. Meanwhile, in the WCRC Europe region, there remains to this day a great deal of misunderstandings and misgivings about the nature and theology of the Accra Confession. The most significant engagement with it in WCRC Europe is the 2010 publication *Break the Chains of Injustice* which documents the attempts of various European Member Churches to engage with its theology.<sup>28</sup> While in the first instance many of the European Member Churches, including the CoS, appear to have agreed to adopt or acknowledge it to some degree, very little has been done to engage with the theology contained in it or promote it in the member churches.

In 2010, the recommendation to develop educational materials to support the adoption of the Accra Confession was adopted by the World Communion of Reformed Churches in Grand Rapids. That General Council agreed that the WCRC should «continue the process of education on the Accra Confession and its implications, establishing a resource bank of Bible studies, sermons, actions, adult education tools, and materials for young people and children, to inform and enrich this process».<sup>29</sup> The development in 2024/25 as part of the Accra+20 programme of a study guide and a graphic novel mark a significant step to fulfilling this commitment. Here, resources are being developed for use across the Communion to enable engagement today with the key theological ideas confessed in the Accra Confession. While the novel was the most popular creative long form medium in the nineteenth century, the graphic novel is that for the twenty first century. It is hoped that the graphic novel will enable people for whom the text of the Accra Confession is too remote and dry to understand and embrace the theology contained in it. Meanwhile the study guide will enable members to reflect on the impact of the Accra Confession over the twenty years which it has been confessed. It will highlight the ways in which the theological points in the Accra Confession are relevant today more

<sup>28</sup> Martina Wasserloos-Strunk and World Alliance of Reformed Churches, eds., *Europe Covenanting for Justice: Break the Chains of Oppression and the Yoke of Injustice and Let the Oppressed Go Free* (Neuwied: Foedus-Verlag, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Setri Nyomi et al., eds., *Grand Rapids 2010 Proceedings of the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches* (Geneva: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2010), 138.

than ever and enable reflection on them. If these resources are adopted widely by members of the Communion, this will enable a far greater understanding of the theology at the core of the Communion of today. However, if greater common understanding of the Accra Confession and its significance is not found, there is a threat that the diverging understandings of the Accra Confession and its theology could lead to divisions in the Communion similar to those in the early church in the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea.

## Conclusion

The Nicene Creed in its own time served both a legal and catechetical function, as the document which defined the faith of the Empire and what beliefs were acceptable and unacceptable in the fourth century. It also had a catechetical function, albeit largely limited to the teaching of the acceptable doctrines to priests in the early church. By the time of the Reformation, there had been a shift from attempting to produce a document which held both a legal and catechetical function to producing separate documents for each of these functions. As has been explored, this was especially the case in the British context where the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s, as it was preparing the Westminster Confession of Faith, decided that not one but two separate catechisms were required to disseminate the theology of the Confession of Faith to the ministers and people of England and Scotland. The Larger Catechism, aimed at ministers, served a similar function to the Nicene Creed in its earliest days in that it defined the faith ministers were supposed to hold. Meanwhile, the Shorter Catechism had a different function – it was written in a simple form for children. In the early days it formed the basis of the educational programme of the church for young people. As argued earlier, the Shorter Catechism retained popularity as an expression of faith for people in the Presbyterian Churches in Scotland up until the nineteenth century before declining.

Educationalists from the early nineteenth century began to believe that supplementary material was required to enable children to understand the points of doctrine contained in the Shorter Catechism. Thus, explanatory texts and later novels were produced. These creative works engaged with the Shorter Catechism in different ways, some were crafted to enable children to go deeper in their understanding of the doctrines in the Catechism. However, others which were written for an adult audience, either affirmed the importance of the Shorter Catechism as a teaching

tool or approached it from the perspective of a doubting adult who could no longer hold such a certain faith as expressed in the Shorter Catechism.

Today in general, there is not the same systematic relationship between the development of doctrinal Statements of Faith or Confessions and catechetical material for the teaching of children and young people. Development of doctrinal Statements have tended to emerge either out of a process of reflection attempting to write a definition of the faith akin to the goals of the Nicene process or from a need to express a Confession of Faith in opposition to a specific socio-political event. Meanwhile, catechetical material for young people today has largely emerged out of the work of parachurch organisations with a very light touch basis in doctrinal theology or from processes of reflection in the years following a Confession. The development of the catechetical material expounding faith confessions is crucial to enable young people to understand and embrace the theology of the Reformed Church today. If the theology expressed in the Accra Confession is to have a lasting impact similar to that of the Nicene Creed, it needs to be adopted by the next generation.

# The Nicene Creed (325)<sup>1</sup>

We believe in one God,  
the Father Almighty,  
maker of all things visible and invisible;  
  
and in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Son of God,  
the only-begotten of his Father,  
of the substance of the Father,  
God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,  
begotten (γεννηθέντα), not made,  
being of one substance (ὁμοούσιον, consubstantialem) with the Father.  
By whom all things were made,  
both which be in heaven and in earth.  
Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven]  
and was incarnate and was made man.  
He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven.  
And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead.  
  
And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost.  
  
And whosoever shall say  
that there was a time when the Son of God was not (ἢν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν),  
or that before he was begotten he was not,  
or that he was made of things that were not,  
or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father]  
or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion  
—all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900), 55, [https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.vii.iii.html#fnf\\_vii.iii-p3.1](https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.vii.iii.html#fnf_vii.iii-p3.1).



