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ARTICLE

What did the Nicene Creed say?

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Abstract

This article examines the origin of and controversies surrounding the Nicene Creed and discusses its limitations as a statement of faith. It points out, for example, that the Creed fails to affirm either the unity of the three persons in one God or even the divinity or personhood of the Spirit. It neither affirms the creation of the world from nothing nor denies that the Son is a creature. The article then seeks to answer the following three questions: (1) why is the Creed so indecisive even on points that were under debate at the Council of Nicaea?; (2) if there was so little that could be defined, what did those who promulgated the Creed hope to accomplish?; and finally (3) where should we look for a trustworthy statement of the ecumenical teaching of the Church on creation, the Trinity and the mission of the Son?

Keywords: creation; Nicene Creed; theology

Introduction

The zeal with which all churches are celebrating the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea is a measure of the importance that is assigned to it as an epoch in the history of a hitherto small, dispersed and oppressed religion. The union of the Empire under Constantine in 324 had not only allayed any fear of the renewal of persecution, but had made possible for the first time a truly ecumenical process of deliberation on matters of doctrine and discipline. If the Council of 325 had done no more than decree that the date of Easter should be fixed by the Roman and Alexandrian computation,[1] it would have made no small contribution to the unity of Christendom; had it only framed canons which implied the validity of baptisms in the name of the Trinity, it would have made an equally significant contribution to the peace of Christendom where it was not united.[2] But of course it has been remembered chiefly for neither of these rulings but for the Creed which served as the prototype for the one that is still recited and set to music in every church that professes allegiance to the Catholic tradition. It is this creed which is commonly

[1] The canon is not recorded, but see Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.17.1–3.20.2, with A Cameron and S G Hall (trans), *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999), 268–273.

[2] This is an inference from the contrast between canon 8 which does not enjoin rebaptism of Novatianists and canon 19, which assumes that followers of Paul of Samosata should be rebaptized. See E J Jonkers (ed), *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae Saeculo Quarto habita sunt* (Leiden, 1954), 42 and 46.

supposed to have established the divinity of Christ as the second person of the Trinity, not created but eternally begotten of the Father, who for our sake alone took on our sinful flesh so that by the death and resurrection of God himself in this human form the whole human race might be freed from sin and given the power to become like God. For those who cherish this as the Nicene faith it may be a surprise to look again, or perhaps for the first time, at the Creed to which about 250 bishops attached their signatures in 325:[3]

> We believe in one God, Father almighty,
> maker of all things seen and unseen;
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father
> *monogenês*, that is, from the substance (*ousia*) of the Father,
> God from God, light from light, true God from true God,
> begotten not made (*poiêthenta*),
> consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father,
> 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 [*or* back] to the heavens,
> and who is coming again to judge living and dead;
>
> And in the Holy Spirit.
>
> But those who say 'there was when He was not', and 'before being begotten He was not', and 'He came to be from what was not', or assert that the Son of God is from another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or created *(ktistos*) or alterable or changeable: these the church Catholic anathematizes.

It is startling to find so much on the meaning of the term *monogenês*,[4] so little on the humanity of Jesus or the work of the Holy Spirit. In this article I shall argue that we should not expect the Creed to be a full profession of faith or a compendium of doctrine, and that its statements on the Trinity and creation are strictly tempered to the occasion. Rather than concluding that the concepts of Triune divinity and creation out of nothing are inessential to Christianity, I shall argue that we shall see them to be essential when we grasp that orthodoxy is defined not by the extemporary decisions of any council but by the harmony of faith and devotion, sentiment and conviction that we find among the great doctors of the Church from the Nicene era to our own.

[3] This translation of the Symbolum Nicaenum (as it is called to distinguish it from the liturgical version) is taken from M J Edwards, 'The First Council of Nicaea', in M M Mitchell and F M Young (eds), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol 1, *Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge, 2006), 552–567 at 561. The sources are Socrates, *Church History* 1.8; Athanasius, appendix to *On the decrees of Nicaea*; Philostorgius, *Church History* 1.7, p 10.

[4] John 1.18, 3.16, etc., meaning 'only-begotten' or 'unique'.

Why a creed?

