Why Heresy Matters: Contesting the Legacy of Nicaea[1]

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Abstract:
The Council of Nicaea (325) marked a watershed in the history of Christianity and in the history of doctrine. Theologically, it was a pivotal moment for the recently legalized Christian religion. The creation of orthodoxy at Nicaea resulted in the creation or expansion of heresy and a doctrine that was thereafter imposed with a modicum of protection from challenge. Augustine noted that only great people were heretics. Despite such greatness, heresy has always been feared. Intellectual adventure is a dynamic process rather than a series of still frames. Reflecting on the council's 1700th anniversary, this essay explores the worst (unintended?) consequences of Nicaea in terms of theological calcification, intolerance, persecution, and the demonizing of dissenters, and offers a revisionist evaluation of heresy. It argues that heresy is not necessarily fatal and that the intellectual legacy of Nicaea has included demonizing difference, thus bequeathing a contested legacy to Christianity.

Keywords: Christology; heresy; history of doctrine; Nicaea; orthodoxy; Trinity

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Introduction

The Council of Nicaea has exerted tremendous influence on the theology and history of Christianity. That being so, is it safe or sensible to assume a posture against the Nicene world in reflecting on the proceedings, deliberations, decisions and legacy of Nicaea after 1700 years? One must venture into that fraught and potentially suspect consideration if, and this is the critical matter, there is any chance that heresy matters.

St. Augustine once noted that only great men (and great women) have been heretics.[2] The worst (possibly unintended) consequences of Nicaea relate

1 This essay is based on a conference address "Remembering Nicaea: A Contested Legacy:" A Joint Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Studies and the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research and the Christian Research Association. Pilgrim Theological College, Melbourne, Australia, 1–3 July 2025.

2 Augustinus Hipponensis, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CXXIV, 5, in: Eligius Dekkers – Johannes Fraipont (eds.), *Enarrationes in Psalmos CI–CL*, in: *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 40, Turnhout: Brepols, 1956, 1839.

to heresy. Context is important because a text without a context is a pretext for a prooftext. The Cappadocian bishop Gregory of Nyssa asserts that theological debates routinely occurred all over fourth-century Constantinople.

> "Now there are those who, like the Athenians, are occupied with nothing else to do but talk and hear something new, who either yesterday or a little before emerged from sedentary, plebeian, and servile occupations, are now suddenly tumultuous authors of theological opinions, perhaps some servants and thugs from servile ministries, who philosophize magnificently about things incomprehensible to us. It is not at all unknown to whom the speech is addressed. Every place in the city is filled with such people. In the alleyways, at crossroads, in the marketplaces, on the streets. Old-clothes men bankers [money-changers], those selling food. If you ask any of them about coins [or change], he will philosophize about the nature of the begotten and the unbegotten; if you inquire about the price and quality of bread, you will be told that the Father is greater, and the Son is subordinate; if you ask if it would be possible to have a bath, you will be told that the Son was made from nothing."[3]

While possibly hyperbolic, the assertion suggests that religious discourse found resonance in the world of early Christianity. The collision between Arian and Trinitarian views of God can only be understood by coming to terms with the political and social influences that exerted force on the history of theology.[4]

Current studies on the history of Christianity and historical theology continue to reinforce earlier scholarship. These efforts underline the variety and vitality of early Christian communities which resulted in a spectrum of interpretations and teachings, including the creation of orthodoxy itself. Theological certainty and doctrinal orthodoxy reached in the post-Nicene milieu should not be understood as a superior form of Christian faith. It did signify a different type of Christianity than had hitherto prevailed. In the fourth century the world witnessed "the rise of a new kind of imperial Christianity under the Emperor Constantine" which "contributed to the development of a new kind of male, orthodox, ecclesiological self-image."[5]

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3 Gregory of Nyssa, *De deitate filii et spiritus sancti et in Abraham*, in: Ernst Rhein (ed.), *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 10, pt. 2, Leiden: Brill, 1996, 121.

4 Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 182–6.

5 Caroline Humfress, "Chez la femme!" Heresy and Law in Late Antiquity, in: Rosamond McKitterick – Charlotte Methuen – Andrew Spicer (eds.), *The Church and the Law*, (Studies in Church History, vol. 56), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 36–59, 43.

Nicene Orthodoxy: Problems and Legacy

The First Council of Nicaea, convened in 325, constituted a landmark event, yet uncertainty surrounds almost every aspect of its proceedings. No *Acts* survive, signatory lists are incomplete, the organization of the council's meetings, along with the identities and motivations of participants, including the number of bishops who attended, remain controversial.[6] The decisions made during the Council were ultimately the result of negotiation (Emperor Constantine's preferred *modus operandi*), compromise, and consensus among this shadowy and diverse group of religious leaders. The sequence is opaque. It is apparent that "Nicaea produced a formula; the problem now was its interpretation."[7]

The definition of "orthodoxy" produced during the Nicene period and continuing to evolve thereafter yielded a dominant theological outlook that has often been static, platonic, propositional, and declarative. It is best codified in a hoary and oft-repeated declaration by the fifth-century French monk and theologian Vincent of Lérins who famously asserted that "orthodoxy" was *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus* ("that which has been believed by everyone, everywhere, and at all times").[8] This dictum reflected a fictional normative theological mentality. The Council of Carthage in 256 concluded that heretics were truly Antichrists and enemies of Christ.[9] The evolution of an illegal sect into a major religious force coincided with the development of doctrine leading to a transition from the theological climate of Origen to the ecclesiastical culture of Athanasius. The pivot centred on the Council of Nicaea and its major outcomes.

Nicaea decided on a series of perspectives and fought for those ideals without asking too many questions, as few did, following the elevation of

6 Rebecca Lyman, The Theology of the Council of Nicaea, in: Brendan N. Wolfe (ed.), *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 2024, available from: https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TheTheologyoftheCouncilofNicaea; David Gwynn, Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea, in: Richard Kim Young (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 90–101.

7 Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, 20.

8 Reginald Stewart Moxon (ed.), *The Commonitorium of Vincent of Lerins*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915, 10.

9 Letter of Cyprian to Jubianus, *De haereticorum baptismate*, in: Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, 217 vols., Paris: Garnier, 1841–1855, vol. 3, col. 1161.