# The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nice, in Bithynia (325)<sup>1</sup>

## Canon I.

If any one in sickness has been subjected by physicians to a surgical operation, or if he has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy; but, if any one in sound health has castrated himself, it behoves that such an one, if [already] enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who wilfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men the Canon admits to the clergy.

## Canon II.

Forasmuch as, either from necessity, or through the urgency of individuals, many things have been done contrary to the Ecclesiastical canon, so that men just converted from heathenism to the faith, and who have been instructed but a little while, are straightway brought to the spiritual laver, and as soon as they have been baptized, are advanced to the episcopate or the presbyterate, it has seemed right to us that for the time to come no such thing shall be done. For to the catechumen

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<sup>1</sup> *Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of The Christian Church*. Second Series, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900), 64–147, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.html>

himself there is need of time and of a longer trial after baptism. For the apostolical saying is clear, “Not a novice; lest, being lifted up with pride, he fall into condemnation and the snare of the devil.” But if, as time goes on, any sensual sin should be found out about the person, and he should be convicted by two or three witnesses, let him cease from the clerical office. And whoso shall transgress these [enactments] will imperil his own clerical position, as a person who presumes to disobey the great Synod.

### **Canon III.**

The great Synod has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a subintroducta dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.

### **Canon IV.**

It is by all means proper that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops in the province; but should this be difficult, either on account of urgent necessity or because of distance, three at least should meet together, and the suffrages of the absent [bishops] also being given and communicated in writing, then the ordination should take place. But in every province the ratification of what is done should be left to the Metropolitan.

### **Canon V.**

Concerning those, whether of the clergy or of the laity, who have been excommunicated in the several provinces, let the provision of the canon be observed by the bishops which provides that persons cast out by some be not readmitted by others. Nevertheless, inquiry should be made whether they have been excommunicated through captiousness, or contentiousness, or any such like ungracious disposition in the bishop. And, that this matter may have due investigation, it is decreed that in every province synods shall be held twice a year, in order that when all the bishops of the province are assembled together, such questions may by them be thoroughly examined, that so those who have confessedly offended against their

bishop, may be seen by all to be for just cause excommunicated, until it shall seem fit to a general meeting of the bishops to pronounce a milder sentence upon them. And let these synods be held, the one before Lent, (that the pure Gift may be offered to God after all bitterness has been put away), and let the second be held about autumn.

## **Canon VI.**

Let the ancient customs in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis prevail, that the Bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction in all these, since the like is customary for the Bishop of Rome also. Likewise in Antioch and the other provinces, let the Churches retain their privileges. And this is to be universally understood, that if any one be made bishop without the consent of the Metropolitan, the great Synod has declared that such a man ought not to be a bishop. If, however, two or three bishops shall from natural love of contradiction, oppose the common suffrage of the rest, it being reasonable and in accordance with the ecclesiastical law, then let the choice of the majority prevail.

## **Canon VII.**

Since custom and ancient tradition have prevailed that the Bishop of Ælia [i.e., Jerusalem] should be honoured, let him, saving its due dignity to the Metropolis, have the next place of honour.

## **Canon VIII.**

Concerning those who call themselves Cathari, if they come over to the Catholic and Apostolic Church, the great and holy Synod decrees that they who are ordained shall continue as they are in the clergy. But it is before all things necessary that they should profess in writing that they will observe and follow the dogmas of the Catholic and Apostolic Church; in particular that they will communicate with persons who have been twice married, and with those who having lapsed in persecution have had a period [of penance] laid upon them, and a time [of restoration] fixed so that in all things they will follow the dogmas of the Catholic



Church. Wheresoever, then, whether in villages or in cities, all of the ordained are found to be of these only, let them remain in the clergy, and in the same rank in which they are found. But if they come over where there is a bishop or presbyter of the Catholic Church, it is manifest that the Bishop of the Church must have the bishop's dignity; and he who was named bishop by those who are called Cathari shall have the rank of presbyter, unless it shall seem fit to the Bishop to admit him to partake in the honour of the title. Or, if this should not be satisfactory, then shall the bishop provide for him a place as Chorepiscopus, or presbyter, in order that he may be evidently seen to be of the clergy, and that there may not be two bishops in the city.

## **Canon IX.**

If any presbyters have been advanced without examination, or if upon examination they have made confession of crime, and men acting in violation of the canon have laid hands upon them, notwithstanding their confession, such the canon does not admit; for the Catholic Church requires that [only] which is blameless.

## **Canon X.**

If any who have lapsed have been ordained through the ignorance, or even with the previous knowledge of the ordainers, this shall not prejudice the canon of the Church; for when they are discovered they shall be deposed.

## **Canon XI.**

Concerning those who have fallen without compulsion, without the spoiling of their property, without danger or the like, as happened during the tyranny of Licinius, the Synod declares that, though they have deserved no clemency, they shall be dealt with mercifully. As many as were communicants, if they heartily repent, shall pass three years among the hearers; for seven years they shall be prostrators; and for two years they shall communicate with the people in prayers, but without oblation.