The Creed of 325 is not recited in modern liturgies; so far as we know, it was never recited by, or even divulged to, the laity at the time.[5] It was therefore an anomaly, as the only creeds for which we have evidence before 325 were employed in the rite of baptism.[6] According to the *Apostolic Tradition* which is attributed to the third-century bishop Hippolytus of Rome,[7] the candidates were asked whether they believed in God the Father almighty, in his only Son Jesus Christ who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, in his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate and resurrection, and finally in the Holy Spirit and the general resurrection from the dead. Although the date and provenance of this text are now in dispute, the formulary now known as the Apostles' Creed, which has much the same content, was almost certainly used in the Roman church before the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius of Caesarea, in a letter addressed to his congregation after the Council, alleges that the creed which he recited, which is generally held to have been derived from the baptismal rite of his own church, was the prototype of the one that he had signed;[8] it resembles the Nicene creed more closely than the two Roman examples in omitting mention of the Virgin Mary and Pontius Pilate and in acclaiming the Son as 'God from God' (although not 'true God from true God'). Yet, in spite of these similarities, we have no evidence that the Nicene Creed was ever used liturgically – and indeed, notwithstanding the testimony of Eusebius, it seems barely plausible that any diocese would have been willing to use a formulary which made no reference to the historical circumstances of Jesus' nativity and death.

A Creed used in Jerusalem after 360 can be reconstructed with confidence from the writings of Cyril, the bishop of that see, and Epiphanius of Salamis, a great chastiser of heretics, who never leaves us in doubt of his attachment to Nicene doctrine, and indeed to the person and teaching of Athanasius.[9] No question can be raised about the allegiance to Nicaea of Augustine or Rufinus of Aquileia, yet both chose not the Nicene but the Apostles' Creed as a text for the instruction of catechumens.

One indication that the Creed of 325 was not used liturgically is that casual citations of it are apt to include material that is found only in other creeds: Cyril of Alexandria, for example, when he is not reproducing a copy from the archives, says that the fathers at Nicaea accorded the title *Theotokos*, 'Mother of God', to Mary, and his antagonist Nestorius also assumes that the Virgin Birth was asserted at Nicaea.[10] When Pope Leo the Great purports to be testing the heresy of Eutyches against 'the creed', he refers to the virgin birth and to the formula 'God from God' as though they were of the same provenance.[11] When he transcribes it from an archival copy in *Letter 165* his text agrees with that of the Creed of 325, but it seems evident that this

[5] C H Turner, *The History and Use of Creeds and Anathemas in the Early Centuries of the Church* (London, 1906), 34–40 assesses some apparently countervailing evidence.

[6] See J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London, 1972), 30–62.

[7] See W Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (Berlin, 2024), 129–130, 151, etc.

[8] Theodoret, *Church History* 1.12.4; Kinzig (note 7), 235–242.

[9] This is the Creed designated J in Kinzig (note 7), 363–377.

[10] T H Bindley, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London, 1899), 107, lines 113–115, and 123.

[11] Bindley (note 10), 195.19–196.34.

is not the version that had fixed itself in his memory. Thus either this creed was not employed liturgically or it had already been made fit for liturgical use in an amplified form. Such an expansion had in fact taken place at the Council of Constantinople in 381, although the purported recitation of this at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 may include a number of subsequent additions. [12] As the Council of Constantinople was not agreed before Chalcedon to be ecumenical, it is unlikely that Cyril, Augustine and Leo were consciously making use of its promulgations; all that we can infer from their inaccuracies is that the formulary of 325 was preserved for consultation rather than everyday use.

It may be that the Creed of 325 is best understood as a summation of those theological questions which were decided at the Council. The virgin birth was not in dispute; the divinity and personhood of the Spirit were matters on which no resolution had been sought. The topics to be canvassed were the *eternity* of the Son and the *manner* in which his origination from the Father was to be distinguished from that of the natural creation. In the body of the Creed it was asserted, in clear opposition to Arius, that the Son proceeds from and shares the Father's *ousia* (essence or substance), while the anathemas proscribe at least two tenets known to have been advanced by Arius, that the Son was 'from things that are not' and that before his creation or generation he did not exist. The assertions that 'there was when he was not' and that he was changeable and alterable were no doubt imputed to Arius,[13] although it is possible that the Council also has heretics of a different stamp in mind.[14] It was not the intention of the bishops, however, to issue an epitome of the faith that was held by Christians or to stigmatise all heresies with the assiduity of some later conciliar and imperial decrees.