"Nicene theology." A crucial question remains: Is it possible that Nicaea was mistaken (in its decisions)? What followed in the decades and centuries after the council was a gradual and widespread acceptance of Nicaea's unique authority and sole sufficiency. One should not underestimate the importance of the struggle for authority and, by extension, control.[10] The important challenge persists: In what ways could Nicene decisions be preserved amidst increasing inadequacy of its texts to speak into new or emerging doctrinal controversies, or the vagaries of developing church history, or challenges presented by different cultures, times and places around a myriad of questions, problems, and unexpected or unanticipated puzzles?

The contested legacy of Nicaea draws attention to the curse of the canon. The Council played no role in the canon of Scripture. That myth originated in the ninth-century Greek manuscript *Synodicon Vetus*, which described a miraculous event where canonical books remained on an altar while apocryphal ones fell off: "The canonical and apocryphal books [the council] distinguished in the following manner: in the house of God the books were placed down by the holy altar; then the council asked the Lord in prayer that the inspired works be found on top and – as in fact happened – the spurious on the bottom."[11] Rather than Scripture, the idea of "canon" and canonical status applied, more generally, to soteriological considerations during the patristic age. The means of salvation, or divine grace, became codified in scripture, creeds, liturgies, sacraments, iconography, as well as in theological and episcopal elaborations. From the twelfth century the idea of "canon" experienced a narrowing of understanding in the medieval Latin west. In consequence, it lost its diversity and became synonymous with Scripture alone.[12] Canonical constraints amount, in the end, to exercises of power and control. To canonize is to privilege. The value of tradition is difficult to exaggerate but tradition is rather different than traditionalism. Tradition is the living faith of the dead while traditionalism is the dead faith

10 Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. A. Baker, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997 combines historical, theological and sociological analysis.

11 John Duffy – John Parker (eds. and trans.), *The Synodicon Vetus* [Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae, vol. 15], Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, Center for Byzantine Studies, 1979, 28–29.

12 Detailed analysis in William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

of the living.[13] Scripture has enduring power to engage readers in different places and at different times in quite different ways. However, the claim for a "biblical" reading or a "biblical" interpretation, for example, presuming unassailable truth, is naïve. Nicaea pitted Scriptural text against Scriptural text in a struggle for Christological certainty. The quest for certainty became acute. The existing biblical texts reflected ambiguity. Solutions aimed at resolving the opaqueness proved elusive. A pugilistic stance arose and then hardened. Combative theologians and bishops resorted to polemics. Samuel Laeuchli observes that "scriptural quotations were made to serve theological structures" and the Nicene convocation put the early church itself on trial.[14] Others would go farther and assert that texts were made to convey what was *assumed* to be their meaning.[15]

The synod at Nicaea made significant and lasting determinations on Christological disputes and elaborated a doctrine of the Trinity. The suggestion that the latter is a revealed doctrine is an evasion of objections that have been or may be brought against it. Though controversial, Trinitarianism is not a doctrine that can be found in the New Testament. Instead, it is the creation of a fourth-century Church. The doctrine of the Trinity was not discovered; it was invented and should be open to serious criticism.[16] Trinitarian thinking involves, from time to time, arbitrary and unsatisfactory elements.[17] These claims are bold and do challenge, if not contradict, third-century sources like Tertullian and Origen, to say nothing of fourth-century theological reflection. But this is the point. If Tertullian, Origen, and Nicene theologians cannot be challenged then eternal truth remains codified in the language and concepts of the patristic world. That eliminates the possibility of progressive orthodoxy. One must admit a modicum of danger but as Aquinas observed one cannot have both faith and knowledge about the same thing.

13 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 65.

14 Samuel Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove: Five Essays on Early Christianity*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966, 54 and 56.

15 Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

16 Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy*, 179–80.

17 Cyril C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958, 8–9, 16–17, 124, 132, 135, 141–142 and 148–149.

Faith means agreement without evidence while knowledge claims to possess that evidence.[18]

Without exploring those challenges further we may proceed instead to suggest a provocative conclusion: The doctrine of the Trinity is an artificial construct that sometimes produces confusion rather than clarification. The problems it addressed in the fourth century were real but the solutions it offers are sometimes not illuminating. For many Christians, the doctrine is complex, impenetrable and ultimately meaningless. Latter-day Gnostics, promoting "orthodox" and "biblical" theologies wonder why it took the church four centuries to formulate a theology of the Godhead in what is now traditional trinitarian categories. The puzzlement betrays a lack of acquaintance with the history of doctrine and a tendency to oversimplify the process of doing theology, with its attendant intellectual challenges, within the early Christian milieu. The development of the Christian faith was "hardly a swift singular process" and required centuries.[19]

These suggestions run counter to the dominant narrative in the history of Christianity. St. Augustine once declared that heresy was worse than murder.[20] He drew this comparison by considering that one who physically kills another does no harm to the soul. On the other hand, a heretic participates in the destruction of the soul by consigning his or her victim to eternal perdition. The association of heresy with Satan is striking.[21] In the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent IV declared that "all heretics [… are] truly robbers,

18 *Summa Theologiae* II–II, Q.1, art. 4.

19 David G. Horrell, "Becoming Christian": Solidifying Christian Identity and Content, in: Anthony J. Blasi – Jean Duhaime – Paul-André Turcotte (eds.), *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Sciences Approaches*, New York: Altamira Press, 2002, 309–335.

20 Liguori G. Müller (ed. and trans.), *The De haeresibus of St Augustine. A Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1956. "They are children of the devil who murder by seducing people from the church." Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani*, 2.13, in: M. Petschenig (ed.), *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 52, Vienna: Tempsky, 1909, 35–36.

21 Geoffrey S. Smith, *Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 10 draws attention to errors stemming from demonic influence occurring in second-century heresy catalogues. Epiphanius and Theodoret were prone to equate heresy with the devil. Todd S. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2016, 150–153.

and murderers of souls, and thieves […] of the Christian faith."[22] Later in the same century, Thomas Aquinas asserted that heresy was the worst sin of all.[23] He developed this thinking a step further: "If forgers of money and other evil-doers are forthwith condemned to death by the secular authority, much more reason is there for heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, to be not only excommunicated but even put to death."[24]

Commenting on Galatians 5:9, Jerome sounded a similar warning 800 years earlier: "Arius was just a single spark in Alexandria; but because he was not immediately suppressed, the entire world was consumed by the flame."[25] This declaration turns up later in medieval canon law (*Decretum*) and also in Aquinas. These are sobering opinions codified in a venerable tradition but new intellectual ground should be tilled and traditional ideas challenged and reconsidered.

