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THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

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Editorial

What a delight it is to be able to include an article by Mac Watts, the founding editor of *Touchstone*. On a personal note, Mac was the external reader for my Ph. D. thesis thirty years ago. Now well into his 90s, Mac continues to think big thoughts and express those thoughts in writing with characteristic charm and wit.

Mac points out that the centennial of the United Church of Canada coincides with another milestone – the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Niceaea, the Emperor Constantine in 325 to settle several points of doctrinal dispute that were dividing the Church. For United Church readers, one of those events is very close to home, both chronologically and ecclesiologically. The other – well, for many if not most of our readers, it may seem remote from the concerns of the Church today. Mac provides an entertaining overview of Niceaea and subsequent ecumenical Councils that, over a century, hammered out the framework for understanding the person of Christ that remains foundational for Christian faith today.

Mac is joined by five other readers in arguing for the ongoing relevance of what was achieved seventeen centuries ago in that city in Roman Bithynia, part of modern-day Türkiye.

While the legacy of Niceaea may be unfamiliar to Protestants, in other Christian communions it is absolutely central. Fr. Jacob Siemens, an Orthodox theologian and priest in Wales, writes about the importance of precision in our theological and Christological language. Niceaea was about defining precisely who Jesus Christ is and what he accomplishes for us. This matters, not only for theological, but also for pastoral reasons. Fr. Jacob describes encounters with young adults who have converted to the Orthodox Church and have a firm and lasting foundation for their lives in a robust proclamation of the Gospel grounded in the Nicene vision of the person and work of Christ.

David Deane, a Roman Catholic theologian, in his article addresses the two main reasons that the Nicene Creed has fallen out of favour: first, that it represents the captivity of the Gospel by politics of empire; and second, that it is corrupted by Greek metaphysics. David argues with passion that these charges are unjustified and that the doctrinal unity forged at Niceaea and its successor Councils was critical to the growth of Christianity.

Susan Wood, also writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, focuses on the third article of the Creed on the Holy Spirit. Using the concept of “synodality,” derived from the Greek *synodos*, meaning “journeying together,” Susan offers of vision of ecumenical unity

grounded in the Spirit's work through baptism and inspiring the Church's mission.

Sandra Beardsall, a contemporary ecumenist (and *Touchstone* Board member) looks at Nicaea as a successful unifying initiative in the fourth century church and asks what lessons it has to teach those who believe that visible ecumenical unity is an important ecclesial goal today.

Gail Allan has written an informative profile of Zambian-born United Church educator and global activist Omega Chilufya Bula. Theological student Kieran Collery in "From the Heart" reflects on the significance of Nicaea for young adults who are asking existential questions of meaning and purpose in the midst of post-modern relativism and ennui. By bringing together Nicene Christology and the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Kieran advocates for the revival of the concept of *martyria* – a message and a way that offers a younger generation something worth giving their lives for and to.

As always, this issue of *Touchstone* is rounded out with three book reviews.

Celebrate the Centennial

This journal is a labour of love for a remarkable team of dedicated individuals who freely give of their time and skills to make *Touchstone* possible. We operate entirely with volunteers, on a shoestring budget. We're inviting our readers and friends to express their support and to mark the centennial of the United Church by making a \$100 tax deductible donation. With your help we can ensure that *Touchstone* continues to be a forum for engaging theological conversation for many years to come. If \$100 is not possible for you, any amount will be gratefully received. Visit www.touchstonejournal.ca/donate make your centennial gift.

Paul Miller, Editor
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325 C.E.: A SIGNATURE YEAR IN THE CHURCH'S STORY

by Mac Watts

My wife and I, with our four young children, had the good fortune in the early 1970s to live for some months on the south coast of Spain. Naturally we visited nearby centres of historical interest during that period, one of which was the city of Cordoba. I have to admit I didn't do my homework on the place before we went, so I knew only of the existence there of the great mosque, built when the Moors were established in the region. But there were other treasures in the city we came upon unexpectedly, one of which had unusual interest for me.

In the centre of town there is a column, a smaller version of the kind of column found in Trafalgar Square in London, upon which Admiral Nelson stands. On the column in Cordoba there is a more modest looking, non-military figure. To my astonishment and pleasure it turned out to represent Bishop Hosius of Cordoba. Hosius had the distinction of presiding over most of the meetings of the very first General Council of the Church, which assembled in 325 at Nicaea (now part of Türkiye). Out of that council came the first version of the Nicene Creed. When I checked the date of the erection of the column I found it was 1925, the year of the formation of The United Church of Canada!

In the late fall of 2020, not long before my 92nd birthday, I was recalling that experience with a friend. She had been telling me about a wonderful trip she and her husband had taken to Spain, which included a visit to Cordoba. They hadn't paid attention to Hosius' column. After the conversation with her I began to think forward to 2025. There was no doubt in my mind that *Touchstone* would be carrying material that year marking the 100th birthday of the United Church. But I was less confident that something would appear marking the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Council. Perhaps, though, if I were to write something about the event myself it might be used. If I were to do so, however, I felt I must get on to it right away, while I still had health of body and mind. Both my father and my brother died suddenly of heart failure at the age of 91. So I immediately sat down at my computer, putting aside the thought that some of my friends were uncertain about the condition of my mind! It is now early in 2023, not long after my 94th birthday, that I am submitting the article to the editor. If it appears in 2025 I might, God willing, be still around to see it.

I must reassure you good readers, however, that in this piece I will not waste your time and mine urging United Church clergy to start using the Nicene Creed in our worship services. After all, even the Apostles'

Creed hasn't been heard in most of our congregations for years.¹ No, I will be content with holding up the significance of the testimony that first General Council made to the Church of its own time, and of its continued importance for our own. To be successful in that, however, I won't be able to focus solely on Nicaea; I must refer also to three subsequent councils. For even the text of the Creed we know today doesn't reach us directly from Nicaea; it comes from a second council meeting about 50 years later, where the third article, dealing with the Holy Spirit, the Church, Baptism, etc., was given its current wording. The second article, however, was left largely unchanged, and it is the second article which contains the testimony that saved the unique good news of Jesus Christ for the community of Christians.

....And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father through whom all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human....

Novels like *The DaVinci Code*, and other popular books, present stories about sinister shenanigans in the early church, some of them related to the Nicene Council. Those books assume the existence of people in a power centre who at Nicaea were able to sneak in views about Christ's identity that were novel, and which were designed to heighten the influence of those in the power centre.² It would be naïve to think there were no coercive power plays at Nicaea; there has never been a large gathering, where weighty decisions have had to be made, without them, certainly not one the size of Nicaea.³ But was there a "power centre" at that time, of the type described in those books? It's true that the Roman bishop's office was

¹ Cogent arguments in favour of the continued use of the historic creeds can be found in William R.H. Haughton's fine book on the origin and employment in the United Church of the "New Creed". *In Search For A Symbol* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2022) pp. 186 ff.

² It was disturbing for me to find one of my favourite Hollywood actors, Tom Hanks, playing a lead role in the movie version of *The Da Vinci Code*, based as it is on such trashy scholarship.

³ In his book *The Resistance To Church Union In Canada*, Keith Clifford alludes to some of the coercive power plays employed in their courts by the Presbyterian unionists, leading to the vote for union in 1925.

revered among Christians as being occupied by Peter's successors, but the bishop of Rome didn't attend the Nicene meetings, and if he had any representatives there, they left no mark. The same was the case with the next council when the additions were made to the third article of the creed. And as far as something novel being introduced—setting aside anything said in the books of the New Testament—the bishops at Nicaea didn't start with an empty page in front of them; rather they made modifications to at least one creed already in existence. The early 5th century Christian historian, Socrates, quotes a letter by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, who had attended the council. It was written to his clergy immediately after the conclusion of the meetings; he tells them that he had shared with council members the creed used in Caesarea, and he spells out the wording:

We believe in one God, the Father all Governing, Creator of everything visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, the only-begotten Son, the first born of all creation, begotten of the Father before all time....⁴

Rather a high Christology! The Caesarean creed, however, did not contain the crucial word that was eventually chosen for inclusion in the Nicene statement, that Christ the Son was of the *very same being* as the Father; the Greek word was *homoousion*, and was not found in the New Testament. If it was in that sense novel, those who put the word forward felt it witnessed to the astounding truth of Christ's personhood.⁵

Meanwhile, since the 18th century, our vision of what went on at Nicaea has been skewed by claims from many sides (a) about how the Church drifted into esoteric philosophical speculations instead of sticking with the down-to-earth message of the Gospels, or (b) about the corrosive influence of the Emperor Constantine in the whole event. On both those counts the importance of what was achieved at Nicaea has been placed in a shadow in liberal denominations like ours. In the course of this article I hope I am successful in showing the validity of the first criticism to be spurious. Regarding the second, it should be recognized that only Constantine had the resources to enable such a huge gathering of bishops

⁴ Found in *A Historical View of The Council Of Nicea* by Isaac Boyle, 1879, p.43, appended to Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C.F. Cruse (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955, 1979).

⁵ For those readers who don't already know, I should point out that the working language of this council, and of the three subsequent ones referred to in this article, was Greek, not Latin, and the texts that came out of the meetings were solely in Greek.

to take place. Three hundred and eighteen of them attended, some in the West from as far away as Spain; it was a very impressive achievement.⁶ And though Constantine himself presided at a few of the opening sessions the main item on the agenda was not set by him. That had been provoked by an outspoken priest from the diocese of Alexandria named Arius. A few years earlier he had put forward a public challenge to the Church to clarify its ideas about the relation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with God the Father. Arius maintained that the Son of God was a divine person created by the Father in order to be the instrument through whom the world would be fashioned, and who would come in due course as the Saviour and Redeemer. The Father came first in the order of things and the Son second, perhaps a distant second. The Son was divine but did not share the full deity of the Father.

It must be acknowledged that a similar theology had been held by a good many respected Christian figures up to this time, who were considered, and considered themselves, to belong in the Church's mainstream. One of those was Eusebius himself.⁷ But the challenge to the adequacy of that outlook was becoming more and more urgent. One of the people who contributed to the discussions was a 21-year-old named Athanasius, probably not yet ordained, who like Arius came from Alexandria. It was seven years *prior* to Nicaea when this young man published some reflections on the Incarnation that anticipated what would later be affirmed in the Nicene confession: the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ. Thus the claim that the bishops at Nicaea had something presented to them never before heard in the Church doesn't square with the evidence.

When Arius widely publicized his position, however, it was not Athanasius but his bishop, Alexander, who initially responded. Alexander sent a general letter around the churches of the Mediterranean basin warning his fellow bishops about Arius' stance, and it was the rancorous

⁶ To get a sense of Constantine's success, compare the number of bishops who attended the next general council, which took place at Constantinople in the year 381: only 180, and almost all from the eastern Mediterranean region.

⁷ Some readers will be aware that Eusebius is not just a vague somebody from ancient times. His monumental work, *Ecclesiastical History*, is to this day essential reading for any student of the early Church. He picks up the Church's story where the Book of Acts leaves off, and carries it through until just prior to the Council of Nicaea. In our own time Jaroslav Pelikan repeatedly reminded us of our debt to Eusebius, because his book carried data that can be found nowhere else.

exchange between Alexander and Arius that stimulated the tumult throughout the Church which came to the notice of Constantine.

The genuineness of the Emperor's personal embrace of Christianity remains disputed to this day, and here I won't take sides. But it's clear he saw in the early fourth century churches, by now spread throughout the empire, a cohesiveness that might support him in his goal of maintaining the unity of his territories. The divisive fight in the Church over Arius' ideas was the last thing he needed. So he took the initiative, encouraged by some episcopal advisers—one of them being Hosius of Cordoba—to use his resources to enable a general council of bishops to gather in order to sort things out.

Even though he gave support to the use of the word that indicated Christ the Son to be of the same being as God the Father, the outcome of the council certainly didn't satisfy him. The Nicene Creed didn't heal the divisions in the Church; Arian churches were soon spread fairly widely around the empire, and continued in existence for a long while. However, the defence of the central affirmation of Nicaea was taken up by some of the best minds in the Church. One of most incisive, and most tenacious, of those was Athanasius, who at the age of 30 succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria. It was the persistence of people like him, the persuasiveness of their biblical exegesis, and the insightfulness of their theological reasoning, that kept the Nicene testimony from being consigned to oblivion. Thus at a second General Council, gathered in Constantinople in 381, the Nicene statement was reaffirmed and augmented.⁸ It's here we must note that not long after the Constantinople meeting the Nicene position got Imperial support: Theodosius I gave Trinitarian faith protection by law. However repugnant such an action is to us in our time we must remember that the kind of separation of "church and state" we take for granted was unthinkable in those centuries. And we should keep in mind that the content of the creed was not imposed from outside, but came out of long-standing reflections *within* the Christian community.

What happened at Constantinople didn't settle things, and what Theodosius enacted didn't settle things; the continued ferment over Christ's personhood led to yet another council meeting, held at Ephesus in 431 where, among other decisions, the devotional title for Mary as "Mother of God", which had been in use by many Christians for at least a

⁸ Regrettably, in my mind, the 381 Council changed the first words of the creed from "We believe" to "I believe". The wonderful people who produced *Voices United* restored the "We" to the text of the creed carried in the book.

century,⁹ was given official endorsement. Understandably the outcome of that decision enhanced devotion to Mary,¹⁰ but actually the focus of the discussion was not on her but on the identity of the One she bore.¹¹

Then exactly 20 years after the Ephesus meeting a council held at Chalcedon issued a statement, in a very different format, about the profound mystery of Christ's personhood: members affirmed that Jesus Christ "is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his human-ness is concerned." So "we apprehend the two natures of Christ without confusing them, without transmuting one nature into another, without dividing them . . . without contrasting them according to area or function. . ." This time the bishop of Rome, Pope Leo I, did play an important role. He wasn't present, but the wording adopted by the council was inspired by a letter from him.¹²

Was all this left behind by the Protestant Reformers, as belonging entirely to the Catholics and the Orthodox? Actually no. Whatever the Reformers negated, it was not this. Here they were in accord with the historic confessions,¹³ Luther and Zwingli even with the affirmation about Mary.¹⁴ If we state that we, by contrast, are not, and that all the fuss about what went on at Nicaea and the subsequent three councils has no connection with us, we can't say it's because we are maintaining the true "Protestant" legacy. I think we are revealing instead that we are the spiritual offspring of different ancestors, even if we have never read them.