Once this limitation of scope is recognised, we should be less inclined to wonder why the creeds produced by subsequent councils proved to be so ephemeral or to assume that wherever they differ from Nicaea they are attempting to supersede it. This intention has often been imputed, for example, to the Dedication Council of Antioch in 341, which omits the term *homoousios* and the phrase 'from the *ousia* of the Father' and does not imply that the Son (although he existed 'before the ages') is co-eternal with the Father.[15] It is true that this was a gathering of bishops who for the most part had not been present at Nicaea; we have no reason, however, to distrust the statement of Julius, Bishop of Rome, that a high proportion of those who met at Nicaea were dead by 343.[16] Antioch certainly disagrees with Nicaea as to the orthodoxy of Arius; on the other hand, it vehemently rejects the notion that the Son was a creature, judging Arius to have escaped this interdict by his reservation

[12] See again Kinzig (note 7), 363–377.

[13] See for example Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.5.

[14] Eusebius, at Theodoret, *Church History* 1.12.12 assumes that it is directed against the notion that God suffered any division or mutation of his *ousia* when fathering the Son. This is a position rejected by Arius and ascribed by Eusebius himself to his bugbear Marcellus of Ancyra, whom he accused of teaching that the Son became a *hypostasis* only at the Nativity through the actuation of a *dunamis* or potentiality that resided in the Father. At 1.12.17 he insinuates that the anathema on 'before he was born he was not' concerns the Nativity, and is therefore another shaft against Marcellus.

[15] For the creeds associated with this Council, see Kelly (note 6), 263–274, esp 268–270.

[16] See S Parvis, 'The Strange Disappearance of the Moderate Origenists. The Arian Controversy 326–341', (2006) 39 *Studia Patristica* 97–102; but also the letter of Julius at Athanasius, *Defence against the Arians*, 23.

'a creature but not as one of the creatures'. If the canon upholding the decision of the 'Great Council' on the calculation of Easter has been rightly attached to this occasion, we cannot dismiss it as a cabal of Arians who were disgruntled by the verdict of Nicaea.[17] Athanasius represents it in this light because it deposed him from his see, but this was little more than a ratification of the findings of previous synods, all of which had been set up to judge Athanasius on the charge of episcopal tyranny, without reference to his position on any doctrinal controversy. When he persuaded Julius of Rome that he was the victim of a heretical conspiracy, his reinstatement by Julius as Bishop of Alexandria led to schism at the Council of Sardica in 343; the western party issued canons vindicating the intervention of Rome in affairs of the east and concluding with a creed of its own which does not contain an exact equivalent of the word *homoousios*.[18] The use of the noun *substantia* to denote the essence or nature which was common to all three persons of the Trinity caused much embarrassment to Athanasius when it was rendered in Greek as *hypostasis*, since the Greeks invariably affirmed three hypostases; yet no-one in antiquity or in modern times has suspected a meeting so obviously sympathetic to his pretensions of being inimical to the Council of Nicaea.

What does the Creed say about the Trinity?

The Council had not been summoned to canvass the doctrine of the Trinity. The matters in dispute between Alexander of Alexandria and Arius, one of his presbyters, were the divinity and eternity of the Son and the mode of his origination from the Father. Arius held that the Father alone is God in the proper sense, as the scriptures expressly state that he alone is good, wise, immortal and the true God.[19] The Son is worthy of worship and may be styled God,[20] but he possesses his attributes only by derivation from the Father; as a creature superior to other creatures he is timeless but lacks the positive attribute of being eternal. Arius nonetheless speaks of three hypostases who command the devotion of Christians, and could hardly have done otherwise as a self-professed champion of orthodoxy. Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is enjoined in the Gospel of Matthew; the worship of all three in liturgical sequence is attested as the practice of the Church by Justin Martyr, and Tertullian had coined the word *trinitas* to express the peculiar unity that they share while remaining three.[21] Origen too has assumed that the Church acknowledges three hypostases,[22] and the consubstantiality, or *homoousiotês*,

[17] See Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola*, 47 for the first canon of Anntioch; but also C W B Stephens, *Canon Law and Episcopal Authority. The Canons of Antioch and Serdica* (Oxford, 2015), 11–82.