Understanding the Nature of Heresy: Definitions, Designers, Defenders

What is heresy? What are its causes, its concerns, its possible merits, the variety of responses to the "problem," its consequences historically and in our contemporary world? There were many definitions of heresy prevailing in various times and places in the pre-Nicene world.[26] Medieval canon law provides a concise elaboration defined by the bishop of London, Robert Grosseteste: "Heresy is an opinion chosen by human perception, contrary to Scripture, yielding new but false opinions, contrary to Church teachings, publicly avowed, and obstinately defended."[27] The sticking point is contumacy.

22 The 1252 bull *Ad Extirpanda*, in: Aloysius Tomassetti (ed.), *Bullarium diplomatum et privilegiorum sanctorum Romanorum Pontificum*, Turin: Seb. Franco, H. Fory et H. Dalmazzo editoribus, 1858, vol. 3, 556.

23 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II, Q.10, art. 6.

24 *Summa Theologi*ae II–II, Q.11, art. 3.

25 Giacomo Raspanti (ed.), *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera, Pars I: Opera Exegetica, 6: Commentarii in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Galatas* (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. 77A), Turnhout: Brepols, 2006, 163.

26 Vittorino Grossi, "Heresy – Heretic" and Roberto Giordani, "Heretical Movements", in: Angelo Di Bernardino (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, 2 vols., trans. Adrian Walford, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992, vol. 1, 376–377 provide concise definitions.

27 C.24 q.3 c.27–c.31, in: Emil Friedberg (ed.), *Corpus iuris canonici*, 2 vols., Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879–1881, vol. 1, cols. 997–998.

When faced with official and authoritative (read "orthodox") instruction, stubbornness indicts the defender of alternative opinions. Resistance to endorsed admonition brought with it the full force of inculpatory condemnation within the church's arsenal of coercive power. The fourth Lateran council summarized it succinctly: "We excommunicate and anathematize every heresy, condemning all heretics under whatever names they may be known; for, while they have different faces, they are nevertheless bound to each other by their tails."[28]

In the Middle Ages, heretics were those who knowingly and intentionally rejected the authority of the church and some of her teachings. They often paid for their opinions and practices with their lives as the defenders of God were content to send them to the stake to be burned alive for the glory of God. Accusations of heresy are often defensive strategies aimed at protecting the accuser's own identity and his or her insecurities. Assessing heresy accusations in this manner may be useful in pondering the legacy of Nicaea.

The invention of "orthodoxy" emerged from the anxieties surrounding ecclesiastical security concerns. As the later patristic period and the Middle Ages wore on there was an emerging tendency to burn alternative ideas in the spirit of ecclesiastical unity and to assume that if a Nicene principle, for example, had previously certified a point of theology then the only legitimate response could be: *Nicaea locuta, causa finita est* (Nicaea has spoken, the matter is concluded). This posture was not without its challenges.

A great deal of theologizing behind patristic ideas, eschatology as a single example, appears predicated upon considerable proof-texting and exegetical gymnastics. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that much eschatological doctrine has been motivated by punitive concerns and desire for miscreants to be punished far outstripping considerations of grace and mercy. Many early theologians developed ideas to support *a priori* assumptions justifying doctrines they considered convenient. Jerome's eschatology, for example, is "notoriously messy and difficult to pin down."[29] With one more reference to eschatology, notions advanced suggesting the annihilation of the wicked or the restitution of all things (rather than sending wicked sinners to an eternal hell to undergo unending torture) prompted serious and sustained

28 4 Lat c.3 *De haereticus*, in: Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1990, vol. 1, 233.

29 Danuta Shanzer, Jerome, Tobit, Alms, and the *Vita Aeterna*, in: Andrew Cain – Joseph Lössl (eds.), *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, 98.

theological heartburn.[30] Assuming there are afterlives, or a *Parousia* (second coming of Christ), or that perdition really does exist, do these considerations not belong to the divine purview rather than to bishops and theologians?[31]

A more strident theology, and certainly a more vociferous attitude, began to dominate the church in the extended wake of Nicaea. Later adherents of Nicaea adopted theological positions and enshrined these as normative. There is an apocryphal story stemming from Nicaea that one bishop became so agitated in the course of debates, and so frustrated with another council delegate, that he punched a fellow in the face believing the latter demonstrated insufficient respect for the Trinity: "It is said that Blessed Nicholas, while yet an old man, attended the Council of Nicaea and that he struck a certain Arian on the cheek out of zeal for the faith."[32] This violent confrontation never happened but there has been a great deal of theological mouth-slapping and ideological face-punching in the history of the church. Most of this has been inflicted upon the alleged (mainly powerless) "heretics" by the defenders of God (possessing power) who proudly represent themselves as orthodox and biblically correct.

All of this is exacerbated by a clear reluctance to question tradition except when it conflicts with personal opinion. The fourth-century Christian apologist Lactantius reflected on the tyranny of tradition: "There are religions which persevere in protecting and defending most stubbornly, whatever has been handed down to them by their ancestors. They do not consider what they are, but believe that they are proven and true on the grounds that the ancients handed them down. The authority of antiquity is so great that it is held to be a crime to inquire into it. Thus it is believed everywhere as if it were a known truth."[33] There are ideas that cannot be challenged easily. These are bones of contention. These include ideas about God (i.e. the doctrine of

30 Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apocatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.

31 Jacob Adsett, Of Hell and Hades: Patristic Eschatology and the Punitive Interim State from Irenaeus to Augustine, PhD thesis, University of New England, 2026 underscores difficulties.

32 There are no contemporary witnesses and the earliest testimony, Petrus de Natalibus, *Catalogus sanctorum et gestorum eorum ex diversis voluminibus collectus*, Vicenza: Henricus de Sancto Ursio, 1493, lib. 1, cap. 33, unpaginated, is a hagiographical text written a hundred years before publication.

33 Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones. Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen*, eds. Stefan Freund – Wolfram Schröttel – Wolfram Winger, (Litterae Christianorum), 2 vols., Stuttgart: Steiner, 2025, vol. 1, lib. 2, cap. 7, 214–335.

the Trinity), particular notions about Scripture and the nature and extent of its authority, claims of absolute truth and, as the Middle Ages wore on, the Eucharist, and so on.[34] Those who dared to inquire too deeply, or too persistently, were often met by heresy-hunters, inquisitors, and self-appointed defenders of God. These zealots were prepared to defend God with savagery and there were many men and women who were persecuted, prosecuted, tortured, and executed because they continued to maintain views that lacked endorsement from the Latin church.