## Canon XII.

As many as were called by grace, and displayed the first zeal, having cast aside their military girdles, but afterwards returned, like dogs, to their own vomit, (so that some spent money and by means of gifts regained their military stations); let these, after they have passed the space of three years as hearers, be for ten years prostrators. But in all these cases it is necessary to examine well into their purpose and what their repentance appears to be like. For as many as give evidence of their conversions by deeds, and not pretence, with fear, and tears, and perseverance, and good works, when they have fulfilled their appointed time as hearers, may properly communicate in prayers; and after that the bishop may determine yet more favourably concerning them. But those who take [the matter] with indifference, and who think the form of [not] entering the Church is sufficient for their conversion, must fulfil the whole time.

## Canon XIII.

Concerning the departing, the ancient canonical law is still to be maintained, to wit, that, if any man be at the point of death, he must not be deprived of the last and most indispensable Viaticum. But, if any one should be restored to health again who has received the communion when his life was despaired of, let him remain among those who communicate in prayers only. But in general, and in the case of any dying person whatsoever asking to receive the Eucharist, let the Bishop, after examination made, give it him.

## Canon XIV.

Concerning catechumens who have lapsed, the holy and great Synod has decreed that, after they have passed three years only as hearers, they shall pray with the catechumens.

## **Canon XV.**

On account of the great disturbance and discords that occur, it is decreed that the custom prevailing in certain places contrary to the Canon, must wholly be done away; so that neither bishop, presbyter, nor deacon shall pass from city to city. And if any one, after this decree of the holy and great Synod, shall attempt any such thing, or continue in any such course, his proceedings shall be utterly void, and he shall be restored to the Church for which he was ordained bishop or presbyter.

## **Canon XVI.**

Neither presbyters, nor deacons, nor any others enrolled among the clergy, who, not having the fear of God before their eyes, nor regarding the ecclesiastical Canon, shall recklessly remove from their own church, ought by any means to be received by another church; but every constraint should be applied to restore them to their own parishes; and, if they will not go, they must be excommunicated. And if anyone shall dare surreptitiously to carry off and in his own Church ordain a man belonging to another, without the consent of his own proper bishop, from whom although he was enrolled in the clergy list he has seceded, let the ordination be void.

## **Canon XVII.**

Forasmuch as many enrolled among the Clergy, following covetousness and lust of gain, have forgotten the divine Scripture, which says, "He hath not given his money upon usury," and in lending money ask the hundredth of the sum [as monthly interest], the holy and great Synod thinks it just that if after this decree any one be found to receive usury, whether he accomplish it by secret transaction or otherwise, as by demanding the whole and one half, or by using any other contrivance whatever for filthy lucre's sake, he shall be deposed from the clergy and his name stricken from the list.

## Canon XVIII.

It has come to the knowledge of the holy and great Synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer. And this also has been made known, that certain deacons now touch the Eucharist even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the deacons remain within their own bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist according to their order, after the presbyters, and let either the bishop or the presbyter administer to them. Furthermore, let not the deacons sit among the presbyters, for that is contrary to canon and order. And if, after this decree, any one shall refuse to obey, let him be deposed from the diaconate.

## Canon XIX.

Concerning the Paulianists who have flown for refuge to the Catholic Church, it has been decreed that they must by all means be rebaptized; and if any of them who in past time have been numbered among their clergy should be found blameless and without reproach, let them be rebaptized and ordained by the Bishop of the Catholic Church; but if the examination should discover them to be unfit, they ought to be deposed. Likewise in the case of their deaconesses, and generally in the case of those who have been enrolled among their clergy, let the same form be observed. And we mean by deaconesses such as have assumed the habit, but who, since they have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity.

## Canon XX.

Forasmuch as there are certain persons who kneel on the Lord's Day and in the days of Pentecost, therefore, to the intent that all things may be uniformly observed everywhere (in every parish), it seems good to the holy Synod that prayer be made to God standing.



# The Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed (381)<sup>1</sup>

We believe in one God  
the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only begotten Son of God,  
begotten of the Father before all worlds,  
that is of the substance of the Father,  
Light of Light, very God of very God,  
begotten not made,  
consubstantial with the Father

By whom all things were made,  
both in heaven and earth who for us men  
and for our salvation came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man,  
was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate,  
and suffered, and was buried,  
and on the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,  
and ascended into heaven,

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<sup>1</sup> *Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of The Christian Church*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900), 163, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214/npnf214.ix.iii.html>.

**646** The Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed (381)

and sitteth on the right hand of the Father,  
and from thence he shall come again with glory  
to judge both the quick and the dead,  
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost,  
the Lord and Giver of life,  
who proceedeth from the Father;  
who, with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified,  
who spake by the prophets.

In one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;  
we look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

And those who say that there was a time when the Son of God was not,  
and before he was begotten he was not,  
or that he was of things which are not,  
or that he is of a different hypostasis or substance,  
or pretend that he is effluent or changeable,  
these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

# The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934)<sup>1</sup>

Adopted by the Confessing Synod of the German  
Evangelical Church in Barmen.

## Preamble

According to the opening words of its constitution of July 11, 1933, the German Evangelical Church is a federation of confessional churches that grew out of the Reformation and that enjoy equal rights. The theological basis for the unification of these churches is laid down in Article 1 and Article 2 (1) of the constitution of the German Evangelical Church that was recognized by the Reich government on July 14, 1933:

Article 1. The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in holy scripture and brought to light again in the confessions of the Reformation. The full powers that the church needs for its mission are hereby determined and limited.

Article 2 (1). The German Evangelical Church is divided into member churches (*Landeskirchen*).