[18] Athanasius, *Tome to the Antiochenes* 5.1; Kinzig (note 7), 284–287. On the Council, its bifurcation and its sequel, see H Hess, *The Early Development of Canon Law and the Council of Sardica* (Oxford, 2002).

[19] See his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, reproduced by Athanasius, *On the Synods* 16. Arius is alluding to Mark 10.18, John 17.3, 1 Timothy 6.16 and Jude 25.

[20] Arius, Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, reproduced by Theodoret, *Church History* 1.5.4. Elsewhere in this letter, the noun *theos* refers peculiarly to the Father.

[21] Matthew 28.19; Justin, *First Apology* 13; Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2.4, 3.1, etc.

[22] See *Commentary on John* 2.10.75; I Ramelli, 'Origen, Greek Philosophy and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of Hypostasis' (2012) 105 *Harvard Theological Review* 302–350.

of the Son and the Father had been proposed by a number of thinkers who were not manifest heretics.[23] If the Council had in fact proclaimed that there is one God who exists in three hypostases, it would hardly have innovated on the teaching of Tertullian, whose vocabulary had become, and was to remain, the norm for Latin theology. What it chose to proclaim, however, was first its belief in one God, the Father Almighty, secondly its belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father who was 'true God from true God'[24] and thirdly, with no further gloss, belief in the Holy Spirit. The silence of this final clause implies that there was no consensus as to whether the Holy Spirit was God; the adoption of the biblical phrase 'true God', by contrast, certainly implies that the Son is God in the same way as the Father (a position denied by Arius and doubted by others), but it does not entail, and might even be thought to preclude, the inference that he and the Father constitute one God. Speakers of Greek were familiar with the use of the locution 'one god' to single out either the greatest or the most propitious member of the pantheon,[25] and Christ's praise of the Father as the 'one true God' at John 17.3 was not understood at Nicaea as a negation of his own claims to divinity. To read this formulary as an affirmation of three persons in one Godhead, would be less natural than to read it as affirming either two persons in one Godhead or two gods.

If it is a heresy to subordinate the Son to the Father, this cannot be proved by appeal to the Nicene Creed, unless we make it a rule that there can be no greater or less among gods as there is among humans and angels, kings and slaves. Nor do the words adopted at the Council prove the eternity of God the Son as a person distinct from the Father. The anathemas do indeed forbid us to say, with Arius, that he did not exist before he was begotten, but they do not determine whether he existed before the creation of the world as anything more than a latent potency – the paradigm or archetype of the world, as the Jewish exegete Philo opined, the word yet unspoken (*endiathetos logos*) as some Greek thinkers put it, his *ratio* or reason (to quote Tertullian) as opposed to his sermon or speech.[26] So long as it was assumed that the title *Logos* is accorded to him as the founding and governing principle of creation, there was no cause to credit him with discrete existence before the 'beginning' which is shown in the Book of Genesis to be separated from our own time by a finite series of generations. It may be that the bishops at Nicaea chose to eschew the term *Logos*, which figures in other creeds, for fear of being taken to mean that the Son is coeval with the creation; but even if this is so, it does not follow from their reluctance to assert that they wished to assert the contrary. Subsequent authors were not falling into heresy when they confessed the Son's existence 'before the ages' in preference to his eternity.[27]

[23] See M J Edwards, 'Did Origen Apply the Word Homoousios to the Son?' (1998) 49 *Journal of Theological Studies* 658–670. Also Sozomen, *Church History* 1.15 on Alexander of Alexandria.

[24] The Council must be construing 1 John 5.20 with reference to the Son, although the syntax also permits it to refer to the Father, as it certainly does in the mouth of the Son himself at John 17.3.

[25] See A Chaniotis, 'Megatheism: the Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults', in S Mitchell and P Van Nuffelen (eds), *One God. Pagan Monotheism and the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010), 112–140.

[26] Philo, *On the Making of the World* 4, 6.24 and 48.139; Theophilus of Antioch, *To Auolycus* 2.10; Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 5.3.

[27] See Eusebius at Theodoret, *Church History* 1.12.17 and often elsewhere.