It is possible to claim that all heresies share a resistance to mystery. Both heretics and orthodox use reason. This is not the distinction being drawn here. Those judged heretical appear to be those who persist in attempting to solve (theological) mystery and in the resolution of those mysteries arrive at divergent proposals outside the imprimatur of prevailing Nicene orthodoxy. From a Christological perspective, which is what prompted Emperor Constantine to convene an ecumenical synod in what is today in western Turkey, Arians, Apollinarians, Monophysites, Modalists, Nestorians, Eutychians, Docetists, and many others, were all seeking viable ways and means (answers) to resolve the Christological mystery. But might we not suggest this is exactly what Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea were endeavouring to do? Since Athanasius emerged as victor, this meant that all the losers were blacklisted as heretics and so they have ever been. Does this blanket marginalization matter? The Christological challenge did not end at Nicaea and 126 years later the church fathers once again convened an ecumenical council at Chalcedon in 451 to evaluate and determine the nature of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ.[35] Not all agreed with the Chalcedonian definition and additional heretics were created and further schisms broke out as ongoing tremors continued to rattle the foundations of the Christian faith along unstable fault lines running beneath the history of doctrine and Christian theological orientation as the late antique period came to an end. It is sobering to note that the first time a Christian was put to death by other Christians occurred in the aftermath of peace declared across the empire

34 James D. G. Dunn, The Authority of Scripture according to Scripture, *Churchman* 96 (1982), 104–122.

35 Richard Price – Mary Whitby (eds.), *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400–700*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009; Richard Price – Michael Gaddis (eds.), *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, 2 vols., Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005 can be recommended.

by Constantine. Nicaea made possible and inevitable the foundation of faith-based violence and the rise of a persecuting church.

Twenty years ago an article argued for the incompleteness of Christianity wherever heresy is excluded.[36] The thesis was simple: Unless we come to terms with difference, until we include rather than exclude, and until we take heretics and heresies seriously, we cannot expect to have a complete history of early Christianity or indeed of any period down to the present. Arguments like these tend to attract a hearing in some academic circles and amongst those outside the mainstream of the various strands of Christendom. Within the churches an official Nicene perspective remains undaunted. This is chiefly on account of allegiance to a pre-Nicene principle that maintains: "Whoever does not have the Church for his Mother cannot have God as his Father."[37] The binding ecclesiastical definition eventually coincided with the religious faith and practices prevailing in Rome and Alexandria. Nicene theology is often messy. Coming to terms with history and theology is not scientific but considerably more tentative and ever so much more imprecise.

What might we do if we are persuaded that certain attitudes within Christianity should usefully be reconsidered? The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, borrowing a musical concept, suggested the value in considering "polyphonic meaning" and "concordance."[38] By this Bakhtin proposed allowing different texts and different traditions to speak with their own unique voices, in conversation with other texts and traditions, in pursuit of openness and creativity. The language of the Creed is of its time. How well does it speak today? Its tone reflects a fourth-century accent. Is the Creed fit for purpose? Does it belong to the discipline of historical theology or does it continue to speak to, and from, the core of the Christian faith? Scholars of early Christianity, especially those studying the history of doctrine, are aware that the New Testament does not present a complete picture of Christian faith and theology. Is this not also true of Nicaea? What is gained by replacing faith with an ill-defined concept of certainty?

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36 Majella Franzmann, A Complete History of Early Christianity: Taking 'Heretics' Seriously, *The Journal of Religious History* 29 (2005/2), 17–28.

37 M. Bévenot (ed.), *Sancti Cypriani episcopi opera*, pars I, (Corpus christianorum Series latina 3), Turnhout: Brepols, 1972, 253.

38 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 5–46.

The Spirit of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea adopted positions one may regard as a reflex of the past. In continued application, evolving Nicene exceptionalism tended to impose dogma on subsequent generations without meaningful appreciation of future change. Potential results are worth considering. First, a harvest of dogmatic theology wielded as a blunt instrument at the expense of creative discovery. Second, a commitment to propositional revelation being the only legitimate form of revelation. Both outcomes threaten to undermine Christian faith and, third, provide justification for autocracy and Church government to rule with mind (a heavy emphasis upon unyielding rationalism) and fist (the violence of exclusion and intolerance) while overlooking the heart of the gospel along with the teachings and ethics of Jesus. Intolerance is a theological issue. Coercion is a political concern. Both matters coalesced in the Nicene period.[39]

There were exceptions to that ethos. Four years prior to the conversion of Constantine, Lactantius advanced a different view on the relation between faith and coercion. He argued that religion cannot be imposed by force. It is a matter that must be conducted by words rather than intimidation. It is preferable to utilize the weapon of the intellect in order to teach, prove and demonstrate. No one should be detained against their will. Torture and faith have nothing to do with each other. It is not possible for truth to be joined with violence and there is no connection between justice and cruelty. Religion and faith should be defended not by killing people, not through the use of cruelty, and not by means of guilt. It should be practiced in good faith. Anyone who desires to defend faith and doctrine by shedding blood or through the use of violence is no longer defending religion but is instead polluting faith and profaning truth.[40] This opinion became muffled in the urge to purge that followed Nicaea and other fourth-century developments.

The Edict of Thessalonica contains an important constitution, (16.1.2) *Cunctos Populos*, promulgated by Emperor Theodosius on 27 February 380 wherein we find the declaration that proper Christians are those who follow the faith of St. Peter as practised by Bishop Damasus of Rome and Bishop

39 H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000 explores this important nexus.

40 Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones. Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen*, vol. 2, lib. 5, cap. 20, 630–753.

Peter of Alexandria. Those deviating from these beliefs and religious practices are "demented and insane."[41] Other early Christian theologians considered heresy, and diverse religious-theological opinions more generally, in a similar fashion: "I do not know by what name this evil should be called, frenzy or madness, or some such evil that is rampant among the people, which causes a perversion of the mind."[42] Such language carried with it awareness of imminent threat and the urgency of containing the toxicity.

The scope and influence of *Cunctos populos* was not limited to the people of Constantinople. Witness its presence in the *Codex Justinianus* (1.1.1) and the Theodosian Code (16.1.2). The latter functioned as imperial law across the Roman Empire suggesting it was broadly applicable outside Constantinople. Its inclusion in the *de haereticis* section of the Code indicates it had become standard. The fifth-century Church historian Sozomen includes in his *Ecclesiastical History* that when the edict was publicly read it prompted "loud shouts of joy" from Nicene Christians.[43] Its influence extended to medieval canon law.