We, the representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, of free synods, church assemblies, and parish organizations united in the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, declare that we stand together on the ground of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of German confessional

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), "The Barmen Declaration," *The Barmen Declaration: An Appeal to the Evangelical Congregations and Christians in Germany*, EKD, accessed July 29, 2025, <https://www.ekd.de/en/The-Barmen-Declaration-303.htm>



churches. We are bound together by the confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

We publicly declare before all evangelical churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this confession is grievously imperilled, and with it the unity of the German Evangelical Church. It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling church party of the "German Christians" and of the church administration carried on by them. These have become more and more apparent during the first year of the existence of the German Evangelical Church. This threat consists in the fact that the theological basis on which the German Evangelical Church is united has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the "German Christians" as well as on the part of the church administration. When these principles are held to be valid, then, according to all the confessions in force among us, the church ceases to be the church and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of confessional churches, becomes intrinsically impossible.

As members of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches we may and must speak with one voice in this matter today. Precisely because we want to be and to remain faithful to our various confessions, we may not keep silent, since we believe that we have been given a common message to utter in a time of common need and temptation. We commend to God what this may mean for the interrelations of the confessional churches.

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" of the present Reich church government which are devastating the church and also therefore breaking up the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

## Theological Declaration on the Current Situation of the German Protestant Church

1. *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (Jn 14.6) "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber ... I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved." (Jn 10.1, 9)*

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

2. *"Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (1 Cor 1.30)*

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

3. *"Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together." (Eph 4.15,16)*

The Christian church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.

4. *"You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant." (Mt 20.25,26)*

The various offices in the church do not establish a dominion of some over the others; on the contrary, they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.

5. *"Fear God. Honour the emperor." (1 Pet 2.17)*

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the church also exists, the state has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. [It fulfils this task] by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the state, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the state, thus itself becoming an organ of the state.

6. *"Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Mt 28.20) "The word of God is not fettered." (2 Tim 2.9)*

The church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and sacrament.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church in human arrogance could place the word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.

## Postscript

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgement of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of confessional churches. It invites all who are able to accept its declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in church politics. It entreats all whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope.

# The Belhar Confession (1986)<sup>1</sup>

In 1986 the DRMC adopted the Confession of Belhar

1. We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Word and Spirit gathers, protects and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
2. We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;

Eph. 2:11-22

that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

Eph. 4:1-16

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people

John 17:20-23

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<sup>1</sup> [[https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/CF\\_Belhar.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/CF_Belhar.pdf)]. The synod of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) adopted the draft Confession of Belhar in 1982 with an accompanying letter. These two documents should always be read together. In 1986 the DRMC adopted the Confession of Belhar in its final version in Afrikaans. The 2008 General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), which resulted from the reunification between the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the DRMC, declared the 1986 Afrikaans version to be the original source document. The 2008 URCSA General Synod in addition adopted the English translation that follows here as the official English version.

and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another;

Philem. 2:1-5  
1 Cor. 12:4-31

that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against everything that may threaten or hinder this unity;

John 13:1-17  
1 Cor. 1:10-13  
Eph. 4:1-6  
Eph. 3:14-20  
1 Cor. 10:16-17  
1 Cor. 11:17-34  
Gal. 6:2  
2 Cor. 1:3-4

that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

Romans 12:3-8  
1 Cor. 12:1-11  
Eph. 4:7-13  
Gal. 3:27-28  
James 2:1-13

that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

which absolutises either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutisation hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;

which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;

which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

3. We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

2 Cor. 5:17-21

Matt. 5:13-16

Matt. 5:9

2 Peter 3:13

Rev. 21-22

that God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity; that God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

Eph. 4:17 – 6:23

Romans 6

Col. 1:9-14

Col. 2:13-19

Col 3:1 – 4:6

that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity; that any teach-

ing which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right;

that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

that the church belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all

Deut. 32:4  
 Luke 2:14  
 John 14:27  
 Eph. 2:14  
 Isaiah 1:16-17  
 James 1:27  
 James 5:1-6  
 Luke 1:46-55  
 Luke 6:20-26  
 Luke 7:22  
 Luke 16:19-31

Psalm 146  
 Luke 4:16-19  
 Romans 6:13-18  
 Amos 5

the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

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| 5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence. | Eph. 4:15-16<br>Acts 5:29-33<br>1 Peter 2:18-25<br>1 Peter 3:15-18 |
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Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

## The Accompanying Letter

1. We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgement, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church family calls for such a decision. Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand. Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be so or should have been experienced as and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the scriptures. As a result many have been given the impression that the gospel was not really at stake. We make this confession because we are convinced that all sorts of theological arguments



have contributed to so disproportionate an emphasis on some aspects of the truth that it has in effect become a lie.

2. We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Being fully aware of the risks involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative. Furthermore, we are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, would give us the right to confess in this way. An act of confession may only be made by the Church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare before everyone that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies or achieve any ulterior purposes. Yet, having said this, we know that our deepest intentions may only be judged at their true value by God before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from God's throne and from on high, but before God's throne and before other human beings. We plead, therefore, that this Confession should not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block Jesus Christ the rock.
  
3. This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no-one will identify themselves with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it. We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole. For this reason we do not doubt the Christian faith of many such people, their sincerity, honour, integrity and good intentions, and theirs in many ways estimable practice and conduct. However, it is precisely because we know the power of deception that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son. Our church and our land have an intense need of such liberation. Therefore it is that we speak pleadingly

rather than accusingly. We plead for reconciliation, that true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures. And while we do so we are aware that an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone, and none is without a beam in their own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct that work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore this Confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.

4. Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee nor manipulate to our own desire. On this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society that have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice. We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed Church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together, and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by God's Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation and true peace to our country.



# The Accra Confession (2004)

Adopted by the 24<sup>th</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of  
Reformed Churches in Accra.

## Introduction

1. In response to the urgent call of the Southern African constituency which met in Kitwe in 1995 and in recognition of the increasing urgency of global economic injustice and ecological destruction, the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council (Debrecen, Hungary, 1997) invited the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to enter into a process of “recognition, education, and confession” (*processus confessionis*). The churches reflected on Isaiah 58:6 “...to break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free”, as they heard the cries of brothers and sisters around the world and witnessed God’s gift of creation under threat.

2. Since then, nine member churches have committed themselves to a faith stance; some are in the process of covenanting; and others have studied the issues and come to a recognition of the depth of the crisis. Further, in partnership with the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and regional ecumenical organizations, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has engaged in consultations in all regions of the world, from Seoul/Bangkok (1999) to Stony Point (2004). Additional consultations took place with churches from the South in Buenos Aires (2003) and with churches from South and North in London Colney (2004).

3. Gathered in Accra, Ghana, for the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we visited the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast where millions of Africans were commodified, sold and subjected to the horrors of repres-

sion and death. The cries of “never again” are put to the lie by the ongoing realities of human trafficking and the oppression of the global economic system.

4. Today we come to take a decision of faith commitment.

## **Reading the Signs of the Times**

5. We have heard that creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for its liberation (Rom 8:22). We are challenged by the cries of the people who suffer and by the woundedness of creation itself. We see a dramatic convergence between the suffering of the people and the damage done to the rest of creation.

6. The signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted. The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death.

7. We live in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all. The annual income of the richest 1 per cent is equal to that of the poorest 57 per cent, and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition. The debt of poor countries continues to increase despite paying back their original borrowing many times over. Resource-driven wars claim the lives of millions, while millions more die of preventable diseases. The HIV and AIDS global pandemic afflicts life in all parts of the world, affecting the poorest where generic drugs are not available. The majority of those in poverty are women and children and the number of people living in absolute poverty on less than one US dollar per day continues to increase.

8. The policy of unlimited growth among industrialized countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment. In 1989, one species disappeared each day and by 2000 it was one every hour. Climate change, the depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, soil erosion, and threats to fresh water are among the devastating consequences. Communities are disrupted, livelihoods are lost, coastal regions and Pacific islands are threatened with inundation, and storms increase. High levels of radioactivity threaten health and ecology. Life forms and cultural knowledge are being patented for financial gain.

9. This crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization, which is based on the following beliefs:

- unrestrained competition, consumerism and the unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth are the best for the whole world;
- the ownership of private property has no social obligation;
- capital speculation, liberalization and deregulation of the market, privatization of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investments and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital will achieve wealth for all;
- social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, and relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation.

10. This is an ideology that claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation. It makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance which amounts to idolatry.

11. We recognize the enormity and complexity of the situation. We do not seek simple answers. As seekers of truth and justice and looking through the eyes of powerless and suffering people, we see that the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by empire. In using the term “empire” we mean the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.

12. In classical liberal economics, the state exists to protect private property and contracts in the competitive market. Through the struggles of the labour movement, states began to regulate markets and provide for the welfare of people. Since the 1980s, through the transnationalization of capital, neoliberalism has set out to dismantle the welfare functions of the state. Under neoliberalism the purpose of the economy is to increase profits and return for the owners of production and financial capital, while excluding the majority of the people and treating nature as a commodity.

13. As markets have become global so have the political and legal institutions which protect them. The government of the United States of America and its allies,

together with international finance and trade institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization) use political, economic or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of capital owners.

14. We see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. This is a global system that defends and protects the interests of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Lk 16.13).

## **Confession of Faith in the Face of Economic Injustice and Ecological Destruction**

15. Faith commitment may be expressed in various ways according to regional and theological traditions: as confession, as confessing together, as faith stance, as being faithful to the covenant of God. We choose confession, not meaning a classical doctrinal confession, because the World Alliance of Reformed Churches cannot make such a confession, but to show the necessity and urgency of an active response to the challenges of our time and the call of Debrecen. We invite member churches to receive and respond to our common witness.

16. Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore we confess before God and one another.

17. We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (Jn 10.10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.

18. We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps 24.1).

19. Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neo-liberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule.

20. We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9.8–12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55.1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the “least of these” (Mt 25.40) at the centre of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos 2.18ff).

21. Therefore, we reject the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market system or any other system which claims there is no alternative.

22. We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience.

23. Therefore, we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God’s creation.

24. We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused (Ps 146.7–9). God calls for just relationships with all creation.



25. Therefore, we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

26. We believe that God calls us to stand with those who are victims of injustice. We know what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk in God's way (Mic 6.8). We are called to stand against any form of injustice in the economy and the destruction of the environment, "so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Am 5.24).

27. Therefore, we reject any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations – gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.

28. We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness (Jn 10.10). Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Lk 4.18); he supports and protects the downtrodden, the stranger, the orphans and the widows.

29. Therefore, we reject any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation, in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to "steal, kill and destroy" (Jn 10.10) rather than following the "Good Shepherd" who has come for life for all (Jn 10.11).