Thoughts on creation

To determine the origin of the Son would be to determine his nature; Arius, however, leaves the mystery open by juxtaposing four scriptural participles: begotten, created, established, and ordained.[28] Some perhaps apply to the Son only in his incarnate state, but Arius seems to get of one mind with Eusebius, who is fond of quoting Isaiah 53.8: 'his generation who can declare?'.[29] The Nicene Creed favours only one term, 'begotten', but how many does it explicitly proscribe? 'Begotten not created' are the words of a well-known hymn which comes from the Latin, but the Greek of the Nicene Creed should be translated 'begotten not made'. So far as our evidence goes, neither Arius nor any of the bishops at Nicaea who were accused of Arian sympathies had ever asserted that the Son was *made*. If anyone before the Council had taken this position, it was Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria,[30] a revered survivor of persecution in the late third century; but if he did indeed say this, he was one of the few to ignore the distinction that Origen, his fellow-Alexandrian, had drawn between making (which pre-supposes a material substrate of some kind) and creating (which is properly an act of God alone requiring no matter but the Father's will).[31] Origen himself is alleged to have called the Son a creature, but if he did so he meant only that he depended for his existence on the Father and was a perfect expression of the Father's own goodness, with no potential for falling away into sin and error. For him, as for many of those who met at Nicaea, the use of the terms 'created' and 'creature' had scriptural warrant, since Proverbs 8.22 puts into the mouth of Wisdom the statement that 'the Lord created me in the beginning of his way'. Because Jesus Christ is extolled as the wisdom of God at 1 Corinthians 1.21–24, it was widely assumed Wisdom in Proverbs 8 is not merely a personification of a paternal attribute but the second person of the Trinity; scholarly readers like Origen were aware that the word which the Septuagint translates as 'created' could also be rendered 'possessed', but the inspiration of the Septuagint was uncontested among Greek-speaking Christians.[32] The fact that Wisdom also declares herself to be begotten at Proverbs 8.25 suggested to many that both 'begotten' and 'created' are terms translated from the physical realm which cannot perfectly express the mystery of the Son's generation. If the creed had said 'begotten not created' it would certainly have been censuring the theology of Arius; it would also have been suspected, however, of censuring the Word of God, and for that reason it restricts itself to an anodyne formulation, to which all parties would have been willing to subscribe before they assembled at Nicaea.

Athanasius, however, takes the view in his writings after the Council that anyone who describes the Son as a creature is an Arian, unless they restrict this term to the human nature that he acquired in the incarnation.[33] In his own transcription

[28] Athanasius, *On Synods* 16 (to Alexander, as above).

[29] Eusebius, *Demonstration of the Gospel* 5.3, citing the Septuagintal (Greek) rendering of Isaiah 53.8, which does not correspond to our English translations of the Hebrew.

[30] Athanasius, *On the Opinion of Dionysius* 21.

[31] Arius, letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, in Theodoret, *Church History* 1.5.4.

[32] P Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford, 1994), citing Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.182.

[33] See D M Gwynn, *The Eusebians* (Oxford, 2007), 233–242.

of the Nicene Creed, which is part of the letter by Eusebius that he appends to his treatise *On the Decrees of Nicaea*, the anathemas which are directed against the teachings of Arius prohibit the use of *ktiston*, 'created' as a description of the Son. But this is the one anathema that is missing in the transcription of the same document by Theodoret, a well-informed historian of the fifth century, whose orthodoxy regarding the divinity of the Son is uncontested. Moreover, we find the same omission in careful reproductions of the Creed of 325 by Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan and Cyril of Alexandria, three of the most distinguished doctors of the church;[34] when we add that this anathema is wanting again in the version of the Creed that was recited at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, we have little choice but to conclude that Athanasius possessed a defective copy of the letter of Eusebius, which although it contains the anathema on *ktiston* in its transcript of the Creed, includes no comment on it by Eusebius himself, who in other work strongly defends the application of Proverbs 8.22 to Christ.