Some within the Christian faith today believe (and behave) that authentic Christianity can be achieved by merely asserting orthodoxy. It is one thing to state but quite another to demonstrate. This approach can produce a hard-headed brand of latter-day Gnostics and a doctrine of salvation by coercion. Such men and women advance claims around the "plain reading" of preferred or selected texts (Scripture, creeds, articles of religious faith and so on). There is no such thing as a plain reading of a text. If all that is required is a "plain reading" of a text, for example the Bible, one might question the point of three to four years of theological education, learning Hebrew and Greek, mastering principles of exegesis and hermeneutics, and so on. "Plain reading" claims of texts are pious fictions aimed at defending *a priori* theological assumptions. Orthodoxy is often and regrettably a Protestant understanding of the Latin western theological tradition. This unhelpfully results in oversimplification and a misleading view of patristic Christianity.[44]

41 *Codex Theodosianus*, xvi.1.2, available from: https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Constitutiones/CTh16.html.

42 Gregory of Nyssa, *De deitate filii et spiritus sancti*, 121.

43 Joseph Bidez – Günther Christian Hansen (eds.), *Sozomenus: Kirchengeschichte*, second revised edition in: *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte*, new series 4, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995, 7.4. 5–6.

44 For example, C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994.

The language of Nicaea followed the example of Athanasius. It was neither biblical nor traditional. The recitation of Scripture was couched in Hellenistic philosophy and Alexandrian Gnosticism.[45] Readers of scripture, history and theology always run the risk of projecting their own meanings into those texts and then standing back to admire them. Those who arrive at different readings, convictions and conclusions often find themselves marginalised, hereticated and excluded. Christians faced sporadic persecution until the time of Constantine. Suffering for Christ sometimes resulted in martyrdom but once the Nicene victory was assured a growing culture of persecution settled into the fabric of Christendom. Theologies of martyrdom in the early church yielded a harvest of fear.[46] Fear of being denounced as heretical became a growing concern from the fourth century. One of the methods to avoid that dire censure was to accuse others. Piety led to polemic. Nicaea intensified this climate and culture of anxiety. Eventually, the only sure way to avoid heresy was to securely link doctrine and theological ideas to Nicaea.

Creating Nicene Legends

The legacy of Nicaea includes a sacrosanct element that privileges its convocation and its Creed. There are two fourth-century versions of the Creed. The revised Nicene Creed of 381 expanded the original five-word section on the Holy Spirit to twenty-eight words. The 381 version also added statements on the Church, baptism, resurrection, and heaven. An even later amendment occurred in the late sixth century when the *filioque* clause was endorsed by the Third Council of Toledo in 589. This local synod set a precedent that later became standard in the medieval Latin west.[47] Most Christians are unaware that the text intoned in liturgy today is generally not the one determined at Nicaea in 325 but instead a substantial revision of a half century after and modified two hundred years later. Mythology intrudes. It has been asserted that 318 bishops attended the conciliar gathering in 325 but this is not a reliable claim. It is more likely that between 200 and 250 bishops participated. At the time the Council of Nicaea met, there were some 800 bishops in the

45 Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove*, 76.

46 Paul Middleton (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2020, 31–214.

47 Edward A. Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 68–69.

west and probably 1000 bishops in the east. Less than 20% turned up. Athanasius claimed 318 attended. Evagrius, Hilary, Jerome and Rufinus confirmed that number. Socrates Scholasticus was less precise stating more than 300. Eustathius of Antioch counted 270 while Eusebius of Caesarea claimed there were 250. There may have been considerably fewer. In other Greek and Latin sources the number never exceeds 220.[48]

The sacred figure of 318 bishops plays a role in some holy narratives. Later hagiographical sources insist the 318 were "God-inspired fathers." A few decades later, churchmen unwilling to accept Nicene doctrine convened. However, "before they could begin their blasphemy, the God of the three hundred and eighteen holy fathers shook the city with an earthquake and drove them contrite out of there."[49] A Nicene legend with no historical verity claims that when the bishops were sitting there were 318 but when they stood to conduct business there were 319. The extra figure is presumed to be the Holy Ghost. Nicaea became enshrined as an unassailable shibboleth of correct theology. Constantine later wrote to the Alexandrian church declaring that whatever "has commended itself to the judgement of three hundred bishops cannot be other than the judgement of God."[50] The Council assembled to address specific concerns. Must its determinations be understood as absolute rules that are applicable for all people at all times and in all places? Must its theological conclusions and convictions be mandatory indefinitely for all followers of Christ? It might be worth considering the salutary attitude of replicating what New Testament writers tried to do. That is, to find appropriate language and symbols by which Christians might best express their faith. To do this, we should not be bound by particular symbols, such as the Trinity, if it is found that the deployment of certain symbols, detracts from, or confuses, the basic message one is seeking to convey.

"The work of defending the plausibility of Nicene Christianity today cannot be done in terms simply of clarifying intellectual history as if it [intellectual history] had an isolated life of its own."[51] This is sensible advice and under-

48 Mark Edwards, The first Council of Nicaea, in: Margaret M. Mitchell – Frances M. Young (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity, volume 1: Origins to Constantine*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 552–67, 558.

49 *The Synodicon Vetus*, 28–29 and 50–51.

50 J. Stevenson (ed.), *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to AD 337*, London: SPCK, 1974, 371–372.

51 Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, revised edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, 266.

scores the importance of context. Is it too late to conduct a theological, ethical, moral cost accounting of Nicene implications?[52] It is worth considering that Constantine worked to avert rather than encourage schism. What should be said about an emperor that his historian (Eusebius of Caesarea) was pro-Arian, his baptism was performed by an Arian sympathizer (Eusebius of Nicomedia), that he was persuaded to allow Arius – the bête noire of Nicaea – to return to the church, and that he increasingly grew weary of the belligerency of Athanasius and the practical legacy of the Nicene moment?[53] Imperial authorities were not so benighted to miss the less salutary elements of this Egyptian bishop. If Constantine was as ruthless as anyone else in the pursuit of personal ambition, Athanasius was his equal.[54] The latter scrupulously revisited his own writings to cover his tracks and rewrote earlier narratives to preserve his preferred personal image and eliminate any trace of his own deceit or mistakes. Less a hero than a provocateur of duplicity, he is hardly the paragon of virtue or deserving of the accolades heaped upon him. The German Protestant church historian and philologist Eduard Schwartz characterized Athanasius as "a power-hungry politician" and an "unscrupulous pamphleteer."[55] Timothy Barnes summarised Schwartz's conclusions in this manner but claims that while the bishop often disregarded or perverted the truth he was "a subtler and more skilful liar than Schwartz realised."[56] Elsewhere Barnes does not soften his assessment by declaring that Athanasius created an "ecclesiastical mafia" in Alexandria and sometimes behaved like a "modern gangster."[57] The indictment is an important caveat on the evolving history of dogma enabled by the Council of Nicaea.