30. We believe that God calls men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls can become visible.

31. Therefore, we reject any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity.

32. We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign.

33. We commit ourselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God.

34. We humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgement of God's justice.

- We acknowledge the complicity and guilt of those who consciously or unconsciously benefit from the current neoliberal economic global system;
- we recognize that this includes both churches and members of our own Reformed family and therefore we call for confession of sin.
- We acknowledge that we have become captivated by the culture of consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the current economic system. This has all too often permeated our very spirituality.
- We confess our sin in misusing creation and failing to play our role as stewards and companions of nature.
- We confess our sin that our disunity within the Reformed family has impaired our ability to serve God's mission in fullness.

35. We believe in obedience to Jesus Christ, that the church is called to confess, witness and act, even though the authorities and human law might forbid them, and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Acts 4.18ff). Jesus is Lord.

36. We join in praise to God, Creator, Redeemer, Spirit, who has "brought down the mighty from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands" (Lk 1.52f).

## Covenanting for Justice

37. By confessing our faith together, we covenant in obedience to God's will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.

38. On this common journey, some churches have already expressed their commitment in a confession of faith. We urge them to continue to translate this confession into concrete actions both regionally and locally. Other churches have already begun to engage in this process, including taking actions and we urge them to engage further, through education, confession and action. To those other churches, which are still in the process of recognition, we urge them on the basis of our mutual

covenanting accountability, to deepen their education and move forward towards confession.

39. The General Council calls upon member churches, on the basis of this covenanting relationship, to undertake the difficult and prophetic task of interpreting this confession to their local congregations.

40. The General Council urges member churches to implement this confession by following up the Public Issues Committee's recommendations on economic justice and ecological issues (see Appendix 18).

41. The General Council commits the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to work together with other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, civil movements and people's movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation and calls upon our member churches to do the same.

42. Now we proclaim with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (Deut 30.19).

# A Song of Faith (2006)<sup>1</sup>

God is Holy Mystery,  
beyond complete knowledge,  
above perfect description.

Yet,  
in love,  
the one eternal God seeks relationship.

So God creates the universe  
and with it the possibility of being and relating.  
God tends the universe,  
mending the broken and reconciling the estranged.  
God enlivens the universe,  
guiding all things toward harmony with their Source.

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<sup>1</sup> United Church of Canada, "A Song of Faith (2006)," accessed August 1, 2025, <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements/song-faith-2006>.

The Song of Faith was adopted by the General Council of the United Church of Canada in 2006. The Song of Faith was published with a preamble that described the character of the creed:

«This statement of faith seeks to provide a verbal picture of what The United Church of Canada understands its faith to be in its current historical, political, social, and theological context at the beginning of the 21st century. It is also a means of ongoing reflection and an invitation for the church to live out its convictions in relation to the world in which we live. [...] This is not a statement for all time but for *our* time. In as much as the Spirit keeps faith with us, we can express our understanding of the Holy with confidence. And in as much as the Spirit is vast and wild, we recognize that our understanding of the Holy is always partial and limited. Nonetheless we have faith, and this statement collects the meaning of our song».

**668   A Song of Faith (2006)**

Grateful for God's loving action,  
We cannot keep from singing.  
With the Church through the ages,  
we speak of God as one and triune:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
We also speak of God as  
    Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer  
    God, Christ, and Spirit  
    Mother, Friend, and Comforter  
    Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love,  
    and in other ways that speak faithfully of  
the One on whom our hearts rely,  
the fully shared life at the heart of the universe.

We witness to Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.

God is creative and self-giving,  
    generously moving  
    in all the near and distant corners of the universe.  
Nothing exists that does not find its source in God.  
Our first response to God's providence is gratitude.  
We sing thanksgiving.

Finding ourselves in a world of beauty and mystery,  
    of living things, diverse and interdependent,  
    of complex patterns of growth and evolution,  
    of subatomic particles and cosmic swirls,  
we sing of God the Creator,  
the Maker and Source of all that is.

Each part of creation reveals unique aspects of God the Creator,  
    who is both in creation and beyond it.  
All parts of creation, animate and inanimate, are related.  
All creation is good.  
We sing of the Creator,

who made humans to live and move  
and have their being in God.

In and with God,

we can direct our lives toward right relationship  
with each other and with God.

We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life.

We can grow in wisdom and compassion.

We can recognize all people as kin.

We can accept our mortality and finitude, not as a curse,  
but as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter.

Made in the image of God,

we yearn for the fulfillment that is life in God.

Yet we choose to turn away from God.

We surrender ourselves to sin,

a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice, or apathy.

Becoming bound and complacent

in a web of false desires and wrong choices,  
we bring harm to ourselves and others.

This brokenness in human life and community  
is an outcome of sin.

Sin is not only personal

but accumulates  
to become habitual and systemic forms  
of injustice, violence, and hatred.

We are all touched by this brokenness:

the rise of selfish individualism  
that erodes human solidarity;  
the concentration of wealth and power  
without regard for the needs of all;  
the toxins of religious and ethnic bigotry;  
the degradation of the blessedness of human bodies  
and human passions through sexual exploitation;  
the delusion of unchecked progress and limitless growth

that threatens our home, the earth;  
the covert despair that lulls many into numb complicity  
with empires and systems of domination.

We sing lament and repentance.

Yet evil does not—cannot—  
undermine or overcome the love of God.