As the Creed does not adjudicate between the creation and the begetting of the second Person, so it neither establishes nor pre-supposes the doctrine of the creation of the physical world from nothing. In preference to *ktistes*, which is a biblical designation of God as Creator, it styles him *poiêtês*, or 'Maker' of heaven on earth, adopting a term made famous by Plato.[35] While this title does not lack scriptural warrant – the verb *epoiêsen* or 'made' appears in the opening verses of both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 – it was probably chosen in anticipation of the clause 'begotten, not made', which as we have seen was applied to the Son in preference to 'begotten not created'. By the time of the Council, it was almost the universal belief of Christians that the world was created from nothing – that is, from a state in which neither the world nor any other thing existed – and not merely 'from things that are not', a phrase that may refer to any state of affairs in which the thing of which one is speaking did not yet exist.[36] It is often alleged against Arius that he declared the Son to be made or created from nothing, thereby levelling him with the world: so far as we know, however, he did not say that the Son was 'from nothing' but 'from things that are not', the preposition 'from' depending only on the verb 'to be'. His principal object was to rule out the derivation of the Son either from the substance of God or from matter, on the grounds that the former implied the divisibility of God while the latter would make the Son subject to all the infirmities of the beings who had

[34] See Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, above; Basil, *Letter 125*; Ambrose, *On the Faith* 1.20; Theosdoret, *Church History* 1.12.8. See further M F Wiles, 'A Textual Variant in the Creed of the Council of Nicaea' (1993) 26 *Studia Patristica* 428–433. M J Edwards, 'Alexander of Alexandria and the Homoousion' (2012) 66 *Vigiliae Christianae* 482–502, esp 498.

[35] See Plato, *Timaeus* 28c on the difficulty of finding out the father and maker of the cosmos. At *First Clement* 19.2 this is adapted to read 'Father and Creator (*ktistês*)', using the term employed at 1 Peter 4.19.

[36] See G May, *Creatio ex Nihilo. The Doctrine of Creation out of 'Nothing' in Early Christian Tradition*, translation by A S Worrall (Edinburgh, 1994), 8m citing Xenophon, *memorabilia* 2.2.3. The creation of the world from 'things that are not' is affirmed at 2 Maccabees 7.28, where the phrase is often taken as an allusion to the *tohu-bohu* or chaos of Genesis 1.2. While Tatian may have been the first to say plainly (c. 170) that God created matter (*Oration to the Greeks* 5.3), the statement at Proverbs 8.24 (*Septuagint*) that God made the abysses may look back to the 'deep' of Genesis 1.2.

been created through him.[37] Perhaps he avoids the phrase 'from nothing'[38] because it was used of the world or because it was not in his view an apposite phrase for that which sprang from the will of God. Whatever his motives, the Council did no more than affirm that all things in heaven and earth were made by the Father through the Son, a tenet which would not be denied by Arius and was not in itself incongruous with belief in creation from a material substrate.

Conclusion: Creeds and dogma

The Creed of 325 is the despair of the systematic theologian; for the historian a stimulus to reflection on the role that creeds have played in the enunciation of doctrine. Why, even when allowance is made for its limited scope, is it so indecisive even on points that were under debate at the Council? If there was so little that could be defined, what could this lacunose promulgation hope to accomplish? And where, if we cannot find at Nicaea, can we look for a trustworthy statement of the ecumenical teaching of the Church on creation, the Trinity and the mission of the Son?

Why is the Creed so indecisive?

The answer to the first question is surely that, setting aside all legend and regarding it as its contemporaries regarded it, the Nicene Council of 325 was a meeting like any other, which could publish no decisions until it arrived at a consensus, and could reach consensus only by a combination of shared pre-suppositions, reasoned debate and the exercise of authority by those in whom it was vested by agreement. The letter in which Eusebius of Caesarea records his own part in the proceedings suggest that the debate left open a certain latitude of interpretation, since he felt able to subscribe to the word *homoousios* without affirming more than the ineffable superiority of the Son of God to all things created. This is all the more remarkable as he also recounts that this was the only word which owed its inclusion on the Creed to the will of the Emperor, and that it is Constantine who added the gloss that the Son emerged from a state of potentiality within the Father – a view not put to Eusebius by the authors of the Creed, not endorsed in his letter or other writings, and not echoed later by Athanasius or by any other orthodox commentator. No other intervention in the wording of the Creed is ascribed to Constantine by Eusebius, who states elsewhere that he thought the controversy inconsequential. It is not surprising therefore that the adjective *homoousios,* together with the cognate phrase 'from the *ousia* of the Father', should have been the most novel elements in the Creed, while the rest is largely commonplace, shirking objections sometimes by a choice between near-synonyms, as in saying 'not made' rather 'not created', sometimes by

[37] See his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia at Theodoret, *Church History* 1.5.4. The novelty of the expression is deplored by Eusebius at Theodoret, *Church History* 1.12.15. See further J M Robertson, *Christ as Mediator* (Oxford, 2007), 92–94.