52 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, 201.

53 Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, 20–32.

54 Averil Cameron, Constantine and the "peace of the church", in: Mitchell – Young (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1, 538–551, 541.

55 Originally published in several instalments between 1904 and 1911, reprinted in: Eduard Schwartz, *Zur Geschichte des Athanasius*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Walther Eltester, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1959.

56 Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 3.

57 Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, 230.

One must also appreciate that the alleged "Arian" phenomena and supposed "Arian" threat to the church were inventions of Athanasius.[58] Nearly thirty-five years after Nicaea, Athanasius issued a blast against the "Arian" gang he had created. This is known as the "Orations against the Arians." Book one mounts a theological rebuttal but is a pastiche of polemic and propaganda and hardly a tidy narrative. Arius and his followers are described as impious, separated from the truth, forerunners of antichrist, perverted, "Arian-maniacs," inspired by the devil, absurd, inventors of evil, enemies of God, silly people, irrational and stupid, misinterpreters of Scripture, and disseminators of heretical poison.[59] The theological indictment proceeds from a hermeneutic ratified at Nicaea and defended thereafter as normative. The appeal of the "Arians" (along with other heretics) to Scripture was routinely dismissed as a "deliberate cloak for other, sinister aims."[60]

Conflicts played out at Nicaea were not purely theological but involved imperial unity and the status of the Alexandrian see.[61] The majority of the Nicene theologians and most of the so-called "Arians" were, right from the start, very close. The arrogant ambitions of Athanasius presented a dangerous and disruptive factor that destroyed any hope of doctrinal unity.[62] The Council of Nicaea was possible only because a mere dozen years earlier the Christian religion gained empire-wide recognition. Imperial legislation against heretics also appears as early as the fourth century. Relevant codes include *Codex Theodosianus* (438), and *Codex Iustinianus* (529) and additional constitutions in 438 and 534 known as the *Novellae*.[63] The triumph of Nicaea required centuries to reach maturity. Several synods between 357 and 360 ignoring the dictates of Nicaea prompted Jerome in 379 to write

58 Thomas C. Ferguson, *The Past is Prologue: The Revolution of Nicene Historiography*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, 1–5.

59 William Bright (ed.), *The Orations of St. Augustine against the Arians according to the Benedictine Text*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 1–67 for the Greek text of Book 1. There are numerous translations.

60 Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy*, 9.

61 Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove*, 51.

62 Demonstrated convincingly in: Hanns Christof Brennecke, *Hilarius von Poitiers und die Bischofsopposition gegen Konstantius II: Untersuchungen zur dritten Phase des Arianischen Streites (337–361)*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984.

63 Theodor Mommsen – Paul M. Meyer (eds.), *Theodosiani Libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis*, Berlin: Weidmann, 1905; Paul Krüger (ed.), *Codex Iustinianus*, in: *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, vol. 2, Berlin: Weidmann, 1877; Rudolf Schoell – Wilhelm Kroll (eds.), *Novellae*, in: *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, vol. 3, Berlin: Weidmann, 1895.

his oft-quoted remark: "The whole world groaned and was surprised to find itself Arian."[64] A half century after the council disbanded it was Emperor Theodosius who convened another ecumenical council which went some distance to establishing Nicene doctrine. The synod at Constantinople in 381 expanded the creed and mandated that doctrines and practices conform to Nicaea consonant with the positions defended at Alexandria and Rome. Even so, the ideas attributed to Arius remained popular and large numbers of Christians accepted them and this alternative form of Christian theology survived, with political support, until the seventh century.[65]

Perhaps against the better judgement of Constantine, from time to time, the memory of Nicaea has been weaponised even against faithful Christians. Orthodoxy was militarised and deployed to invalidate, hereticate and marginalise divergent ideas. Has this enriched or impoverished the Christian faith? To what extent or in what ways has this approach mirrored the teaching and ethics of Jesus? Well before Nicaea there were other Christian ideas and approaches that traditionally have been discredited as heretical. It is useful to recognise that "teachers and movements were denounced as heretical especially because they were in conflict with the type of Christianity that was gaining the upper hand in Rome in the second half of the second century."[66] By the fourth century, Nicaea endorsed the triumph of Alexandrian theology and politics.[67]

Judging Orthodoxy and Heresy by Diphthongs and Adjectives

The struggle between unity and diversity was waged and won at Nicaea. Athanasius won. Arius lost. It was neither quite that simple nor immediately decisive. It is true that a definitive Christological understanding emerged. Nicaea shut the door on doctrinal diversity though it left the door ajar in its minimalist adjudications. Polarizing Athanasius and Arius in this manner is intentionally dramatic and helps to shed light on relevant texts. What must be

64 "Ingemuit totus orbis, et Arianum se esse miratus est", in: Aline Canellis (ed.), *Jérôme, Débat entre un luciférien et un orthodoxe* (*Altercatio luciferiani et orthodoxi*), Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 473, Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2003, 19, 10–11.

65 Guido M. Berndt – Roland Steinacher, *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

66 Antti Marjanen – Petri Luomanen (eds.), *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, ix and xii.

67 Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove*, 98.

kept in mind is that the historical Arius was lost centuries ago in the powerful Athanasian thunder. Both Arius and Athanasius were actors on an important theological stage but in terms of the legacy of Nicaea, both are now disturbing traditions in the struggle for faith and identity. The *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) solution did not offer precision. The term has a range of meaning and its vagueness allows for a degree of flexibility. Those with different views could sign on to the Nicene formula. Arius, however, was excluded because he had previously asserted that Christ was not *homoousios* (of the same substance) with God. And in a touch of deep irony, the notion of *homoousios* was first advanced by heretics (Gnostics) and was decidedly ambiguous.[68] Constantine either did not know this or was unconcerned. It would be facile to suppose that Christendom was arbitrarily split by a diphthong but the Christological contest at Nicaea turned on technicalities. The legacy of the Council has often been faith by hair-splitting distinctions. The differences between Peter Valdes and Francis of Assisi were indistinct, perhaps amounting to the width of a hair.[69] Michael Servetus' theology was judged heretical because he put the adjective in the wrong place in his sixteenth-century Christological ruminations.[70] Had he confessed Jesus as the eternal son of God rather than Christ as the son of the eternal God he might have been saved. In consequence he was arrested while attending a church service and went to the stake in Calvinist Geneva. Blasphemers and heretics are those who fail to understand or accept Nicene theology. Theologians and churchmen in the fourth and fifth centuries created an intentional profile of heretics. Imperial lawmakers in the same period developed a similar construct.[71] A legislate and agitate program targeting difference and dissent ensued. The war against heresy was on.