⁹ For instance, Jaroslav Pekilan notes an encyclical sent out by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria in 319 in which he refers to Mary as "Mother of God." That's over 110 years before the Ephesus council!

¹⁰ Right after the Council Pope Sixtus III began the construction of the Basilica of Santa Maggiore in Rome. When completed, it became the most important shrine to Mary in the West.

¹¹ Both Trinitarian theology and Mariology arose out of reflections on the identity of Jesus Christ.

¹² Members of the Chalcedon council did not consider their statement would supercede the Nicene Creed as modified in 381. In fact, we know the wording of the latter only because it is contained in minutes of the Chalcedon meeting. Those from 381 are lost.

¹³ The opening words of the *Augsburg Confession* of 1517, were "we unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea . . ."

¹⁴ John Calvin revered Mary for her role in the salvation story but felt it inappropriate to use the title "Mother of God" for her, while it seems John Knox expressed no regard for Mary whatever. Meanwhile, Calvin's most illustrious successor in the Reformed tradition, Karl Barth, said that Mother of God language for Mary is "sensible, permissible, and necessary . . ." (*Church Dogmatics* I,2, p. 138).

Edward Gibbon comes to mind as one, a leading figure in the 18th century British Enlightenment. In his brilliant multi-volume *Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire* he described the debates at Nicaea with contempt. He was scornful of the fact that ordinary lay Christians in that time, who had no credentials for dealing with sophisticated ideas, had the nerve to talk—and sing!—about issues surrounding an “iota”, a letter in the Greek language that affected the meaning of the two words that were options for inclusion in the creed, *homoiousion*, or *homoousion*. In choosing the latter, council members were making clear that Jesus Christ’s deity was of the *very same* nature as that of the Father, not just similar nature. Gibbon’s opinion that “it didn’t make one iota of difference” has made its way into our language in relation to almost anything insignificant. Well really! I’m sure many languages are like Greek and our own, where the change of one letter can alter the meaning of a word fundamentally.

I hope readers will note that in this article I have not demonized Arius. The biblical texts about Christ’s identity left room for differences of judgement. Take the Father/Son imagery, for instance. In human relationships a father can exist a long while before a son appears. And a son has his own character, and can make his own life choices that may be very different from his father’s. It’s true that the uniqueness of the Father/Son relationship in the case of Jesus Christ is spelled out in a number of places, such as in John’s Gospel, where Jesus is heard to say that He and the Father are one, and that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father. Nevertheless, Arius’ position that the Son was created by the Father at a later time was defended by quotations from Scripture. For example, there was an influential Old Testament text that seemed fully to support his argument. The Book of Proverbs has Wisdom saying, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth . . . When he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker . . .” (8:22 - 30). When the prologue to John’s Gospel was read side by side with the Proverbs passage we can see how some could conclude that the Father was alone on the scene to begin with and that the Word/Wisdom/Son came later.

By choosing the non-biblical word that affirmed the Son to be of the very same nature as the Father, however, members of the Nicene council saw themselves as providing an *authoritative interpretive frame* for the Church in its reading of the biblical texts concerning Christ’s personhood. And the Nicene bishops were concerned to assure Christians that the Scriptures pointed not only to the deity of Christ but also his genuine humanity. Arius’ position had questioned the latter as well: in his

theology Jesus Christ was neither fully God nor fully human, lower than God and higher than us.¹⁵ In maintaining the case for Jesus' true humanity Mary remained the fall-back person people pointed to: Jesus had a real mother.

Regarding liturgical use of the creed, despite imperial recognition of it by Theodosius I, it remained for some time a hot potato at ground level. In some places it may have been a tool in preparing people for baptism, but it's hard to find evidence of its use in Sunday services. But over time it authenticated itself. (We might compare that process to the way several books now contained in the New Testament had, over a couple of centuries, authenticated themselves as deserving recognition as Scripture.) About a 100 years after the Constantinople Council the Creed was incorporated into the Eucharistic liturgy of the Eastern Church, where it remains to this day. In a Latin translation it became part of the Western Mass in northern Spain and much of Gaul about a 100 years later still, spreading out from there.¹⁶ It is part of the present-day Sunday liturgies of our Catholic, Anglican, and some of our Lutheran neighbours.

In the United Church we still sing the Christmas carols, with their affirmations about the Incarnation. But it seems the Incarnation is for us but a brief episode; quickly after Christmas, God is not incarnate anymore. He is simply "God," and we revere Jesus for being such a great help to us in pointing to God's love and providing for us the guidance we need for a good and faithful life. In that context we can understand the negative reaction against those New Testament texts about Jesus dying for our sins. Thus from many of our pulpits comes the assurance that Jesus may have died *because* of our sins, but a loving God would never single out some innocent person to die *for* our sins. And actually God did not. If the Nicene testimony about the incarnation is true, then it is God's own self-giving on the cross that is at the heart of the good news.

The illustrious Northrop Frye claimed that "creeds and dogmas quickly turn malignant . . ." Since he spent a lifetime as Professor of Literature at Victoria College, Toronto, originally a Methodist foundation, he should have taken our Methodist ancestor, Charley Wesley, into

¹⁵ To get a feel for the issues at stake at Nicaea one of the most easily read resources is Dorothy L. Sayers' play, *The Emperor Constantine*. In scenes 4 and 5 of Act Three she provides a fictional exchange between some of the main contenders at the Council. It's fictional, but since Sayers was an accomplished scholar, with the nuances of the language of the council, Greek, at her command, I consider the exchange she creates to be a *tour de force*.

¹⁶ The declaration about the creed's use assumed that it would be chanted. For much of the church's history the creeds were sung not recited.

account. In his many hymns Wesley gave joyous testimony to the central affirmation of Nicaea. Think of the lines in his well-loved Christmas carol: “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity!” And consider the first three verses of another hymn of his:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing Love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

‘Tis mystery all! The immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of Love Divine!
‘Tis mercy all; let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father’s throne above—
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race;
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free,
And, O my God, it found out me!

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DOCTRINE MATTERS: ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN OBSERVATIONS ON NICAEA'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

by Fr Jacob Siemens

In all the mess of modern thoughtlessness, that still calls itself modern thought, there is perhaps nothing so stupendously stupid as the common saying, 'Religion can never depend on minute disputes about doctrine.' It is like saying that life can never depend on minute disputes about medicine. The man who is content to say, 'We do not want theologians splitting hairs,' will doubtless be content to go on and say, 'We do not want surgeons splitting filaments more delicate than hairs.' It is a fact that many a man would be dead today, if his doctors had not debated fine shades about doctoring. It is also the fact that European civilization would be dead today, if its doctors of divinity had not debated fine shades about doctrine.¹

Seventeen hundred years ago, the Roman Emperor, Constantine I, called all the bishops of the Christian Church to a council. It had been twelve years since he first legalised Christianity across the empire with the Edict of Milan, and in that time, disunity was rife within the newly liberated Church. A charismatic priest from Alexandria, named Arius, had been preaching that Christ was subordinate to God the Father, and this had been noticed and contested by an upstart deacon named Athanasius. The issue at stake was fundamental to Christian Faith: either Jesus Christ—the incarnate Word of God—was God, and in the act of taking on human nature extended healing to humanity, or he was something less than God, in which case he could not possibly have accomplished such an immeasurable, incomprehensible act.

Whatever the implications of his teaching, and however the situation turned out, Arius' intent was not to diminish the saving work of Christ; it was, rather, to uphold the absolute unity of God according to the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church as he understood them. A second person of the Godhead seemed to introduce a multiplicity of gods to Arius. The problem with his position, however, was two-fold: from Athanasius' point of view, Arius was both mis-reading the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church, and his premise—that anyone (or anything) less than God

¹ In *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. XXI, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 320.

himself could effect such salvific work—was fundamentally wrong. Athanasius was supported in this position by Alexander, the Patriarch of Alexandria.

The controversy became so pronounced that, according to the fourth century Christian historian, Eusebius, it spilled out into the streets. He writes in the second book of his *Vita Constantini* (The Life of Constantine):

In this manner the emperor, like a powerful herald of God, addressed himself by his own letter to all the provinces, at the same time warning his subjects against superstitious error, and encouraging them in the pursuit of true godliness. But in the midst of his joyful anticipations of the success of this measure, he received tidings of a most serious disturbance which had invaded the peace of the Church. This intelligence he heard with deep concern, and at once endeavoured to devise a remedy for the evil. The origin of this disturbance may be thus described. The people of God were in a truly flourishing state and abounding in the practice of good works. No terror from without assailed them, but a bright and most profound peace, through the favour of God, encompassed his Church on every side. Meantime, however, the spirit of envy was watching to destroy our blessings, which at first crept in unperceived, but soon revelled in the midst of the assemblies of the saints. At length it reached the bishops themselves, and arrayed them in angry hostility against each other, on pretence of a jealous regard for the doctrines of Divine truth. Hence it was that a mighty fire was kindled as it were from a little spark, and which, originating in the first instance in the Alexandrian church, overspread the whole of Egypt and Libya, and the further Thebaid. Eventually it extended its ravages to the other provinces and cities of the empire; so that not only the prelates of the churches might be seen encountering each other in the strife of words, but the people themselves were completely divided, some adhering to one faction and others to another. Nay, so notorious did the scandal of these proceedings become, that the sacred matters of inspired teaching were exposed to the most shameful ridicule in the very theatres of the unbelievers.²

² Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Life of Constantine*, bk. 2, chap. 61, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 1, edited by P. Schaff & H. Wace, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.), 1890.

And to an emperor for whom a symbol of Christ had been the means of military victory only a few years earlier, and who had much invested in the unity of the empire and its people, this state of affairs simply would not do. In light of this, Constantine called the bishops together in order to resolve it, in what would become the first of seven ecumenical councils: Nicaea I in A.D. 325.

The importance of this council and all that unfolded in its aftermath really cannot be overstated. It had implications for the Christians who had already become part of the Church; it had implications for the emperor and the well-being of the empire; it had implications for Christian doctrine and how the Church would continue to elucidate the terms of its beliefs. The Christians who were already part of the Church before the Edict of Milan and then the Council, had known what it was to struggle, to fear, to exercise faith in the face of opposition; now it was possible to be a Christian without risk. The emperor, meanwhile, knew what a fractured Church could mean for an empire he was trying to re-build and consolidate. And while the Christian Church had known from the time of the apostles what it was to sit in council together and make decisions on the direction in which it should go, it now knew that the conciliar process would have to entail more precisely what true Christians understood by the God they worshipped.

This last fact was critical. While there can be no question, for example, that St Paul the Apostle knew Jesus Christ, and that he was able to articulate with great clarity and immeasurable depth what he knew; and while the saints who followed Paul—such as Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, and Irenaeus of Lyons—were able to extend Pauline language, and conceive of a Christ who had accomplished an act of salvation that almost defied description, no one had yet expended their effort on fully defining complex notions such as the full humanity and divinity of Christ, how that Christ related to God the Father, and how Christians should understand the person of the Holy Spirit. But Nicaea set a template, and all subsequent language for such things would end up being tried and tested through councils.

In all, there were seven such councils (depending on who you ask, but Orthodoxy accepts seven), including the first in Nicaea, held in 325; the second, held in Constantinople in 381; the third in Ephesus in 431; the fourth in Chalcedon in 451; the fifth in 553 and again in Constantinople; the sixth in 681 once again in Constantinople; while the seventh was again in Nicaea in 787. Each of these was called to deal with a particular theological issue that had arisen in the Church and served to set the limits of what the Church considered “right belief” and “right worship”.

Today, this may seem strange to some. After all, why should the Church be so concerned with the precise terms of the Christian Faith when there are so many “better” things to be concerned about? When humanity seems to stand on the precipice of self-destruction; when poverty abounds; when the Earth itself is in rebellion against our rapacious consumption: what does it matter what the Creed says? Yet the Church has always insisted that a mere iota can separate us from salvation.³ Failure to recognise the correct formulae for speaking about the persons of the Godhead is to risk missing out on the fullness of the Gospel, to fall into heresy or, in the worst case, find oneself following demons. So, for example, underscoring the importance of understanding that the divine Logos, in the Incarnation, took on a full, true, and complete humanity, St Gregory of Nazianzen said: “That which He has not assumed He has not healed.”⁴ The statement was central to his argument in the theological debate against Apollinarianism, a christological heresy of the fourth century. Apollinarius of Laodicea was teaching that Jesus Christ had a human body and soul but that his human mind (*nous*) was replaced by the divine Logos (the Word of God). This meant that Apollinarius believed Jesus was not a complete human being. Gregory countered this by arguing that for salvation to be complete, Christ must have taken on the fullness of human nature: body, soul, and mind. Accordingly, if Christ did not assume a human mind, then the human mind, which was a key part of our fallen nature, could not be healed or redeemed. Gregory's point was that the incarnation was not just about God putting on a human body, but about God uniting with humanity in its *entirety*, including the part that had fallen most deeply into sin. By fully assuming our nature, Christ could restore it to its original, uncorrupted state. The debate was settled with Gregory's vindication by the second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381.