God forgives,  
and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings  
with honesty and humility.

God reconciles,  
and calls us to repent the part we have played  
in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other.

God transforms,  
and calls us to protect the vulnerable,  
to pray for deliverance from evil,  
to work with God for the healing of the world,  
that all might have abundant life.

We sing of grace.

The fullness of life includes  
moments of unexpected inspiration and courage lived out,  
experiences of beauty, truth, and goodness,  
blessings of seeds and harvest,  
friendship and family, intellect and sexuality,  
the reconciliation of persons through justice  
and communities living in righteousness,  
and the articulation of meaning.

And so we sing of God the Spirit,  
who from the beginning has swept over the face of creation,  
animating all energy and matter  
and moving in the human heart.

We sing of God the Spirit,  
faithful and untameable,  
who is creatively and redemptively active in the world.

The Spirit challenges us to celebrate the holy  
     not only in what is familiar,  
     but also in that which seems foreign.

We sing of the Spirit,  
     who speaks our prayers of deepest longing  
     and enfolds our concerns and confessions,  
     transforming us and the world.

We offer worship  
     as an outpouring of gratitude and awe  
     and a practice of opening ourselves  
     to God's still, small voice of comfort,  
     to God's rushing whirlwind of challenge.

Through word, music, art, and sacrament,  
     in community and in solitude,  
     God changes our lives, our relationships, and our world.  
 We sing with trust.

Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word  
     passed on from generation to generation  
     to guide and inspire,  
     that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place  
     from the human experiences  
     and cultural assumptions of another era.  
 God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

The Spirit breathes revelatory power into scripture,  
     bestowing upon it a unique and normative place  
     in the life of the community.

The Spirit judges us critically when we abuse scripture  
     by interpreting it narrow-mindedly,  
     using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.



The wholeness of scripture testifies  
to the oneness and faithfulness of God.  
The multiplicity of scripture testifies to its depth:  
two testaments, four gospels,  
contrasting points of view held in tension—  
all a faithful witness to the One and Triune God,  
the Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.

We find God made known in Jesus of Nazareth,  
and so we sing of God the Christ, the Holy One embodied.

We sing of Jesus,  
a Jew,  
born to a woman in poverty  
in a time of social upheaval  
and political oppression.

He knew human joy and sorrow.  
So filled with the Holy Spirit was he  
that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.  
We sing praise to God incarnate.

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign—  
a commonwealth not of domination  
but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

He healed the sick and fed the hungry.  
He forgave sins and freed those held captive  
by all manner of demonic powers.  
He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.  
He preached and practised unconditional love—  
love of God, love of neighbour,  
love of friend, love of enemy—  
and he commanded his followers to love one another  
as he had loved them.

Because his witness to love was threatening,  
     those exercising power sought to silence Jesus.  
 He suffered abandonment and betrayal,  
     state-sanctioned torture and execution.  
 He was crucified.

But death was not the last word.  
 God raised Jesus from death,  
     turning sorrow into joy,  
     despair into hope.  
 We sing of Jesus raised from the dead.  
 We sing hallelujah.

By becoming flesh in Jesus,  
     God makes all things new.  
 In Jesus' life, teaching, and self-offering,  
     God empowers us to live in love.  
 In Jesus' crucifixion,  
     God bears the sin, grief, and suffering of the world.  
 In Jesus' resurrection,  
     God overcomes death.  
 Nothing separates us from the love of God.

The Risen Christ lives today,  
     present to us and the source of our hope.  
 In response to who Jesus was  
     and to all he did and taught,  
     to his life, death, and resurrection,  
     and to his continuing presence with us through the Spirit,  
 we celebrate him as  
     the Word made flesh,  
     the one in whom God and humanity are perfectly joined,  
     the transformation of our lives,  
 the Christ.

**674 A Song of Faith (2006)**

We sing of a church

seeking to continue the story of Jesus  
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

We are called together by Christ

as a community of broken but hopeful believers,  
loving what he loved,  
living what he taught,  
striving to be faithful servants of God  
in our time and place.

Our ancestors in faith

bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living;  
upon their lives our lives are built.

Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints,

experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign  
even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.

The church has not always lived up to its vision.

It requires the Spirit to reorient it,

helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition,  
challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement,

for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.

We sing of God's good news lived out,

a church with purpose:

faith nurtured and hearts comforted,  
gifts shared for the good of all,  
resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,  
fierce love in the face of violence,  
human dignity defended,  
members of a community held and inspired by God,  
corrected and comforted,  
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,  
creation's mending.

We sing of God's mission.

We are each given particular gifts of the Spirit.

For the sake of the world,

God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry.

In the church,

some are called to specific ministries of leadership,

both lay and ordered;

some witness to the good news;

some uphold the art of worship;

some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering;

some build up the community of wisdom;

some stand with the oppressed and work for justice.

To embody God's love in the world,

the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship  
of all believers.

In grateful response to God's abundant love,

we bear in mind our integral connection

to the earth and one another;

we participate in God's work of healing and mending creation.

To point to the presence of the holy in the world,

the church receives, consecrates, and shares

visible signs of the grace of God.

In company with the churches

of the Reformed and Methodist traditions,

we celebrate two sacraments as gifts of Christ:

baptism and holy communion.

In these sacraments the ordinary things of life

—water, bread, wine—

point beyond themselves to God and God's love,

teaching us to be alert

to the sacred in the midst of life.