Even bishops were not immune. Priscillian, bishop of Avila, was suspected of theological irregularity. He was accused of Sabellianism, his theology was Patripassian, and modern scholars have discussed (and dismissed) whether

68 Irenaeus attributes the term to the early second-century Basilides in: *Against Heresies*, 1.24, in: Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, 161 vols., Paris: Garnier, 1857–1866, vol. 7, cols. 675–676.

69 Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Medieval Christianity: Prophecy and Order*, Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing Corporation, 1968, 145.

70 William Farel, letter to Ambrose Blauer, 10 December 1553, in: William Baum – Eduard Cunitz – Eduard Reuss (eds.), *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. 14, Corpus Reformatorum, vol. 42, Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke and Sons, 1875, cols. 691–696, especially cols. 693–694.

71 Humfress, "Chez la femme!" Heresy and Law in Late Antiquity, 48.

he was a Modalistic Monarchian in his view of the Godhead.[72] He stood trial in Trier and was decollated somewhere between 385 and 387. What the enigmatic case of Priscillian reveals is that other streams of Christian faith and practice continued long after Nicaea, the peril that attended these dangerous initiatives, the unsafe approach of constructing theology from polemical texts, and the motivation of control, both socially and theologically.[73]

Control and security extended beyond theology to language. Gerhard Kittel, founder and editor of the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, advanced a prominent principle of twentieth-century biblical theology. To wit, the words of the New Testament were charged with theological content so that the study of those words became an avenue for apprehending the gospel itself. The methodology allows theology to overpower philology. The approach is dangerous. Words do not have a built-in theological content; they derive their specific meaning from the context in which they are used.[74] Justified criticism was levelled against the *Wörterbuch* method.[75] A similar sacrosanctity has sometimes been attached to the words of the Creed and as Constantine advised the Alexandrian church: "The judgement of three hundred bishops cannot be other than the judgement of God."

Unity and diversity, evident in the New Testament and in early Christianity, retained toleration at its core, possibly because it was an unofficial and persecuted minority sect, and this characteristic seems to have been part of its genetic makeup. In the wake of Nicaea, that once dominant attribute appears to exist only as a recessive gene and the consequences have been sobering. It is indefensible to argue that the "Arian" impulse was a challenge to orthodox faith or a perversion of Biblical truth. Apologists like Irenaeus and Tertullian "misled Christian theology for almost two thousand years"

72 Tarmo Toom, Was Priscillian a Modalist Monarchian?, *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014/4), 470–484.

73 Henry Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila: The Occult and the Charismatic in the Early Church*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976; Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

74 Gerhard Kittel – Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 10 vols., Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1932–1973.

75 Principal criticisms of the *Wörterbuch* method, as reflected in the early volumes, included prevailing naïveté that the mentality of people can be ascertained directly from the structure of language, apparent theological bias affecting the understanding of language, and a glaring "failure to get to grips with the semantic value of words in their contexts." James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, 3, 107–110 and 231.

with their assertion that historically orthodoxy always preceded heresy.[76] The Bauer thesis retains relevance; its broad themes worthy of consideration.[77] Even central doctrines like that of salvation remained fluid for hundreds of years reflecting considerable diversity and understanding.[78]

The Irony of Nicaea

There is a deep irony attending the proceedings and outcomes of Nicaea. This irony was captured concisely by the Swiss-American scholar of patristics Samuel Laeuchli sixty years ago in a provocative essay titled "The Heresy of Truth."

> "If the rejections of Nicaea were the 'absolute' truth of 325, then they anathematized parts of the biblical canon. There is not the slightest doubt that the New Testament has statements which are subordinationist, even adoptianist, in regard to the Son of God. Nicaea anathematized a segment of the Bible, and not a small one at that, if one regards the whole synoptic tradition about Jesus of Nazareth, which was certainly not the Christology of Nicaea. To be sure, there were key passages in the Gospel of John that pointed toward something like the Nicene resolution, but even in this Gospel the opposition could find texts to sustain their views. You have to reject part of the biblical witness in order to subscribe to the dogma of Nicaea […] there was no attempt at real exegetical work on either side, only the flinging of proof texts at each other. At Nicaea certain passages of the New Testament became heretical […] Nicaea did not continue the sole main current of the pre-Nicene church. 'God from God,' 'begotten not made,' 'consubstantial,' were not the orthodox, antiheretical traditions of the pre-Nicene church. They were part of that church, but they also conflicted with other parts of her theologies. Nicaea did not continue; it judged. And if this judgment was the orthodox faith of A.D. 325, then an overwhelming proportion of primitive Christianity had been heterodox […]. Tradition was not identical with orthodoxy. If it had been, a majority of bishops and churches, hit by the anathemata of the fourth century and the *damnatio memoriae* of consecutive ages, would have to be called 'orthodox,' together with their particular heresies […] theological orthodoxy itself was never an established, 'timeless' truth […] orthodoxy was the salt of christological speculation; as established dogma, it became moribund formula."[79]

76 Gerd Lüdemann, *Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, 12.

77 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1972, but also Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988, and more recently Paul A. Hartog (ed.), *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015.

78 Thomas A. Fudge, Concepts of Salvation in the Western Church to the Sixteenth Century, *Communio Viatorum* 45 (2003), 217–247.

79 Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove*, 66–67, 68–69, 96 and 100.

Cicero once remarked: "I only wish I could discover the truth as easily as I can expose falsehood."[80] His wise observation found little traction in the post-Nicene world. The German biblical scholar and historian Gerd Lüdemann suggests it is specious to argue that heresy is *prima facie* rebellion against orthodoxy.[81] Origen recognized the internal contradictions in the New Testament but his voice and influence was muffled at Nicaea as the shrill intonations of Athanasius became ever louder. The theological world represented by Origen receded. Eventually the ethos defended and advanced by Athanasius became the dominant core identity of the Christian faith in the Latin west. The uncertainty of Nicene doctrine in the decades following the council was palpable. Repeated rescue interventions were required. In the end "Athanasius saved Nicaea."[82]

Why Does Heresy Matter?