In the present moment, there are countless Christians of many traditions and communities for whom familiarity (or what they *assume* is familiarity) has bred contempt. That is, they have taken for granted the ideas upon which the authentic Christian Faith is contingent—assuming that they know the “old, old story” so well there is little value in examining

³ The Greek letter ‘iota’ (similar to an ‘i’ in Latin script) when added to the word ‘*homoousios*’ (meaning “same substance”), so that it reads “*homoiousios*” (meaning “similar substance”), separated those who sought to reconcile the ideas of Arius with orthodox Christianity by saying that Christ was of *similar* substance with the Father, as opposed to being of the *same* substance.

⁴ In *Epistle 101 to Cledonius*, Gregory of Nazianzen. The Greek original reads, Το γαρ απρόσληπτον και αθεράπευτον.

it further or continuing to perpetuate it in its entirety—and instead become consumed with work that resembles that of business executives, social workers, or politicians. Yet the Christians who gave their entire service, their intellects, even their lives in pursuit of the whole Gospel would disagree. The Christian Faith *in its entirety* is a rich, rich tapestry that proffers life, joy, freedom, clarity of vision and, ultimately, salvation to an extent beyond measure, and relegating its terms or despairing of its accessibility is to impoverish both the self and those with whom we connect. The history of the Council of Nicaea—and the early Church in general—is an indisputable mark of the inexhaustible life to be found in getting the terms of the faith correct.

The recent surge in people—and especially, though not exclusively, young men—approaching the Orthodox Churches may be seen as instructive in this regard. As an academic theologian, I myself have an especial investment in precision when it comes to expressing what the Church believes. Even so, that I am first and foremost a parish priest means that my pastoral work dominates my waking hours. Importantly, though, these two functions are not at all mutually exclusive. The last five years in the life of my parish has seen a constant increase in the number of enquirers looking into Orthodoxy. What is drawing them is a mix of factors, but one of the things that seems to increase the likelihood of retention is the clarity and robustness of the Church’s proclamation—something for which Orthodoxy tends to be known, and something in which I take immense personal pleasure. This is especially so when dealing with the many hurt and broken souls that come to the Church seeking relief from their burdens. The first thing necessary to make clear to such people is that there is no “me and you” in any comparative sense. There is really only “us”. Whoever it is I am speaking with, and no matter what it is they feel they have done, we are in exactly the same boat. But then, the medicine comes out: the medicine of the Gospel, the fullness of the Good News. When people hear that God became as we are in order that we might become what He is,⁵ they are stirred. In this is hope. This implies healing. This is our end. At the same time, this is an inaccessible axiom to any who ignore the doctrine that makes it possible.

⁵ Irenaeus of Lyon first expressed this in the preface of book five of his work, *Against the Heresies* (*Adversus haereses*). It is then taken up by Athanasius (the same who so vociferously countered Arianism) in his work, *On the Incarnation* (*De Incarnatione*), before being developed by many other Church Fathers, especially in the Greek East.

Precise doctrine matters because without it, we preach a sorely diminished Gospel. Quite apart from the risk of falling outside the bounds of Christianity, our ability to meet people where they are and—as Jesus did—proffer an authentically therapeutic word, is inherently limited. If, for example, our language is limited to “Jesus saves”, and have no idea what that actually means, how is it possible to communicate God’s divine work to people who have, quite naturally, a lifetime of struggle and hard questions? Indeed, something like Irenaeus’ doctrine of *recapitulation*⁶ may seem academic at first glance, but the idea that the divine Logos lived through every moment of human experience—from His kenotic taking on of flesh in the first instance, to His life through infancy, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood—is a profoundly comforting truth that holds many implications across the field of Christian understanding, from what it means to us, personally, to how we might interpret the meaning of sex, gender and other facets of anthropology. It is, ultimately, a deeply pastoral idea that can help every person approaching Christ understand better their relationship to God, to self, and to the world around them.

We indubitably inhabit a new world: one that is very different from that of our forebears. Not only has the so-called Enlightenment had its day, even the post-war consensus that prevailed from 1945 to the end of the twentieth century is now in ruins. The tenets of the (classical) liberal centre, taken for granted and held so dear for so long, have dissolved. This is why we are witnessing such polarisation in the West. For better or worse, Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and other phenomena that many who continue to hold to classical liberal assumptions find alarming, have arisen precisely because the centre of such human constructs, no matter how well-conceived or well-meaning, could never have held forever. Such being the case, it is faith alone that continues to stand in the midst of the storm. This may not be obvious from the point of view of those generations that look around them and see nought but empty pews in formerly full buildings; it is, however, evident in the number of enquirers now approaching Christianity with questions

⁶ The doctrine of recapitulation (Greek: ἀνακεφαλαίωσις), is rooted in the Pauline epistles, especially when St Paul refers to Christ as the “new Adam”, and developed by Irenaeus of Lyons. In Greek, it literally means to “re-head”, and shows how Christ, in the Incarnation, takes on every aspect of what it means to be human, while setting out a renewed template for human life and experience. This renewed template in Christ is distinct from the old template in Adam and, according to Irenaeus, finds a feminine corollary in the *Theotokos* (the Virgin Mary), who is the “new Eve”.

that are forcing those of us within the Church to re-visit the earliest formulae. After all, as a rule (to which there may, of course be exceptions) they are asking not about the history of Residential Schools or land claims; what type of people the local community ordains as ministers; or what the Church is doing by way of overseas aid (as important as many of these issues are!). They are asking, rather, how they might be saved from a life of screen-addiction, ubiquitous drugs, rampant sexualisation, personal instrumentation, and general malaise. And they are seeking answers that they know cannot come from institutions that are, themselves, mired in the same problems, challenges, and sins as they are. So they are looking to the Church.

The question is: how can a deracinated body respond? A Church that has become detached from its roots and no longer knows what it knows, is no Church at all. There is no way it can speak its own language—a language that could extend a lifeline and more—to those who struggle. Yes, it can draw on its material resources to feed the poor; it can speak prophetically in the face of injustice; it can try to behave in an exemplary way (in public, at least!). Yet real people, with their real experiences of poor mental health, of family struggles, of addictions of various sorts, of enslavement: these people do not live in the pages of the newspapers or on statistical spreadsheets. Real people are reaching out for healing and salvation. Real healing and salvation. And the Christian Church—the Body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit—when it remembers its language and its primary task, can offer this in abundance.

Ultimately, the first council of Nicaea, called by the emperor Constantine and held exactly seventeen hundred years ago, continues to matter because *doctrine matters*. This is not a harsh or exclusive thing to assert; indeed, it is the most pastoral thing possible. We began by citing G.K. Chesterton's words comparing the work of the physician to that of the theologian. The Christian community cannot possibly treat the illness from which all humanity suffers unless it is expert in its own medicine—knowing its parameters, its precise therapies, and how to apply them. This does not mean, of course, that it is incumbent on every Christian to be an academic theologian—to know the history and development of every idea that has passed through the collective patristic mind, or to be expert in every form of medicine. From an Orthodox point of view, the Church as a whole already possesses both the fullest understanding and the application. What is incumbent of every person who seeks to follow Christ and both to enjoy and share the fruits of His work, is that they accept the idea that the Church is bigger than they are, that individually it is impossible to claim knowledge superior to the whole, and to allow the wisdom of the Church—

divine in origin as it is—to so infuse their own souls that they themselves might become its agents. This process starts with the Scriptures, extends through the Fathers, and finds expression in the Councils. Nicaea is a pivotal moment in the process and is as relevant today as it ever was ever.

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BEYOND THE SHADOWS: A DEFENSE OF THE NICAEAN CREED

By David Deane

In this essay I will argue that the Nicaean Creed (and pro-Nicene theology more generally) should be championed by Christians as central to our shared identity. This may sound like supporting the wetness of water, or the coldness of snow. After all, the council of Nicaea was the first great truly ecumenical council of the church. The Creed it produced is axiomatic and is proclaimed¹ in the Anglican, United, and Roman Catholic Churches. It represents the credal core that unites all Christian churches, East and West. Therefore, in one sense, its importance does not need to be defended. However, I would argue that Nicaea should not be merely passively unifying, but that Christians should actively champion Nicaea's theological culture and use its theological grammar to norm our theology and practices.

To this end, we need to defend the Nicaean Creed against two perspectives that have etiolated the status of Nicaea over the last two centuries—first, that the Nicaean Creed represents a distortion of Christianity effected by the Emperor Constantine;² and second, that the Nicaean Creed is corrupted by the categories of Greek metaphysics that are incompatible with the simple truths of Christian doctrine.³ These two

¹ In various forms, sometimes with the *filioque* and sometimes without, but even more recent Creedal expressions such as *The Song of Faith*, follow the core shape of Nicaea and its logic.

² This position has a long history, from Jacob Burckhardt's *The Age of Constantine the Great in the 19th century* to John Dominic Crossan's *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperOne, 2007). It has been a staple in post-liberal theological streams influenced by John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), including theologians less specific in their critique of the Creed but who share Yoder's rejection of Constantinianism, such as Stanley Hauerwas and Bill Cavanaugh.

³ This position was advanced in the 16th century by radicals such as Servetus and Socinus but gained wider acceptance in the 19th century with Von Harnack's *History of Dogma* and Edwin Hatch's Hibbert Lectures of 1888, published posthumously as *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*. It remains a central tenet of the liberation theology of Leonardo Boff and is defended by biblical scholars such as James Dunn, whose *Christology in the Making* holds that such 4th and 5th century developments go far beyond what can be found in the New Testament text itself.

positions are ghosts that haunt the Nicæan Creed, reducing its capacity to be ecumenically unifying and undermining Nicæa's power to norm theology and practices.

Constantine's Role

The primary source for Constantine's life is Eusebius of Caesarea, who, upon the emperor's death in 337, began his *Life of Constantine*. Eusebius portrayed Constantine as a saintly figure, the inverse of the hated Diocletian, who began the largest and most devastating persecution of Christians in 303. Eusebius also contrasted him with Licinius, whom he presented as a champion of paganism. Constantine's victory over Licinius represented, for Eusebius, the victory of Christianity over paganism. The *Life of Constantine* is as much Christian apology as it is history, arguing to Rome that the great Constantine wanted only the union of the faith with the empire.

Less than three decades after the mass persecution of Christians, emphasizing the zealotry of Constantine's faith was prudent. However, I would argue that it is unsupported by the evidence and has encouraged misreadings of Constantine's involvement at Nicæa. By pushing the idea that Constantine sought to establish Christianity's privileged status within the empire, even going so far as to direct proceedings at the council of Nicæa, Eusebius strove to defend Christianity from any return to the persecution that preceded Constantine. Eusebius needed imperial support for Christianity after the decades of persecution. However, by striving to establish this he created a problem for Christianity in a culture very different from 4th century Rome, one in which the empire's embrace of Christianity is an embarrassment.

Eusebius never actually claimed that Constantine "pushed" a particular vision at Nicæa. However, his hagiography of Constantine is the closest thing we have to evidence that Constantine took a position on the debates. Those who imply a Constantinian hand at work in the outcome of the council can offer no detailed engagement with either the sources or the theological debates around Nicæa. They simply imply, rather than argue, that because Constantine called the council of Nicæa, Constantine was involved in securing its outcome, resulting in a shift from a "purer" Christianity to a more sinister one.

John Dominic Crossan, for example, writes, "It is easy enough to see that the Roman imperial theology was a rival to the Christian theology and that one would have to go. What Constantine did, however, was not to

abolish Roman imperial theology but to Christianize it.”⁴ Crossan’s perspective that speaks to a common Christian longing to find an original purity, uncorrupted by forces from without, to find a point at which “Christianity” or “The Church”, was perfect and spotless before being spoiled and set on the terrible trajectory. But there is no actual evidence that Constantine represents such an inflection point. Even if Boff is correct when he claims that with Constantine “the Church became a great power, a replica of the empire, with its structures of domination, its titles,”⁵ he offers no evidence to support this claim. Nor can Boff find a time when Church had no titles or ranks, whether the charismatic titles from Pauline letters or the ministerial titles (bishop, presbyter deacon) that we find in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. Crossan and Boff want to distance Christianity from the sins that have darkened our history. Constantine, as the first political leader who professed to be Christian, seems to offer a convenient point of separation between purity and corruption. But the evidence for this claim does not exist.

If we define “Constantinianism” as the rejection the radical teachings of Jesus in favour of security, wealth and advancement, we find that, even among Jesus’s twelve disciples, two spurned his way in favour of security or advancement. The New Testament shows that the rejection of heretical positions, such as those of the “Judaizers” condemned by Paul or the mysterious Nicolaitans impugned of Revelation 2:6 and 15, was present from the beginning. The point is that evidence for an original pure and idyllic Church is difficult to come by. As Christianity grew rapidly following its decriminalised in the first half of the 4th century, the visibility of moral and doctrinal failure was magnified and the temptations that led to that failure increased. Christians rightly lament this, but Constantine, simply by legalizing and encouraging Christian faith cannot be held solely responsible for determining the outcome at Nicaea. While nostalgia for a Church persecuted by imperial power is understandable, the loss of such persecution in no way casts a shadow over Nicaean theology.

Burckhardt, Crossan and Co. are on more solid ground in contending that Constantine was motivated more by *realpolitik* than Christian faith. Constantine’s concern was the unity of the empire. He witnessed the failure of Diocletian to persecute Christianity out of

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 164.

⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 27.

existence. There were at least six million Christians in Rome by 311.⁶ By 350 Christians would comprise half the population of the Empire. Establishing peace within this increasingly important group (that Constantine was close to joining) was prudent. The evidence supports Constantine's desire for unity between Christians, but not the argument that his motivation was primarily theological. Henry Chadwick rightly notes that "Constantine had summoned the council at Nicaea primarily because he wanted peace and unity, not because he was a zealous partisan for one side or the other."⁷ While striving for such unity Constantine, writes Eusebius, "assembled a general council, and invited the speedy attendance of bishops from all quarters, in letters expressive of the honorable estimation in which he held them."⁸ He did so because Alexandria, the city built by Alexander (upon whom Constantine styled himself) and the intellectual engine of the Roman empire, was in flames. The dispute between Arius, Bishop Alexander, and their respective followers, was tearing the Church around the eastern Mediterranean apart. Constantine's response was to write to Arius and Alexander⁹ about the "intolerable spirit of mad folly that has overcome the whole of Africa", whose "heedless frivolity had presumed to divide the religion of the people into diverse sects." He claims that the cause of their division was "of a truly insignificant character, and quite unworthy of such fierce contention."¹⁰ But fierce contention it was, to such an extent that Constantine's plans to travel through Antioch and Alexandria had to be changed. In the letter he seeks harmony from both sides, asking Alexander (the Bishop) to admit that his question soliciting an answer from Arius (the presbyter) was

⁶ See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7.

⁷ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, The Penguin History of the Church (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 132.

⁸ Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Commentary on Eusebius' Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 36.

⁹ Likely in 324, although a minority view (held by Cameron and Hall) dates it in 325.

¹⁰ J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, rev. ed. by W.H.C. Frend (London: SPCK, 1987), 286.

misguided and unnecessary¹¹, and that Arius should admit that his response was brazen and intemperate¹².

From this, we can see two things. First, that Constantine had no real interest in, or understanding of, the debate between both parties, which he saw as “frivolous” and of “truly insignificant character.” Second, that Constantine, in writing to both presbyter and bishop as equals,¹³ either did not understand how the Church in the East functioned or had an alternative understanding to that of the bishops. Within a year, he would clearly get “up to speed” as he wrote to bishops, inviting them alone to comprise the council. But this sequence of events shows that he was adapting to the Church’s norms rather than superimposing his own “imperial” patterns upon it. All bishops, even those opposed to Alexander in terms of the theological substance of the issue, were of one mind with Alexander on the subordination of presbyters to their Bishops.¹⁴

While this letter shows his lack of interest in the theology of the debate, Constantine’s actions after the council are the clearest evidence of

¹¹It seems likely that in response to Arius and other presbyters accusing Alexander of heresy, Alexander had required presbyters in her see to clarify their interpretation to lines in Scripture that spoke to the relation between the Father and the Son.

¹² See Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, commentary on Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 117.

¹³ On the basis of “its plural address and formal phraseology,” Cameron and Hall have proposed that this letter was not sent directly to Arius and Alexander but to a wider group. (See Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, commentary on Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 196). This interpretation, which transgresses Ockham’s Razor, requires us to account for why Eusebius would have changed the letter, addressed to Alexander and Arius), when, thirteen years later, his lies could easily have been exposed. Further the “plural address” argument is based on the letter’s use of the word “brethren,” which they read as indicating a wide group, but it is just as plausible that, with typical diplomatic skill, Constantine is referring to both Alexander and Arius as his Christian brethren, flattering them with equality to him in Christ in order to encourage them to fulfil his request and settle the dispute. While fascinating, the Cameron and Hall position remains a minority one. Leading scholars such as Ayers, Hansen, Drake, Behr, Barnes, and Rubenstein all acknowledge the Cameron and Hall position, while nonetheless engaging the letter as addressed to Arius and Alexander.

¹⁴ See R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (T&T Clark, 1988) 82-84, Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2004) 87, and Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 195.

his relative indifference to the theological issues at stake. In keeping with the goal of establishing unity, immediately after the council he exiled Arius along with his most ardent champions, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea. But, whether Constantine's theological position evolved, or he decided that the anti-Nicene position was not going away and it, rather than Nicaea, best served the unity of the Church, in 328 he recalled all three.¹⁵ Furthermore, in 335 Constantine exiled Nicaea's most significant champion, Athanasius.¹⁶ While Athanasius was not exiled on theological grounds alone,¹⁷ the fact that it signified Constantine's growing opposition to Nicaea is supported by the simultaneous rise of Eusebius of Nicomedia as Constantine's chief theological adviser.¹⁸ It was Eusebius who finally baptized Constantine on his deathbed in 337.¹⁹

These facts make untenable the position that the Nicene Creed was so tarnished by Constantine that it does not warrant enthusiastic support. Constantine, it is clear, did not favor one side and certainly did not impose one theological vision at the Council in 325. It could be argued, based on the increasing influence of Eusebius of Nicomedia in his court, that he began to favour the anti-Nicene "homoian" side, beginning in 327. But there is no evidence that Constantine personally influenced the debate at Nicaea on one side or the other. If Nicaea deserves to be regarded as a component of Christianity's ecumenical core, then queasiness about Constantine's role should not overshadow it.

But was Nicene theology too influenced by Greek philosophical terminology to be enthusiastically embraced?

The Greek "hijacking" of theology

I would argue that, rather than representing the imposition of an alien metaphysics, the focus on the category of *ousia* ("being") offered a helpful and philosophically neutral grammar. After years of confusion, it was used increasingly by both sides in the early 320s (a) to enable each side to more

¹⁵ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (T&T Clark, 1988) 259.

¹⁶ Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 40.

¹⁷ Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 308.

¹⁸ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (T&T Clark, 1988) 261-263.

¹⁹ Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 348.

clearly identify the position of their opponents and (b) to clarify what was at stake in the debate.

The controversy began in a storm of phrases, metaphors, and predicates. Arius and his supporters accused their Bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, of promoting heretical models of the relationship between the Father and the Son, rekindling earlier “modalist” heresies such as Sabellianism. But when we read the letters from the early years of the dispute,²⁰ both Arius, Bishop Alexander, and their respective supporters demonstrate a clear lack of clarity. Arius, in his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, attempts to summarize Alexander's position by claiming that Alexander believed the Son coexists with the Father in a manner that is “unbegotten,” “always-begotten,” and “unbegotten-generated.”²¹ But these three phrases represent distinct, even contradictory, theological models. “Always begotten” and “unbegotten” are in opposition in what they signify (either the Son is begotten or he is unbegotten); but they share refusal to make a concrete temporal distinction between the Father and the Son. Arius flags this as the heretical element in Alexander's teaching. According to Arius, there *was* a time in which the Son did not exist. By attributing terms such as “unbegotten, always begotten, unbegotten generated” to Alexander, Arius is seeking to highlight Alexander's rejection of this temporal distinction between the Father and the Son. This is problematic for Arius because it leads to the position that the Son is either an “outflow” or an “extension”²² of the Father. Such a model he argues, is monadic, the Son being simply an emanation of the Father—a heresy long rejected by the Church. Arius attributes a series of phrases to Alexander and then links them to an accepted heresy. The correlations he draws are logically coherent. A phrase such as “light from light” implies emanation. In fact, Alexander did not take the position that the Son is simply a piece of the monadic God, broken off, but this gets lost in the polemical storm on which Arius focuses and disseminates in his correspondence.

Alexander for his part is even more guilty of misrepresentation than Arius. For example, he claims that Arius and his supporters are “denying

²⁰ Hanson suggests that the letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia is written between 318 and 320, and Williams and Ayers both agree that it represents the early stages of the dispute.

²¹ Arius, Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 110.

²² *Ibid.*

the divinity of our Savior and proclaiming him to be equal to all”²³ while, in fact, Arius affirmed that the Son, brought into existence by the Father’s will before all time and ages, was “fully God, only-begotten, and unchangeable.”²⁴ Again, we can see why Alexander arrived at this interpretation. His assumption is that there is a concrete distinction between God, who is uncreated, and everything else, which is created; between God who alone is sanctifying and everything else, which is sanctified. Therefore, if Arius is positing a temporal distinction between the only unbegotten Father and the Son, then the Son must be in this second category of begotten/created/sanctified and, therefore, no different from us. Note that such phrases, which have different meanings, have semantic resonance in that they all refer to the “not God” side of the binary distinction within which Alexander is working. Arius assumes gradations of divinity. Alexander does not. Therefore he can not offer an interpretation of Arius’ position that he or his supporters would recognise as their own.²⁵

This focus on phrases and predicates led to a series of letters from both Arius and Alexander to bishops across the eastern Church, in which they both offer summations of the other’s theology that their opponents would see as a misrepresentation. Bishops across the eastern Church received letters from Arius tying Alexander’s position to heresies such as Sabellianism, and letters from Alexander tying the position of Arius to heresies such as Valentinianism. Given the rational corollaries of the language separated from its context, those receiving the letters could only agree, on the basis of what the phrases, as presented, imply, that Arius or Alexander is guilty as charged. Because of this, from 318 on, bishops and

²³ Alexander of Alexandria to Alexander of Byzantium, in S. Fernández and S.F. Eyzaguirre, *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304-337)*, Contexts of Ancient and Medieval Anthropology (Brill Schöningh, 2024) 45.

²⁴ Arius, Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 111.

²⁵ Both Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia write to Alexander on this point, making clear that their position is not that the Son is a creature like other creatures. There is no existing record of any response from Alexander, but it seems unlikely that it would countenance that their position did not effectively result in the condemnation of the Son to the realm of creatures. As Ayres, Williams, and others have noted, one of the results of Nicaea is the solidification of the primary distinction as Alexander held it, between Creator and creation, rather than degrees or gradations of divinity between the two.

leaders from the eastern Church were animated to oppose the heresy that these accounts clearly highlight for them.

It is against this backdrop that the focus on a distinctive and “renovated”²⁶ grammar of “*ousia*” emerges, bringing greater clarity and precision to the issues at stake. Eusebius of Nicomedia and Athanasius, on different sides of the conflict, both appeal to the term “*ousia*” to make their case. According to Eusebius, the Alexandrian term “*homousia*,” (of one substance) signifies an ontological conflation of the Father and Son, while Athanasius maintains that the preferred Eusebian term “*homoiousia*” (of similar substance) fails to make sufficient distinction between the uncreated Godhead and creation, implying that there are degrees of divinity while positing a soteriologically problematic ontological distinction between the Father and the Son. *Homoiousia* delineates the Eusebian position that the Son is of similar but distinct substance from the Father, while being wholly distinct from the rest of creation. *Homoousia*, Alexander and his supporters argue, safeguards the ontological union of Father and Son, as well as the proper and ultimate distinction between uncreated and created, sanctifying and sanctified. The distinction between the Father and the Son, they note, is incomprehensible, but nonetheless must be affirmed as it is a distinction revealed in the economy of salvation.

It is instructive to note how Athanasius, with the benefit of this terminological grammar, could later offer a clearer and more faithful analysis of Arius’ position than Alexander’s. As Athanasius writes in *De Decretis*

Let us behold what it was that they replied to the blessed Alexander in the beginning, when their heresy was formed. They wrote then saying that, ‘He is a creature (*ktisma*), but not as one of the creatures (*tōn ktismatōn*); He is a thing made (*poiēma*), but not as one of the things made (*tōn poiēmatōn*); He is an offspring (*gennēma*), but not as one of the offsprings (*tōn gennēmatōn*).’²⁷

²⁶ “Renovated” in a sense that the Alexandrian side came to offer *homousia* in a manner distinct from that which they hold to have been rejected by the 3rd century council of Antioch. So too Eusebius of Nicomedia relies on the term *homoiousia* in a form distinct from 3rd century usage when he applies it to refer to the nature of the Son in a manner similar but distinct from the Father.

²⁷ Athanasius, *De Decretis* section 3, as cited in David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the ‘Arian Controversy’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 234.

Alexander has failed to note that the position of Arius is “homoian.” The Son, according to Arius, is of a similar, not of the same, substance as the Father, and certainly not of the same substance as us. Athanasius, equipped with a fuller appreciation of the *homoiousian/homoousian* distinction, has a grammar that allows him to understand this and accurately represent the position of Arius and his supporters. Therefore, the language of *ousia*, far from being a problematic grammar superimposed onto a Christian imagination, offers a terminology that enabled each side to express the position of the other in a way that the other side would recognise as their own.

Furthermore, the term “substance” or even “being.” cannot be thought of as embedded within a distinct theological culture, Greek or otherwise. This is because, as used by Eusebius and Athanasius, they are terms of distinction without substantial semantic content. For both Athanasius and Eusebius, the *ousia* of the unbegotten is not knowable in any sense. All sides agree on this. There is no sense in which the term *ousia* when applied to God has any imaginable “content.” Nothing could possibly come to mind when we try to think of the substance that is the substance of God. It has no distinct referent, no more than the word “stuff.” It serves only as a term of distinction. God the Father is. Therefore, however incomprehensible and unimaginable it may be, there is an *ousia* or “stuff” that is the Father’s *ousia* or stuff. Is the Son’s *ousia* this *ousia*, or is it the same *ousia* as the rest of creation? Or is it a third *ousia*, neither one nor the other (albeit infinitely more similar to the *ousia* of the Father)? This is the question the Council of Nicaea was called to settle. It does not require any speculation about this incomprehensible *ousia* in itself and all sides explicitly prohibit such speculation. It simply asks if the “stuff” of the Father and the “stuff” of the Son is the same “stuff.” As such, while *ousia* terminology was condemned in the Synod of Antioch’s condemnation of Paul of Samosata,²⁸ its reimagining in the 420s by both

²⁸ We cannot know for certain how Paul of Samosata used the term *homousia* and therefore why the term became so tarnished by his use. Paul held that the Son was neither born nor incarnated as God, but became one with God through the indwelling of the divine Logos at his baptism. This was likely the sense of the term “homoousia” in Paul’s usage. For him the Logos, being *homousion* with the Father, was bound to the creature Jesus during the course of Jesus’ life. For whatever reason, this condemnation seems to explain why the embrace of *ousia* language in a *positive* sense was gradual. As Hanson rightly notes, this condemnation from the council of Antioch embarrassed Athanasius throughout his life as he never wanted to reject the Council of Antioch’s condemnation of the phrase but remained adamant about its coherence in his own usage. See R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for*

sides (in distinctiveways) was the Rosetta stone that enabled understanding of each other's position and the clarification of what, precisely, was at stake. It was not the hijacking of Christian debate by Greek philosophical categories. On the contrary, it was the utilisation of signifiers whose direct semiotic content was empty, signs that pointed to nothing imaginable, but which nonetheless allowed for a distinction between the positions offered, as well as a clarification of what was at stake.