[38] G C Stead, 'The Word "from nothing"' (1998) 49 *Journal of Theological Studies* 671–684 appears to see no difference between the two locutions.

the yoking of near-synonyms without further elucidation (as in 'any other *ousia* or *hypostasis*') and sometimes by simple reticence, as in 'And in the Holy Spirit'.

What did the Creed hope to accomplish?

The answer to the second question will not elude readers of this *Journal*. A Council is a legislative, not an academic assembly, and the purpose of laws in most cases is to prescribe, permit or prohibit certain actions, sometimes extending all these provisions from action to speech, but seldom if ever attempting the invidious and futile progression from speech to thought. The salvation of souls and the unity of the church might be deemed to require the enforcement of certain replies to questions about the content of faith and the proscription of other replies which a sufficient majority held to be false or pernicious. It would not be conducive to unity to curtail speculation on open questions or even to punish false statements where they did not imperil the fundamental doctrines or were thought by a large minority to be defensible, if not true. Councils may be more diffident in their stipulations than magistrates or authoritative bodies which wield greater powers of coercion: thus even the amplified version of the Creed which forms part of many Christian liturgies does not affirm the divinity or consubstantiality of the Spirit, although the Emperor Theodosius, who convened the First Council of Constantinople in 381, had already given legal force to this tenet in his Edict of Thessalonica, which was accompanied by harsh sanctions against a multitude of dissenting communions.[39]

Where should we look for a trustworthy statement of the ecumenical teaching of the Church on creation, the Trinity and the mission of the Son?

The answer to the third question is not to be found in the circumspection of prelates or even in the vociferations of Emperors, which would not have been repeated so often had they been obeyed. There may be churches in which one sovereign voice determines the articles of faith, but if we ask how a common mind is formed in all those churches that describe themselves as catholic, the common depositary is the teaching of the most esteemed theologians, some in the east and some in the west, some in concert and some in isolation, some under authority, and some for a time in defiance of it; there is no single canon, but those of the east and the west have been found to agree in their basic propositions, and not only when they concur with the parsimonious wording of the Nicene Creed. The doctrine of three persons in one substance was already a norm for both Greek and Latin theologians before the Council of Constantinople, and even the putative discord between Augustine and the Cappadocians has proved on inspection to be almost nugatory. As the stature of Maximus comes to be acknowledged in the west, we recall that he owed his first conciliar vindication to a Pope. As Palamas comes to be more admired and better understood throughout Christendom, so does Thomas Aquinas. Students of modern dogmatics can discern Cyril and Athanasius behind Karl Barth, Dionysius and Maximus behind Hans Urs von Balthasar.

[39] *Theodosian Code* 16.1.2.

Books have appeared in recent years on the subject of conciliar Christology, a proposed distillation of the church's teaching in the person of Christ from the proclamations of the first seven Councils.[40] There is little of this in the Nicene Creed, which omits not only the Virgin birth but the death of the Son of God, except insofar as this is implied by his passion and his resurrection. On the second point other councils are equally silent, an observation that throws into relief the difference between the evolution of Christian thought and the constraints that have been imposed on this by conciliar legislation. Councils do not speculate or dogmatise, but set punitive bounds to both speculation and dogma: they may also define a core of beliefs which must be sincerely held if one is to be worthy of the name Christian. Yet just as the indispensable verb and noun are seldom enough to produce a conversational sentence, so the articles of a creed do not suffice by themselves to make up a system of doctrine. Our systems differ because our increments differ, but it is useless to imagine that the Christian world could return to unanimity by banishing all the increments and embracing the Creed of 325 alone. By analogy one might consider the perversity of writing a history of political science in this country using no other sources but Acts of Parliament.

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[40] T Pawl, *In Defence of Extended Conciliar Christology* (Oxford, 2019). My concern here is with the possible misapplication of the phrase, not with the argument of the book.

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