Posing this question results in several options and considerations in evaluating the Council of Nicaea, after 1700 years, and trying to assess the virtues or possible merits of heresy. To do so is to pivot away from traditional admonitions. Cyprian is one example: "If anyone, having obtained grace in the Church, has withdrawn and left the Church, such will be guilty on their own account and responsible for their own destruction."[83]

Why does heresy matter? First, because without it we are condemned to partial truths and incomplete understandings. We are left with the dangers of dogma and the possibility of invincible ignorance. Second, because revising the certainties of yesterday and refining opinions based on new evidence is always salutary. Third, because alternatives are helpful in avoiding calcified ideologues convinced of their own rectitude. This is achieved by actively questioning personal and institutional beliefs. Fourth, because it is in the

80 *De natura deorum*, lib. 1, cap. 32 in: Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods. Academics*, trans. H. Rackham, (Loeb Classical Library, 268), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933, 88–89.

81 Lüdemann, *Heretics*, 216.

82 William G. Rusch (ed. and trans.), *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, 22.

83 G. F. Diercks (ed.), *Sancti Cypriani episcopi epistularium*, (Corpus christianorum Series latina 3C), Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, ep. 69 to Magnus, 469–482. An instructive argument in: Erik Thaddeus Walters, *Unitas in Late Antiquity: The Contribution of Cyprian*, PhD thesis, University of Vienna, 2010.

disputes where clarity is often achieved and in polemics and disputations there is always the possibility that new and perhaps even superior alternatives may present themselves. Fifth, because the first principle of science is this: "You" or "I" may be mistaken. Nicaea may have gotten it wrong. Sixth, because there is no such thing as absolute knowledge. Those who claim it, whether they be scientists or theologians are mistaken. All data and information are imperfect. Seventh, because imposed dogma may inhibit proper responses to later questions and unanticipated concerns or may be incapable of meaningful relevance for the contemporary world.

In 1929 the American writer William Faulkner observed: "No battle is ever won […]. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools."[84] To what extent is the triumph of Nicaea an illusion? It seems perilous to draw straight lines from the Nicene past into subsequent generations and even more egregious to project its conclusions backward 300 years. The theological perspectives of the fourth century should be considered in context and to some extent left there. Context remains essential.

It is important to recognise that not all councils bear the weight of authority equally. Many of them were regional or local caucuses and their decisions were never ecumenically binding. By extension, the entire church did not always endorse local solutions or ratify regional judgements which were often contextually determined. By further extension, it is essential to discriminate amongst competing voices emerging from synodal deliberations for the simple reason that shriller individual voices might be heard above a more cautious consensual argument. Ecclesiastical history has often been energetically illuminated in the contested relationship between theological pluralism and institutional power. In these encounters, powerful voices have occasionally prevailed. It is a perennial temptation to predicate theological preferences within the history of dogma upon selective uses of the past in order to support the current demands of orthodoxy.

Nicene theology remained tenuous. There were various appeals to Nicaea during the fifth-century Nestorian controversy. Between Nicaea and Nestorius there were repeated councils and alternative creeds during the 340s and 350s. A gradually-expanding acceptance followed in the wake of an Athana-

84 William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, ed. David Minter, New York: W. W. Norton, 1994, 48.

sian-driven apologetic which argued endlessly for the unique authority and sole sufficiency of Nicene doctrine. Athanasius was prepared to engage in historical and theological revisionist exercises as he laboured to construct the Nicene past and secure its legacy. To the end of his life, he defended Nicaea and its decisions both in theological treatises and correspondence.[85] After the heat of strife there emerged a long and convoluted Christian heritage that can neither be defined entirely nor circumscribed by the momentous events of the fourth century.[86]

Most theologians in the pre-Nicene world held that doubt was implicitly a denial of faith. After the Council of Nicaea a conviction emerged that true faith implied a firm and unshakeable commitment to particular doctrines. By the thirteenth century the phrase *dubius in fide infidelis est* was included in canon law among the Decretals of Gregory IX.[87] The idea was neither original nor shocking. It was part of the harvest of Nicaea: "Whoever is doubtful in matters of faith is an unbeliever. Those who are ignorant of the faith and truth should not be believed at all."[88]

The creation of orthodoxy solved some problems in the Nicene world but created others. The heritage of Nicaea insisted upon certainty. This disrupted the quest for unity. In practice this destroyed the tolerance evident in the New Testament and in pre-Nicene Christian communities.[89] Athanasius and his supporters placed little value on the ninth hour during the crucifixion of Jesus. It may be said that Christ was uncertain at the end. He was nevertheless not rejected by God. In the urge to purge the church of theological diversity and uncertainty, faith was forced to dispense with doubt. This development changed the nature of faith. Faith can be an energetic and compelling reality precisely because it cannot be certain. If faith is nourished by certainty, and doubt prohibited, then mystery (divine mystery and theological mystery) is

85 Pavel Dudzik, Nicene Terminology defended by Athanasius of Alexandria in *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* and the possible influence of Eusebius' *Epistula ad Caesarienses*, *Vox Patrum* 34 (2014), 123–135.

86 Thomas A. Fudge, In Praise of Heresy: Hus, Luther and the Ethos of Reformation, *Journal of Religious History* 43 (2019/1), 25–44.

87 R. N. Swanson, *Dubius in fide fidelis est?* Doubt and Assurance in Late Medieval Catholicism, in: Frances Andrews – Charlotte Methuen – Andrew Spicer (eds.), *Doubting Christianity: The Church and Doubt*, (Studies in Church History, vol. 52), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 186–202.

88 X 5.7.1 *De haereticis* in: Friedberg (ed.), *Corpus iuris canonici*, vol. 2, col. 778.

89 James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM Press, [2]1990.

solved. In consequence, there is no meaningful role for faith because certainty precludes the need for faith.

Nicaea speaks today but with a fourth-century voice. The twelfth-century thinker Peter Abelard included in the prologue to his controversial book *Sic et Non* that it was the mother of all weariness to repeat uncritically the wisdom or findings of the past.[90] The principal task of theology is neither to simply repeat nor recite. This is one of the important lessons from the pre-Nicene Christian world. After the great fourth-century council the consequences for a systematic theological evaluation of Nicaea and its decisions became, and have remained, substantial. The legacy of Nicaea has been a comfort to many for 1700 years. To others it has been a theological coat of mail that confines and condemns.

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90 Blanche B. Boyer – Richard McKeon (eds.), *Peter Abailard Sic et Non: A Critical Edition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, 89.