At stake was nothing less than the Christian theology of salvation. Athanasius' fixation on *homoousia*, as his writings post 325 make clear, followed from his participatory model of salvation (which he, and Nicaea, agree is the Christian model of salvation) demanded it. We are saved through ontological union with God. The binding of God to humanity in and as the man Jesus ontologically unites the person with that which is proper to God, but not to us, things such as eternal life. As Athanasius writes in the *Orationes contra Arianos*,

For if the works of the Word's Godhead had not taken place through the body, humanity would not have been deified . . . But now that the Word has become human and has appropriated what pertains to the flesh . . . we, no longer being merely human, but as proper to the Word, may participate in eternal life.²⁹

We are bound to Christ in the Incarnation, but only if Christ is of one substance with the Father are we thereby bound to the fullness of God. Otherwise, we are bound to the Word, which is of like substance with God but, being a third thing, is not true God. So too, the last do not become first unless the true God who is first becomes last. The poor are blessed because this God, the true God, became poor in and as the man Jesus. This self-giving of God is, for Athanasius, real to the extent that to see and serve this true God, revealed and made present in Christ, is to see and serve the poor and lowly. *Homoousia* is consistent with the Christian grammar of salvation. Without it, salvation is the gift of a distant deity, rather than the ontological union with a saving God. Without *homoousia* salvation is a divine decree, under which an ontological alien humanity is granted "something." With *homoousia* salvation is an ontological union with true God because true God who, as the Word, bound Himself to humanity. The gift is from God Himself. Humanity is bound to eternal life as gift from the

the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 102-103.

²⁹ As cited in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 143-44.

God who is eternal life. Nicaea insists on *homousia* because it affirms the model that is ontological and relational, not deontological and non-relational. The poor and lowly can be truly filled up (Lk. 1:53) only by the gift of the very self-giving of God. This is Nicaea's scandalous truth

In this essay, I have aimed to show that the achievement of Nicaea is not tarnished by either of the two shadows that have haunted its affirmation. Christians rightly lament the temptations and failures of post-Constantinian Christianity. The evidence, however, shows that Constantine's primary interest was not theological. The Nicene theological disputes are relevant to him only in so much as unity is served by their resolution. I have argued that the use of the grammar of *ousia* in no way overwhelms Christian doctrine with an alien philosophical lexicon. The category of *ousia*, as it was used by both sides of the conflict, served as a term of distinction without concrete content and thereby enabled a helpful clarification of the issues. Therefore, the ecumenical centrality of Nicaea is not threatened by either the claim that Constantine's role overshadows the theological outcome, or that it subordinates Christian truth to an arid and alien philosophical concept.

Baptismal Communion and the Spirit: Reimagining the Church in the Third Article of the Creed

by Susan K. Wood

Although the church is traditionally associated with the third article of the Nicene Creed focused on the Holy Spirit, its identity and mission are deeply rooted in the Trinitarian life of God. As Yves Congar observes, “the church is seen to be a community of worship in spirit and truth, in accordance with the logic of *ab, per, in* and *ad*—from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father.”¹ Nevertheless, the church is especially associated with the work of the Holy Spirit as the divine Person who constitutes the church through baptism. Baptism forms the basis for ecclesial communion, synodality, and ecumenical unity.

I will develop this theme by arguing that baptism is the foundational sacrament that initiates individuals in the church and establishing unity among Christians that precedes institutional or denomination divisions. Next, I argue that ecumenical recognition must move beyond individuals to communities. The apostolicity of these communities must be discerned not just through ministerial succession but through the lived faith, teaching, and worship of the community. Then I consider the implications of baptism for the relationship between ordained ministers and the baptized community, challenging hierarchical models that create a binary of ordained ministry over against the laity in favor of a communion-based ecclesiology. Building on this, I discuss synodality as a lived expression of baptismal equality and charismatic diversity. Synodality, a word that comes from the Greek word *synodos* meaning “journeying together,” describes a way of being and working together in the church that emphasizes listening and dialogue and shared decision-making. Finally, I reflect on the phrase “for the forgiveness of sin” in the Creed, interpreting baptism as initiation into a lifelong process of conversion, reconciliation, and mercy. Finally, I reflect on the phrase “for the forgiveness of sin” in the Creed, interpreting baptism as initiation into a lifelong process of conversion, reconciliation, and mercy.

¹ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol. I (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 169. In the Catholic tradition, Chapter 1 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from Vatican II situates its treatment of the church within a Trinitarian framework.

Baptism

Baptism is the foundation of ecumenical unity because one becomes a member of the new people of God established by the new covenant ratified in Christ through baptism. The Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of this people as in a temple.² All those who constitute the people of God are “temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) or “temples of God” (1 Cor 3:16, 17; 2 Cor 6:16) and members of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:13, 27). The Catholic Church describes this people as a communion, a seed and sacrament of saving unity.³ Within this communion all the baptized possess an equal dignity prior to any differentiation of state of life or ministry. The unity and communion formed in baptism makes the people of God one in grace with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and one with all other baptized in water in the triune name. There is but one baptism and one communion as attested to in Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (NRSV). This unity precedes the unity of the churches, ecclesial unity finding its basis in the sacramental and soteriological unity of baptism. Through this one baptism all Christians are initiated into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and are anointed with the one Spirit. The unity of Christians in one baptism, then, is not the result of ecumenical efforts, but is a gift to be received and recognized prior to those efforts. We do not achieve one baptism when we have achieved mutual recognition of one another’s baptisms. That unity exists now because there is only one Lord and one event of his saving death and resurrection. Our unity is in Christ. Consequently, the burden should be to account for our disunity rather than to account for our unity.⁴ This disunity is most obvious as the disunity among ecclesial communities.

Baptism and the Recognition of Churches

Today, the ecumenical challenge is not just to recognize one another as individuals united in Christ by his Spirit in our common baptism, but to recognize one another’s ecclesial communities. No formula of baptism specifies our ecclesial identity. We receive that identity from the community in which we are baptized according to the faith and

² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §9.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Susan K. Wood, “I Acknowledge One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins,” in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 189-201.

understanding of the faith professed by that community. And yet, our individual faith identity as professed in our baptism is inseparable from the faith of the community that receives us and baptizes us. So, we have the paradox: one faith, one Lord, one baptism in water and the Father, Son, and Spirit and divided baptismal communities.

From the Catholic side, we have traditionally assessed the status of these communities based on the status of their ministries in such a way that recognition of an apostolic ministry leads to the recognition of an apostolic community as well as a judgment on the validity of their eucharistic liturgies. Ecumenical work on apostolicity complexifies what was once presumed, for a succession of the laying on of the hands in episcopal ordination/consecration is certainly a sign and instrument of apostolicity as well as a conferral of the responsibility to maintain the church in apostolicity, but it is not in and of itself a guarantee of apostolicity. The whole church is a bearer of apostolicity as it transmits to every generation all that it believes “in its doctrine, life and worship.”⁵ Consequently, a more correlational approach is needed to assess apostolicity, one that correlates ministry and church. We are called to discern evidence of apostolicity in one another’s churches, which will also give us a new perspective in assessing one another’s ministries. This necessitates an assessment of how these communities live as baptismal communities that follow the pattern in Acts 2:38-47: reception of the apostolic testimony, repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sin, reception of the Holy Spirit, life in accordance to the apostolic teaching, prayer and the breaking of bread, generosity to those in need, and praise and thanksgiving.

Baptism and the Relationship between Ministers and the Community

Baptism not only requires discernment of the apostolic status of other communities; it also necessitates a re-evaluation of divisions of status within a particular ecclesial community, especially the relationship between ordained members and the laity. Because a baptismally based ecclesiology emphasizes what is shared in common before considering what is distinctive, as compared to, for example, a eucharistic ecclesiology with its focus on ministry and the ordained in the eucharistic liturgy, it bypasses the binary pair “hierarchy-laity” to consider the community as a whole and then, secondarily, the roles of the distinctive charisms and ministries within it, what Bruno Forte identifies as the binary “community-

⁵ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, §8.

charism/ministers.”⁶ The first model emphasizes the distinction between the laity and the clergy even though they are fundamentally united in baptism. The second model highlights the unity of the baptized without denying the variety represented by the gifts of the Spirit—a subtle but important difference. Unity comes before distinction. Baptism establishes the communion of the Christian faithful who are equal in dignity before any division in status, all called to holiness.⁷

This diminishes neither the importance of the ordained ministry nor the importance of the Eucharist but is a recognition that all ministry is first baptismal, the minister being neither above nor outside the community of the baptized, but a member of the baptized. This is illustrated by Augustine’s comment, “What I am for you terrifies me; what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a duty; the latter a grace. The former is a danger; the latter, salvation.”⁸

Neither does the equality of dignity established in baptism result in a monochromatic community. Nor does it presuppose a democratic egalitarianism along political lines. A baptismal community is a differentiated community, an ordered communion, with each person occupying a particular *ordo* in the eucharistic community, some of whom are ordained and therefore occupy the *ordo* of presider over the eucharistic assembly.⁹ The diversity of the gifts of the Spirit and subsequent sacraments that confer status such as ordination and matrimony ensures a rich variety of functions and responsibilities.

Baptism and Synodality

In synodality, baptismal communion becomes a lived reality. Ecclesiology in a baptismal key highlights the charismatic dimension of the entire People of God. Each person is endowed with charismatic gifts for the upbuilding of the church, all sharing according to their different gifts and ministries in the priestly, prophetic, and servant kingship of Jesus Christ. This diversity of charismatic gifts along with the basic equality in dignity

⁶ Bruno Forte, *Laïcat et laïcité* (Paris: Méduaspaul, 1986), 116 and *The Church: Icon of the Trinity: A Brief Study*, trans. Robert Paolucci (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1991), 38-61.

⁷ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §9.

⁸ St. Augustine, *Serm.* 340, 1 Pl 38, 1483.

⁹ See Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 24; John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1997), 216.

conferred in baptism constitutes the theological and soteriological foundation of the structures and practices of synodality in the church. The “sense of the faith” shared by all the baptized allows them to be attuned to the promptings of the Spirit, to contribute to the church’s understanding of the faith, and to discern the signs of the time and how the church can best carry out its mission in its contemporary context.

Synodality entails the people of God walking together in a shared journey of faith with the full, active, conscious participation of all the baptized in the mission of the church, not just the clergy. Here, the principles of good liturgical participation become the principles of participation in the life of the church.¹⁰ Thus, the participation of all baptized persons, including those at the peripheries, engaged in deep listening to one another and in intentional, courageous speech is a necessity for the church. Each person has a role in the church’s mission and, in Pope Francis’ words, is a “missionary disciple.”¹¹ All are responsible for evangelization through witness to the faith through a gospel-oriented life. Each person actively contributes to the mission of the church. The teaching church is no longer set against the learning church, for all teach by speaking from their Spirit-inspired faith experience and all learn through deep, mutual listening. In this way, those responsible for making the final decision—whether that be at the local, regional, or churchwide level—does so in communion with and informed by all the people of God. In this way, synodality is an expression of the catholicity of the church.

Synodality represents a broadening of the collegiality of bishops by strengthening the bond between episcopal leadership and the community through mutual discernment and consultation that inform episcopal decisions, but it does not take away the governing function of pastors. The Synod on Synodality distinguished between “decision-making” and “decision-taking,” the first the result of broad participatory discernment and the second the final decision of the final responsible party.¹² This is similar to the distinction between consultative and deliberative votes but gives more weight to what mere consultation might

¹⁰ See Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy], §14.

¹¹ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel], 24 November 2013, §§24, 120-121.

¹² XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session (October 2023), 52.

https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/it/eng_instrumentum-laboris.pdf.

otherwise be. In a synodal process, the community tries to attend to what the Spirit is saying to the church through the Word of God, attention to the signs of the times, and through the eyes of faith within a posture of prayer.

Synodality is not just an institutional process or institution of governance, but an expression of the church's nature, form, style, and mission. It is a modality of being church.¹³ It mirrors the primordial synodality of the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, who, living in perfect unity and mutual love as a model of dialogue and mutual listening, become the theological foundation for the church's communal discernment and shared mission.¹⁴ Thus, synodality is appropriately an outgrowth of the Nicæan confession of faith: catholicity in terms of its inclusivity, oneness in terms of the unity of communion forged in baptism, holiness because it is the work of the Trinity and is made holy because of the grace of Christ. The church is both a communion of holy people and a communion made holy in the sacraments (*communio sanctorum*). Finally, the synodal church is an apostolic community because it hands on the apostolic teaching in its life, teaching, and worship and in its missional proclamation of the saving mercy of Christ.

Baptism “For the Forgiveness of Sin”

The phrase “forgiveness of sin” in the creed occurs in the context of confession of the one baptism wherein it receives its interpretation. Baptism is associated with the forgiveness of sin from the earliest days of Christianity. In Acts 2:38 Peter tells the Israelites to “repent and be baptized everyone one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (NRSV). Romans 6 interprets baptism as a baptism into the death of Christ Jesus so that we will walk in newness of life, be united in a resurrection like his, and be freed from sin.

¹³ Francis, “We are Church Together,” Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, September 18, 2021, in Dicastery for Communication, *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), 151-63 at 152.