Before conscious thought or action on our part,

we are born into the brokenness of this world.

Before conscious thought or action on our part,

we are surrounded by God's redeeming love.

Baptism by water in the name of the Holy Trinity  
is the means by which we are received, at any age,  
into the covenanted community of the church.  
It is the ritual that signifies our rebirth in faith  
and cleansing by the power of God.

Baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining,  
and transforming power of God's love  
and our grateful response to that grace.

Carrying a vision of creation healed and restored,  
we welcome all in the name of Christ.

Invited to the table where none shall go hungry,  
we gather as Christ's guests and friends.

In holy communion  
we are commissioned to feed as we have been fed,  
forgive as we have been forgiven,  
love as we have been loved.

The open table speaks of the shining promise  
of barriers broken and creation healed.

In the communion meal, wine poured out and bread broken,  
we remember Jesus.

We remember not only the promise but also the price that he paid  
for who he was,  
for what he did and said,  
and for the world's brokenness.

We taste the mystery of God's great love for us,  
and are renewed in faith and hope.

We place our hope in God.

We sing of a life beyond life  
and a future good beyond imagining:  
a new heaven and a new earth,  
the end of sorrow, pain, and tears,  
Christ's return and life with God,

the making new of all things.  
We yearn for the coming of that future,  
even while participating in eternal life now.

Divine creation does not cease  
until all things have found wholeness, union, and integration  
with the common ground of all being.  
As children of the Timeless One,  
our time-bound lives will find completion  
in the all-embracing Creator.  
In the meantime, we embrace the present,  
embodying hope, loving our enemies,  
caring for the earth,  
choosing life.

Grateful for God's loving action,  
we cannot keep from singing.  
Creating and seeking relationship,  
in awe and trust,  
we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love.

Amen.



# A Creed for Easter<sup>1</sup>

What do you know?

**I know that I am.**

**I know that we are.**

What do you feel?

**Sadness and joy.**

**Hope and despair.**

**The awful and the awe-full!**

What do you believe?

**I believe that**

**we are not alone.**

**We live in God's world.**

**I believe in God:**

**who has created and is creating,**

**who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,**

**to reconcile and make new,**

**who works in us and others by the Spirit.**

**I believe that**

**we are called to be the Church:**

**to celebrate God's presence,**

**to live with respect in Creation,**

**to love and serve others,**

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bott, "A Creed for Easter," in *Gathering* Lent-Easter 2017, 34-35. The United Church of Canada adopted *A New Creed* in 1968 and has subsequently revised it to make its language inclusive (1979-80) and to add a statement of ecological concern (1995). *A New Creed* was intended for use in worship and has been used by other churches in different parts of the world. "A Creed for Easter" is an example of how it has been slightly expanded and adapted for Easter worship services in the United Church.



**to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.**

In life?

**In life, in death, in life beyond death.**

We believe...

**God is with us. We are not alone.**

In that belief,

**we worship God.**

# A New Creed with Actions<sup>1</sup>

**We are not alone:** *Left fist out in front of body*

**We live in God's world:** *Right hand comes down and 'claims' or covers fist*

**We believe in God:** *Right finger points up (making symbol for one)*

**Who has created:** *Right hand comes down and circles fist*

**And is creating:** *circles again*

**Who has come in Jesus:** *Right hand held up palm forward to show full hand*

**The Word made flesh:** *right hand comes down and rests on fist*

**To reconcile:** *right hand lifts and descends again upon the fist (as if to break it open)*

**And make new:** *two hands break apart and come back together with a clap (becoming one)*

**Who works in us:** *two hands together 'stir' the heart*

**And others:** *two hands stir in wider circle (eyes making contact with neighbours)*

**By the Spirit:** *two hands join at the thumb (creating a bird) and fly into the sky*

**We trust in God:** *two hands break apart and extend heavenward as if receiving grace*

**We are called to be the church:** *hands join with neighbours' hands at the side*

**To celebrate God's presence:** *hands are lifted together (still joined with neighbours') over the head*

**To live with respect in creation:** *hands let go of neighbours' hands and form a cup (as if holding something beautiful and delicate)*

**To love:** *turn to the right and massage the shoulders of the person next to you*

**And serve:** *turn to the left and do the same*

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<sup>1</sup> United Church of Canada, *A New Creed with Actions* - YouTube video, 1:29, posted by United Church of Canada, October 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFEZl-hcsMR4>.

"A New Creed with Actions" is an example of how *A New Creed* can be given embodied expression in worship. The specified actions symbolize what the words express and add an important physical, active dimension that makes the act of confessing the faith more holistic and lively.

**Others:** *turn and face the circle again*

**To seek justice:** *right hand forms a fist and comes down in front*

**And resist evil:** *left hand makes a stop motion and comes to rest beside fist*

**To proclaim Jesus:** *touch the palms of both hands (showing nail holes)*

**Crucified:** *extend hands out to side*

**And risen:** *lifts hands up above the head*

**Our judge and our hope:** *make a fist with right hand and shake it slowing and with determination at head level, eyes closed*

**In life:** *left hand extends forward and opening slowing like a flower*

**In death:** *left hand closing slowing*

**In life beyond death:** *right hand extended and opening slowing*

**God is with us:** *two hands clasp as if in prayer*

**We are not alone:** *Hands unclasp and grasp neighbours' hands*

**Thanks be to God:** *Hands raised together*

**Amen:** *right fist in the air*

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