¹⁴ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html. See also Robert Józef Woźniak, “Dialogical Nature of the Synodal Church. Toward a Trinitarian Consideration of the Theological Roots of Dialogical Synodality,” *Annales Theologici*, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/101290922/dialogical_nature_of_the_synodal_church_toward_a_trinitarian_consideration_of_the_theological_roots_of_dialogical_synodality.

Even apart from baptism, forgiveness of sin is associated with the Spirit, for in John 20:22, Jesus appears to the disciples who are locked in a room, shows them his wounds in his hands and side, and breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit saying, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (NRSV). With the gift of the Spirit, Christ commissions his disciples—all of them and not just ordained ministers—to unbind their fellow human beings, to set them free from everything that enslaves them, and to forgive them. This injunction to forgive occurs throughout the Scriptures where we are given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19) and where we are forgiven as we forgive even to seven times a day (Lk 6:37;17:3-4).

Forgiveness in baptism extends beyond the one-for-all forgiveness of sins in the person being baptized or even the forgiveness of someone who has wronged us. It entails entrance into a lifestyle in the Spirit characterized by gratitude by the one who has been forgiven and commitment to a lifetime of repentance and conversion. Although baptism is an event in the life of a Christian and the church, Christian initiation is a process introducing a person to a Christian lifestyle of ongoing conversion and life in the Spirit. The expanded rite in the Ordo of Christian Initiation celebrated at the Easter Vigil service is normative for an understanding of baptism that presupposes a sequence and a pattern that includes formation in the faith or conversion, baptism in water in the name of the Triune God, postbaptismal chrismation in the sacrament of confirmation, participation in the public prayer of the church, especially through admission to the Eucharist, and, finally, life in the Christian community. This sequence, simplified as formation in faith, baptism in water, and participation in the life of the community essentially follows the pattern of Acts 2:41-41: “So those who welcomed his [Peter’s] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers” (NRSV). As the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults puts it, “The Rite of Christian initiation presented here is designed for adults who, after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts.”¹⁵ Conversion is not a one-time event at the moment of baptism, but baptism is initiation into a lifetime of conversion.

¹⁵ *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by the Second Vatican Council*, Volume One (New York: Pueblo, 1990), 35, §3.

As society becomes less Christian, more adults are seeking Christian initiation, which creates a need for churches to develop catechumenal processes for adults. These recognize a basic ordo of initiation.¹⁶ The Lutheran publication *Occasional Services* delineated a basic structure in 1982.¹⁷ The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada developed an adult catechumenate process in its *Living Witness* series in 1992 as did the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1997.¹⁸ The Office of Evangelism ministries of the Episcopal Church in the United States published *The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation and Formation for Christian Life and Ministry* in 1990.¹⁹ Methodists and Presbyterians have also produced similar rites of initiation.²⁰ While this trend has not been without its critics, it points to an ecumenical consensus—at least on the part of churches issuing from the magisterial arm of the Reformation—that baptism is initiation into a lifelong process of conversion and life in the Spirit.²¹

Today, while the need for forgiveness of sin continues, perhaps we need to broaden the notion of forgiveness to include mercy. Mercy encompasses forgiveness but is a broader concept. While forgiveness of sin points to events, episodic moments and specific actions or omissions, mercy is an ongoing state and is directed to the totality of an individual in his or her condition of need, misery, poverty of whatever kind, dependence,

¹⁶ See “Report of the Consultation,” in *Becoming Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of our Common Baptism*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, Faith and Order Paper No. 184 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999), §10; Gordon Lathrop, *Water that Speaks: The Ordo of Baptism and its Ecumenical Implications*, in *Becoming Christian*, 13-19.

¹⁷ *Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1982), cited in Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 663.

¹⁸ Cited in Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 663, n. 86.

¹⁹ *The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation and Formation for Christian Life and Ministry* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990).

²⁰ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1990) 32-54; Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 403-88.

²¹ For critics of this trend see the discussion in Susan K. Wood, *One Baptism: Ecumenical Dimensions of the Doctrine of Baptism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 130-134.

and sinfulness.²² As God bathes our entire life with mercy, so we are invited to live through mercy and share it with others.²³

Conclusion

The church, as confessed in the third article of the Nicene Creed, is inseparably linked to the work of the Holy Spirit, who constitutes its communion, animates its mission, and empowers its members through baptism. This baptismal foundation not only unites Christians across ecclesial boundaries but also challenges internal structures, calling for a renewed understanding of ministry, relationships to authority, and participation. Synodality emerges as a lived expression of this communion of believers who are equal in dignity, yet differentiated in charism and role in the community, and called to a shared mission. In embracing synodality, the church not only honors the Spirit's gifts among all the baptized but also deepens its communion, its catholicity in its inclusiveness, its apostolicity in its life, teaching and witness, and its holiness in its commitment to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). Baptism for the forgiveness of sin initiates believers into a lifelong process of conversion, reconciliation, and mercy, shaping a church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in its witness to the world.

²² See Susan K. Wood, *A Synodal Church: The Christian Faithful on Pilgrimage* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2025), 80.

²³ Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group, "Towards a Spirituality for Synodality," p. 15, <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/towards-a-spirituality-for-synodality.html>.

NICAEA 2025: ARE WE READY FOR VISIBLE UNITY?¹ **by Sandra Beardsall**

Did Santa Claus Do It?

A popular “fact” about the Council of Nicaea of 325 CE is that Nicholas, Bishop of Myra (later the famed St. Nicholas), was so incensed at Arius’ theological stances that he slapped him. For that, and more information, there is a public Facebook group called “Just Say You don’t Understand the Council of Nicea and Move Along,” whose one hundred members use jokes and memes to imagine the council and its purported antics. Most Nicaea commemorations focus on the creed, that powerful and enduring instrument of unity. However, Nicaea was also a church council, as popular culture remarkably recalls. The Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order, occurring in late October in Egypt, acknowledges this with its theme: “Where Now for Visible Unity?” In this piece, I will use the Council of Nicaea to explore that question. I will briefly describe the Council and its imperial context, discuss how the bishops of Nicaea found unity (fisticuffs notwithstanding), and then ask if twenty-first century Christians are ready to do the same.

The Council

The Council of Nicaea was the first gathering that sought to bring Christian leaders—bishops and some clergy—together from all over the empire to meet and make decisions. The Roman Emperor, Constantine, called and hosted it in a small city at the eastern end of Lake Askania, in what is now northwestern Türkiye. Constantine urged the bishops to come, “speedily,”² and promised them pleasant weather. It was a complex affair, and there is much we do not know about it. There is no surviving minute book. Exactly who attended Nicaea, when the Council started, and even precisely how the discussions unfolded are all matters of what one scholar calls “calculated guesswork.”³

¹ This article is an edited version of a lecture delivered on January 22, 2025, as part of the annual “De Margerie Lectures on Christian Reconciliation and Unity,” at St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon, SK.

² “Constantine Summons the Council of Nicaea,” in J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1977), 358.

³ David M. Gwynne, “Reconstructing the Council,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge U. Press), 91.

The meeting lasted six or seven weeks,⁴ beginning in late May or early June. We don't have an accurate attendance list—rather, there are several conflicting lists—but despite the traditional claim that 318 bishops attended, better estimates are 200-250. There is no reliable evidence that Nicholas of Myra was there, although he served as bishop at the time of the Council and would have been invited, or that any punches were thrown. The event was magnificent in its size and scope. The whole gathering likely totalled about two thousand people,⁵ including bishops' assistants and the imperial officials. Behind the scenes, of course, were the women and men, many of them likely enslaved persons, who provided food, lodging, and transportation to the participants.

The Context

Scholars, fiction writers, and ordinary Christians debate the Emperor Constantine's motives and contributions in calling an attending the Council. We know he contributed frequently to the discussions, but he did not officially chair the proceedings, and he did not have a vote. He was actively interested in Christian theology and wanted doctrinal clarity and accuracy, but that was, as one scholar puts it, "of far less concern to him than arriving at a consensus that would produce unity and lead to peace."⁶ He was likely looking to the Christians—strategically located all across his empire—to unify and strengthen it. The Council produced a letter, a creed, twenty canons, and two exiled Libyan bishops who refused to sign on to the creed.⁷ And Constantine got, at least for the moment, the unity and peace he wanted.

For several centuries the church called Constantine a model Christian emperor and granted him the title *Isapostolos* (equal to the apostles).⁸ Some churches continue to hold that view. Others, however, especially many Protestants, and certainly Anabaptists, consider the emperor's presence to be a problem, if not a travesty. This founding moment in church history, they argue, wedded the church to the state and has led to the churches' participation in all the evils of empire. Constantine's legalization and normalization of Christianity, and his

⁴ Gwynne, "Reconstructing the Council," 97, 108.

⁵ Gwynne, "Reconstructing the Council," 95.

⁶ H.A. Drake, "Constantine at the Council," in *Cambridge Companion to Nicaea*, 126.

⁷ Gwynne, "Reconstructing," 101-102.

⁸ Drake, "Constantine," 111.

ongoing engagement, most clearly manifested at Nicaea represented, many argue, to the “Constantinian captivity” of the church.

However, as historians point out, the separation of church and state is a modern invention. In ancient societies “every ancient state was also a religious institution.”⁹ Catholic Deacon and Indigenous Education scholar Harry Lafond noted, during a panel on religion and politics at the University of Saskatchewan, that within Indigenous communities, politics *is*, in modern terms, religious ceremony.¹⁰ This does not imply that we therefore absolve the church of its complicity in Empire in any age. We do, however, need to consider the very different world of the churches of the fourth century as we assess their actions. Further, and awkwardly, without Constantine’s largess, and that of subsequent emperors, would the Christian church have blossomed and survived into the twenty-first century? We need to ponder that question, too.

More contextually interesting is the sheer marvel that Nicaea happened at all. A humble religious sect, heavily populated by enslaved persons, only a decade after the end of a brutal imperial persecution, found its leaders gathered from the ends of a vast empire to sit together and find common cause on matters of faith and practice. These bishops in council managed both to imagine a unified Christianity and to struggle to a fragile consensus. That moment, perhaps flawed, perhaps compromised, nonetheless unites Christians worldwide, despite all the ways they have since divided themselves from one another. That is compelling reason to remember Nicaea and use it as a touchstone for ecumenical work today.

How did Nicaea Find Unity?

How *did* Nicaea find the unity it expressed in its creed and canons? Nicaea was not the ideal ecumenical conference. Its creed ended with condemnations. Not everyone went home happy. In fact, the bitter divisions continued long after the Council. Some eastern councils issued their own alternative creeds. Constantine’s imperial successors took differing opinions on Nicene faith, and pro-Nicene bishops, including the famous Athanasius of Alexandria, found themselves deposed, exiled, and reinstated, often more than once. Yet, its creed did persist—although slightly amended by 381 CE, so that “Nicene faith” has stood for centuries as the one Christian statement of faith that has been accepted as truly

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Remarks recorded by author as participant in a public panel: “Religious Worldviews and Politics,” moderated by Prof. David McGrane at St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon, SK (Sept. 18, 2019).

ecumenical. Its canons were also held in high regard into the fifth century, and beyond, although few scholars have traced their long-term influence. What did it take for the bishops of Nicaea to come to unity?

From what contemporary scholars can glean, except for the emperor's presence Nicaea looked not unlike a contemporary synodal gathering. The presider, Bishop Ossius of Cordova, Spain, was seasoned in church synods, and especially in those that had debated the views of Arius. Ossius prepared the agenda and kept order. There were lively debates, not only about the Father/Son relationship in the Trinity, but about the date of Easter and tricky issues relating to discipline and the fallout of the long Diocletian persecution. The bishops sometimes appeared to agree readily, and other times they compromised. There were factions. A small sub-committee drafted the creed and presented it to the plenary. Does any of this sound familiar?

The further removed the accounts of the Council are in time from the event, the more colourful they become. They often feature Bishops dramatically destroying offending documents. The historian Rufinus, for example, seventy years after the Council, describes Constantine receiving petitions from rival clergy who brought charges against one another. Constantine did try to reconcile such disputes, but did he really take the two letters in hand and burn them both publicly in a theatrical demand for unity?¹¹ There is no corroborating evidence, but the story points to the role the emperor may have played in keeping everyone in the room.

What did it take, then, to produce a "unity statement" in 325 CE? Ultimately, it took a committed leadership, group perseverance, personal flexibility, the willingness to work toward consensus, and most of all, an overwhelming desire that the Christian Church, in all its diversity, would be a shining example of the oneness of the Body of Christ, so thoroughly united that a Roman emperor could imagine it helping to bring peace to his realm.

Are we Ready for Visible Unity?

So, are *we* ready for visible unity? Are we—our church traditions, our parishes, ourselves—prepared to respond, finally and fully, to the Scripture call to be peacemakers, that there be no divisions among us, that we clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony? I suggest we can answer that question with a "yes," a "no," and a "maybe."

¹¹ Gwynne, "Reconstructing," 107.

Let's Say Yes!

We have everything we need for visible unity. We have the experience of over a century of dialogue and relationship-building. We have impassioned speeches from ecumenical pioneers, including Canadian-born Anglican Bishop Charles Brent and Orthodox Metropolitan Germanos at the First World Conference on Faith and Order in 1927, radiating assurance in the Spirit's call to unity. From 1948 we have the famous pledge, crafted by pioneer ecumenist Kathleen Bliss for inclusion in the first "Message" of the newly minted World Council of Churches: "We intend to stay together." And in 1964 the Decree on Ecumenism described a "certain, though imperfect communion" of Christians before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council had even begun to take hold.

We have libraries full of international and national dialogue texts, great and promising agreements on formerly church-dividing issues. Canadian church history is peppered with church union, full communion agreements, and ecumenically shared ministries in, currently, over one hundred local parishes across the country, in hospitals, prisons, and universities, theological colleges, and youth work. The Canadian Council of Churches comprises twenty-six member churches who collectively represent 85% of all the Christians in Canada. Most of Christians in Canada are at the ecumenical table. The Margaret O'Gara Dialogue Collection (<https://ecumenical-dialogue.ca/>) features no less than nineteen Canadian dialogue groups and their multiple reports.

As the topics of dialogue evolved, so too has our understanding of what we are doing. Margaret O'Gara, beloved mentor to many ecumenists, described ecumenical dialogue as an exchange of gifts in which the giver gets to keep the gift they are giving *and* receive the gift of the other. I recall Archbishop Don Bolen of the Regina Roman Catholic Archdiocese, gently joking that he wasn't sure who might want the gift of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. But that's the point of gifting—it requires generosity and grace on the part of giver and recipient. "Receptive ecumenism"¹² is a similar concept, suggesting that the primary ecumenical responsibility is to ask not, "What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?" but, "What do we need to learn from them?" Both "gift exchange" and "receptive ecumenism" intend to expand our dialogue by understanding that it is not simply propositional statements aimed at one another. It is

¹² See, e.g., Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes, *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning, and Loving in the Way of Christ* (ATS Press, 2018) (accessed Aug. 27, 2025).

rather an exercise in vulnerability, humility, gratitude, and mutual discernment.

Our dialogue reports are not arcane and dusty. They breathe with the possibilities Christians imagine when they come together. Take this example from “Towards a Common Understanding of the Church,” text of the International Reformed/Roman Catholic Dialogue. (“Reformed” includes The United Church of Canada). It offers two conceptions of the Church: as “Creation of the Word,” and as “Sacrament of Grace.” The first is described as more Reformed in character, while the second is more Roman Catholic. The document then goes on to suggest that “the two conceptions, “the creation of the Word” and “sacrament of grace”, can “become the *poles of a creative tension* between our churches.”¹³

And right there, a wall begins to crumble. Peering through the cracks, we see not a dangerous stranger, but another facet in the one diamond, that gospel treasure we would buy a field to obtain. There may be tension, but it is one that pulls us towards better listening and learning. That’s what this long parade of ecumenical documents invites us to do: to experience the faith in fresh and startling ways, ways that draw us closer together as churches and as believers. They help foster compassion for the ecumenical “other”; even if we can’t agree, we can understand one another a little better.

If sometimes these documents move our hearts and minds and imaginations, other times they accomplish explicit steps forward and even genuine visible unity in some places. Churches globally and nationally have lifted anathemas, formed united and uniting churches, and entered multiple agreements on full communion and mutual recognition of ministries. In the PLURA agreement of 1975, the Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in Canada agreed to recognize the validity of each other’s baptisms. Happy 50th birthday to that ecumenical milestone! All these documents, these accomplishments, are part of the new and old things that scribes trained for the Kingdom pull out of the householder’s treasure (Mt. 13:52). They form part of the “Yes” that makes us ready for visible unity.

“Yes, but You Don’t Go”

We may have the resources for visible unity, but we aren’t there yet. This challenge, which is often that vexed question of “reception” of our impressive dialogue achievements, puzzles and confounds ecumenists. It

¹³ “Towards a Common Understanding of the Church,” Reformed/Roman Catholic International Dialogue, 2nd Phase, 1984-1990, par. 113. Italics mine.

reminds me of a scene from Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. A group of police officers are nervously waiting outside the Major General's home to go into battle with a band of pirates. The lovely young women who are the Major General's wards urge the policemen on to their glorious deaths while the police officers dither and hesitate. Eventually they sing lustily, "We go, we go," several times, while staying more or less put. The Major General gets increasingly exasperated. Finally, after he hears one more "We go," he sings back at them, "Yes, but you *don't* go!"¹⁴

Why is it that we, the churches, the people of God, 1,700 years after we pledged our common faith; over one hundred years since the rekindling of the fires of unity; even as we say, in texts and prayers, "We go," why is it that so often we don't go? Or at least, we don't go far enough to make our unity visible? Here are some possibilities:

The Changed Religious Landscape is perhaps the most frequently-cited reason that we don't go. The ecumenical excitement stirred up by the *Decree on Ecumenism* coincided in Canada with the beginning of the decline of membership in Canadian mainstream churches. Churches across the West have, since the 1960s, lost not only members, but social and political influence in the much-studied surge of untrammled capitalism and the acceleration of secularization. Churches have fewer resources and spread them ever more thinly. Even when unity could help us with our perceived scarcity, sometimes the energy is not there to promote it. In the late 1980s, after the initial enthusiasm about the 1982 landmark convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) waned, even seasoned ecumenists got disheartened.

Is the patient, sometimes plodding work towards visible unity an outdated mid-twentieth century project, based on now tarnished enlightenment views? In the 1980s, BEM received over 160 responses from churches alone. The convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV) released in 2013, received only 78 written responses, 45 of those from churches. (Others came from organizations or individuals.) Meanwhile, many churches located where Christianity is growing, especially Africa and Asia, have not historically seen themselves as part of the ecumenical project.

We Don't Know What Visible Unity Means. In Amsterdam in 1948, the WCC named the "visible unity" of the churches as its goal. The

¹⁴ See lyrics at <https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/p/policemanssong.html> (accessed Aug. 29, 2025).

bylaws of the Faith and Order commission describe it as “visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world.” The term *Koinonia* sometimes replaces “visible unity,” but both terms elude firm definition. In 1950 the WCC Executive, meeting in Toronto, made clear that the goal was not a single institutional church or even a particular model of unity. However, it could not be only a “spiritual” unity—it must be visible in and to the world. Susan Durber, past Moderator of Faith and Order, helpfully asserts that Christian unity requires both “mutual recognition”—the unity we see in ourselves as churches—and “visible unity”—what the world sees in the churches. She also points out the challenge that the church is both the Body of Christ and, by necessity, an “organization.”¹⁵ How do these intersect to create “visible unity”?

Many responses to *TCTCV* showed the desire to move away from complex doctrinal agreements to more possible goals around shared service, justice work, and simply “sharing the gospel.” The term “reconciled diversity” is popular.¹⁶ However, theologian Jurgen Moltmann called that concept “the sleeping pill of the ecumenical movement”¹⁷—allowing us to be “nice” without truly reconciling. This model is popular because it helps us contend with contemporary challenges such as thorny and divisive moral issues or the desire to embrace the complexities of diversity—which we understand also to be a gift of God. Still, if we cannot commune together and recognize one another’s ministries, are we truly visibly reconciled?

And then there’s the “invisible” visible unity of truly integrated ecumenism. When does a “United Church” become one more denomination? Or what is it when a Vacation Bible School is so seamlessly ecumenical that at lunch the children—from several church traditions—all cross themselves before singing “Johnny Appleseed,” without batting an eye? What, indeed, is visible unity?

Fear stops us. I believe that like Gilbert and Sullivan’s nervous police officers, anxiety holds us back. In ecumenical shared ministry negotiations,

¹⁵ Remarks at online meeting of Faith and Order Commission, Nov. 18, 2024.

¹⁶ Susan Durber, “Visible Unity and Mutual Recognition,” in *Common Threads: Key Themes from Responses to the Church Towards a Common Vision*. F&O Paper No. 233 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 6.

¹⁷ Odair Pedroso Mateus commenting on Jurgen Moltmann’s 95th birthday in 2017. <https://oikoumene.org/news/deep-appreciation-abounds-as-renowned-german-theologian-prof-dr-jurgen-moltmann-turns-95> (accessed Jan. 11, 2025).

I have occasionally seen one partner church withdraw, sometimes far into the process. The reasons they offer are often vague but underlying them I see fear—of losing power and control, of having to compromise a treasured value, even if those guiding the process have given assurances that in shared ministries, we don't have to leave those commitments behind. Many centuries of division seem to have imprinted caution when encountering the religious "other." Meanwhile, most church denominations have eagerly adopted "branding" language to advertise and set themselves *apart* from other Christians. Retired Swedish Lutheran Archbishop Antje Jackelén comments that "baptism is citizenship, but we treat the baptized instead like consumers."¹⁸ In some way or other, we fear the ecclesiastical pirates.

Maybe, If ...

While we can't pretend to mimic the absurdly happy ending of the *Pirates of Penzance*, I believe there are ways our visible unity quest can also find its way to a satisfying conclusion. I suggest three considerations for Canadian ecumenism: broaden the table, focus on the power of dialogue, and find the need to want unity.

Broaden the Table

Faith & Order commissioners began several years ago to pursue a process of both broadening the table regionally—to engage more intentionally in dialogue with churches in the global south and with other traditions generally. The results are promising. The new F&O commission, appointed in 2023, is the most diverse ever appointed, using all the metrics: regions, denominations, gender, age. We are further seeing that, paradoxically, adding more diversity to the ecclesial mix can help to foster unity, partly through an infusion of fresh ideas, energy, and inspiration, and partly by reminding us of the depth and breadth of the Body of Christ.

Focus on the Power of Dialogue

Those of us who have been fortunate to participate in formal or structured ecumenical dialogue often say that the lasting gift is the dialogue experience itself: the friendships, the discoveries, the personal transformation. Pioneering Roman Catholic ecumenist Yves Congar described his involvement in ecumenical dialogue as entailing a process of rebirth; it involved a "truly evangelical readiness to refuse nothing that is

¹⁸ Antje Jackelén, Oral presentation on "Baptismal Ecclesiology," Commission on Faith and Order meeting, Manado, Indonesia, Feb. 5, 2024.

of God.”¹⁹ Younger ecumenists, especially in the United States and Canada, have focused in recent years on describing what dialogue does, and how. Russell Johnson describes the “enemy-love” demanded of critical dialogue.²⁰ Kathryn Reinhard considers, via Paul Ricoeur, the role of “recognition” in dialogue in transforming both the one seeking recognition and the one offering to recognize the other.²¹ Elisabeth Nicholson studies how specific processes developed in conflict mediation can both describe and strengthen ecumenical dialogue.²²

Recognizing the power of dialogue might help us focus less on outcomes and more on getting people—all Christians—into ecumenical dialogue. Pentecostal ecumenist Josiah Baker argues that by agreeing to dialogue without knowing what visible unity looks like, ecumenists engage in a Spirit-led process.²³ That trust forms Christians who are ready to expand their worlds, ready to “refuse nothing that is of God.” And understanding the anatomy of dialogue might help ecumenists address more honestly the power dynamics at play when Christians speak together. Practising dialogue will assist us beyond the goal of visible unity.

We need to Want It

Finally, I believe we will find visible unity, or more correctly, it will find us, if we want it badly enough. The “Unity Statement” of the WCC Karlsruhe Assembly in 2022 focused on what is often called “ecumenism of the heart”: “When we are drawn to one another out of compassion, fascination, and longing for one another—across our differences and divisions . . . we will find the grace to search for that common faith, the truth together held that will overcome our separation.”²⁴ Many of us

¹⁹ Yves Congar, “The Ecumenical Experience and Conversion: A Personal Testimony,” in Kinnamon, *Ecumenical Movement*, 24.

²⁰ Russell P. Johnson, “The Gospel in a Polarized Society: Newbiggin and Roberts on Ephesian Protest,” *JES* 57:3 (Summer 2022), 330-347.

²¹ Kathryn L. Reinhard, “Recognition and Ecumenical Interdependence: Relationship Beyond Division,” *JES*, 57:3 (Summer 2022), 348-362.

²² Elisabeth J. Nicholson, “Ecumenical Dialogue and the ‘Insight Approach’ to Conflict Mediation: A Suggestion Based on Lonergan for a Minor Methodological Innovation,” *JES* 56:2 (Spring 2021), 200-228.

²³ Josiah Baker, *A Visible Unity: Cecil Robeck and the Work of Ecumenism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2024), 222.

²⁴ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/A05rev1-Unity-Statement.pdf> par. 19 (Accessed Aug. 27, 2025).

already share that longing. What will it take for all of us, and our churches, both to share it and to act on the fruits of that compassion and fascination?

The bishops at Nicaea were there at the behest and expense of an emperor who, despite, or as well as, being murderous and calculating, was determined to foster, for whatever reason, the peace and visible unity of the global Christian church. Constantine, as best we can determine, kept them at it until they found it. The emperors of our age, unfortunately, are largely disinterested in the genuine visible unity of the Christian church. We need to find our compelling motivation elsewhere.

The *Decree on Ecumenism* warned the faithful in 1964 that Christian division, as well as openly contradicting the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature.”²⁵ So, would we do it for the world? Naim Ateek, a Palestinian Anglican liberation theologian, was asked in 2024 the most important thing the churches could do for Palestine. He replied: “Find a common date for Easter.” Really? Yes. A common date for Easter would, Ateek said, bring badly needed visible unity to help bring justice to the beleaguered churches of Palestine. Jerry Pillay, General Secretary of the WCC, declared on his Canadian visit in December 2024: “Unity and justice are like two wings of a bird: both are required to fly.” Would the opportunity to model solidarity and collectively cry for justice in a hurting world do it? Would that help us long for visible unity enough truly to go for it? What would it take?

In the opening sermon of the First World Conference on Faith and Order, Charles Brent adjured: “Christ appeals to us to hush our prejudices, to sit lightly to our opinions, to look on the things of others as though they were our very own—all this without slighting the convictions of our hearts or our loyalty to God. It can be done. It must be done.”²⁶ I believe, in order to desire and act on this “compassion and fascination,” we need to be—as persons and as churches—steeped in, imprinted by, the common faith that formed us, saved us, and sends us into the embrace of the ecumenical other. They found it, against the odds, at a church council by a lake seventeen hundred years ago. Are we ready to claim it once more?

²⁵ Unitatis Redintegratio: *Decree on Ecumenism*, Rome, Nov. 1964, par. 1.

²⁶ Charles Brent, “The Call to Unity,” *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the First World Conference, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927*, 7.

OMEGA CHILUFYA BULA: SEEKING JUSTICE FOR ALL GOD’S PEOPLE

By Gail Allan

Omega Chilufya Bula was an educator and activist who offered visionary leadership in the global church and in The United Church of Canada, where she served on the staff of the General Council Office from 1994 until 2012, until she retired and returned to her original home in Zambia. At the time of her death in 2023 she was celebrated as “a beloved justice leader, sister, elder, pioneer, mentor, friend, and colleague,” and one of the ecumenical movement’s “greatest leaders.”¹



Omega was born on October 8, 1948, in what was then known as the African Hospital, in Lusaka, Zambia. Her family home was in Chipembi, the site of a United Church of Zambia Mission Station, founded by Methodist missionaries. The family was deeply immersed in the church; her father, Rev. Solomon Makumba, was a Methodist minister who later became moderator of the church and a key figure in the union that formed the United Church of Zambia in 1965.

Omega’s mother died when she was just 6 years old. Her sister Jennifer Mukabe Chiwela recounts that she was then cared for by many “aunties” and developed deep relationships with her extended family. Jennifer also recalls “a toddler who was very particular about not stepping on dirt,” a trait she saw continue into adulthood as a perfectionism concerned with getting things right.² She attended girls’ boarding schools where she excelled, and then studied sociology and social work, in Zambia, and after receiving a scholarship, at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Ecumenical Work in Africa

In 1977 Omega became Program Director at the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Kitwe, Zambia, a position she held until 1988. The Foundation was established in 1959, “with the aim of serving the Church and community at large in deepening their understanding of the crucial

¹ “WCC Mourns Loss of Omega Chilufya Bula, Who Opened Doors of Opportunity for Many,” World Council of Churches, 3 February 2023, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-mourns-loss-of-omega-chilufya-bula-who-opened-doors-of-opportunity-for-many> .

² WhatsApp Chat with Jennifer Mukabe Chiwela and Mwai Bula, July 31, 2025.

issues facing them and affecting the unity and renewal of the Church.”³ During this time, Omega’s enduring focus on empowering women and improving the lives of African women, beginning in her own Zambian context, shaped her approach to the work. On a Ten Days for World Development visit to Canada in 1986, she explained to a reporter that Mindolo’s leadership courses aimed at “developing leadership in a fashion of teaching women so that they can go back to others at the community level.” At the same time, she identified the challenges facing women trying to change decision-making structures in their church communities, lamenting that “the rate isn’t as fast as it should be.” On this same visit, she was also part of encouraging Canadians and their government to examine understandings of aid and development.⁴

This weaving together of local community experience—especially that of women—with analysis of systems and structures impacting women’s lives, and the role of the church in living and seeking justice would mark Omega’s way of working in the church and world throughout her life. As Nelly Mwale points out in an article outlining Omega’s theological journey, an important thread in this approach was a firm belief in “liberative education centred on justice,” linked with practical work to ensure resources to support it. For example, Mwale notes that while at Mindolo, Omega was “instrumental in the formation of the Association of Christian Lay Centres in Africa.”⁵

From Mindolo, Omega moved to the All Africa Conference of Churches as program executive for the Women’s Desk. In this role she continued to advocate for women’s participation in economic and church leadership, while also becoming engaged in ecumenical processes making connections to a fundamental critique of the global forces contributing to women’s experiences of poverty, exploitation and gender-based violence. Coming into the work at a time when African economies were being impacted by global trends towards neo-liberalism, as well as deepening debt giving rise to structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, she emphasized educating

³ Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, “Executive Director’s Welcoming Remarks,” <https://mef.yt/update.html>.

⁴ Susan Lunn and Leanne Scott, “Conference Will Discuss Improved Foreign Aid,” *The Dalhousie Gazette*, 23 January 1986, 4.

⁵ Nelly Mwale, “Theological Journeys of Omega Bula: A Zambian Theologian,” in *Nehanda: Women’s Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa (Circle Jubilee Volume 3)*, ed. Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse, Fundiswa Kobo and Dorothy Tembo (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2024), 345.

women for economic literacy. She produced videos on women, economic justice and empowerment, as a basis for advocacy and action around the destructive effects of SAPs and other forms of exploitation in women's lives. At the same time, she created opportunities for women to gather together to explore possibilities and strategies for transformation grounded in local community life.⁶

In describing a two-week training seminar that included economic analysis, theological reflection, and skills development, Omega affirms the holistic vision that compelled her leadership: "building alternatives that are just and free of oppression." She explains: "These alternatives must be based on a critical understanding of who we are as a people (in our case African women), a critique of the existing social reality (in our case the marginalization of women and the economic roles women play) and a recognition of the social, cultural, patriarchal, political and economic structures that support this marginalization." She declares that "economics is a matter of faith," and to build "theological understanding of issues of economic justice from women's experiences. . . in itself is social transformation."⁷

In an article describing the mission of women's economic literacy work as "participation in healing," Omega reflects on its impact in her own life:

On a personal level, I have grown in the realization that my liberation is tied up with that of others, both known and unknown. To be human and a woman demands very intricate ways of operation, especially if one's mission is social transformation. We must build bridges and allow all to travel on them, not just a select few.

She concludes by once again making the connection between individual experience and community: "The sisterhood is powerful. In many gatherings of women, one feels the strong sense of togetherness, the common purpose in questioning even our own role in women's oppression. Women are beginning to articulate their needs and visions; they are

⁶ United Church Archives entry for Omega Bula, https://catalogue.unitedchurcharchives.ca/actor/browse?entityType=132&subject=547202&sf_culture=uk&repository=3249&sort=lastUpdated&sortDir=asc .

⁷ Omega Bula, "Transformation of Society by Laity Formation," *The Ecumenical Review* 45, no. 2 (October 1993), 433.

building courage, breaking out of isolation, and realizing their collective power.”⁸

Division of World Outreach

In 1994 Omega joined the staff of the General Council Office of The United Church of Canada, as Area Secretary for Southern Africa in the Division of World Outreach (DWO). She replaced Jim Kirkwood, who had known Omega for many years, and encouraged and supported her to move into the position as he retired. In this position she engaged with DWO partners in Southern Africa, ensuring the resources and accompaniment of the United Church during a time when many sought to serve their communities in contexts of deep crisis. Her visits to partners included time in Mozambique, Congo/Zaire, and Angola.

Letters and trip reports from these visits provide a picture of how she understood this partnership work and her role in it. A letter planning for a 1997 United Church delegation to the Congo describes the importance of experiencing the context of partners’ life and work; learning what it means to be church in that context; hearing the stories and witness of women, youth and children, and struggling with the questions and challenges of partnership for the present and future.⁹ Similar elements were reflected in a comprehensive report on a 1996 trip to Angola visiting partner church and ecumenical organizations responding to the challenges of a fragile peace process. The report demonstrates Omega’s commitment to and capacity for deep listening and careful analysis, looking for systemic barriers, root causes, and always alert to the call for justice to prevail over habits of charitable response. As always, she calls attention to the experiences and marginalization of women in church and society, even as they sustain the church and share stories of faith “that brought tears to my eyes.” And she articulates avenues for action in “our common quest for justice and peace” that reach from the development of local leadership and regional networking to ecumenical advocacy in Canada.¹⁰

Of note in these reports is how they reveal and convey not only the critical analysis of the situation and witness of partners and their community members, but also the spirit, passion and compassion that characterized Omega’s presence with partners. She opens the Angola

⁸ Omega Bula, “Women in Mission Participating in Healing,” *International Review of Mission* 81, no. 322 (April 1992), 250.

⁹ Letter from Omega Bula to Rev. Dr. Diafwila - dia - Mbwange Daniel, 19 December 1997.

¹⁰ Omega Bula, “Trip Report on Angola, March 5-15, 1996,” 5, 8.

report by affirming the “blessing” of travelling with a colleague “to reflect and analyze with, to laugh and cry with, to share my fears and anxieties with, but most of all to tell the story and experience of the Angolan people’s struggle.”¹¹ This spirit is further evident in the poetry she included in her reports. Here is an excerpt from “Child, Why do you Weep?”

Child, why do you weep?
 I am the abandoned child
 I am the child soldier
 I am the child that works in the market
 I am the child without school
 I am the malnourished child
 I am the sick child
 I am the child that plays on the garbage dump
 I am the child, I am the child, I am the child
 I am alone between bombed out factories and silent maize fields¹²

Throughout this time, Omega voiced her conviction that learning about the experiences of global partners implied responsibility and accountability for Canadians. Referencing the issue of Canadian manufactured land mines in Mozambique, she declared, “We are being challenged to recognize our role in the global injustice. . . . If we are part of the evil, we need to be part of the possible new source of life — reconciliation and peace building. Together we need to face our guilt in order to be part of the healing.”¹³ This challenge to bring new meaning to the concept of partnership would remain a constant theme throughout her career.

Racial Justice Minister

In 2002 the United Church General Council Office was restructured to five senior leadership positions relating broadly to the program work of the church; as part of this change, Omega was appointed as the first General Council Minister, Racial Justice: a “new and innovative” role.¹⁴ While the need for anti-racist initiatives had been acknowledged a decade earlier, General Council’s adoption of a United Church anti-racism policy, “That All May Be One,” gave a new impetus to the work. The senior position was intended “to assist the church in working towards becoming an anti-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, np.

¹³ Christian Council of Mozambique Trip Report, 20-26 October 1995, np.

¹⁴ *The Observer*, February 2003, 24.

racist church and walking a new path toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.”¹⁵

Called to be a “change agent” in a church being “challenged by the presence of racial difference,” Omega viewed her experience as a “visible minority person . . . black and female,” as her “basic gift” to the United Church. She reflected on the colonial heritage of her childhood in Zambia, the internalized racism promoted by the boarding school system, training students “to be like white women,” but where she also developed “resistance skills,” and identified parallels with Canada’s residential schools. For her, to name racism as a sin, and to turn systemic analysis and systemic change towards justice and reconciliation was central to this work of calling the church to own and deal with its own racism. Rooted in the conviction that “it’s my church too,” Omega acknowledged that sharing her gifts would involve some struggle: “how to own my voice, my style; how to find the spaces and the allies.”¹⁶

It was during this period that I joined the General Council Office staff, as program coordinator for ecumenical and interfaith relations, and had my first opportunity to work with Omega. As part of the Circle and Cross program bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the United Church together in a series of conversations about faith and spirituality, we travelled together to a circle gathering in Alberta. My memory is of a time when storytelling brought forth new insight and understanding, together with bitter accusation, anger, and pain. Listening deeply, seeking clarity, holding connection and building relationships are the lessons I remember from participation with Omega in this encounter: not denying the emotional impact of such moments but seeking through the anger and pain ways towards healing and justice. She affirmed that confronting racism in the church would require not only education and analysis but “a deep change of heart,” and opened her heart to that call.

Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations

In 2006 Omega once again transitioned into a new role in the General Council office: Executive Minister of the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit, which was later redefined as Partners in Mission. Here she combined her management skills of encouragement and support of the staff

¹⁵ A Short Timeline of Racial Justice in The United Church of Canada. <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/2024-02/a-short-timeline-of-racial-justice-in-the-united-church.pdf>.

¹⁶ John Bird, “A Table for Everyone,” *The Observer*, May 2003, 15-16.

team responsible for the church's program work, with her continuing dedication to engaging the church in the work of justice and partnership.

Omega's leadership style was consultative and empowering. While this involved many in-office meetings, she also built in several staff retreats as a time to step away for renewal of energy, relationships and creativity. Through conversation, problem-solving, visioning, worship and a good dose of play, we were invited to shape our work together and to reflect on our place in it. From initial planning to final reporting, Omega tried to ensure that all voices could be heard and our input valued.

This commitment to consultation and joint action carried into her vision for the partnership work of the church. Omega insisted that the church needed to find ways to bring a true commitment to mutuality and right relations to life in our local and global, ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. One example that stands out for me was a partner consultation held in June 2008. Partners from around the world were invited to share their experiences, questions and challenges in relation to significant policy issues facing the church, as well as their visions and priorities for the partnership program. There was heated discussion, rich sharing and moving worship, all of it aimed at upholding the value of partnership at a time when diminishing resources were leading to some hard decisions about how programs and relationships would be maintained.

Omega asserted that the United Church needed the accompaniment of its partners to be fully church. As one way of living this out, she envisioned an expanded presence of global, ecumenical and interfaith partners at meetings of the General Council. We created a program for 15-20 partners that included orientation to the practices and issues of the Council, spaces for hospitality and debriefing together, participation in every discussion, and an opportunity for partners to bring to the closing session of the Council a message based on their experiences and observations. This witness from partners has consistently been one of the most profound moments of the council. This led to the formation of the Partner Council in 2011, with members from each region where the United Church works with global partners. The Partner Council offers advice and wisdom to the governance structures of the church and accompanies the whole church in mission and ministry.¹⁷ Arising from these practices of

¹⁷ <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/partners-mission/global-partners>.

partnership came the articulation of a set of Partnership Principles that continue to guide the global partnership program of the United Church.¹⁸

Omega also lived out this vision of justice and solidarity in her wider ecumenical engagement. She encouraged Canadians present at a KAIROS Canada gathering in 2009 to “discover our relevance to the struggle,” engaging in “post-colonial analysis that will inform a post-colonial response and a decolonized solidarity.” At the same time, she urged people to “be bold” in calling the church to be both a movement for resistance and discipleship, attending to diversity and exclusion, and a movement of prayer, for God’s grace to transform the world.¹⁹

Omega gave strong ecumenical leadership in both the World Council of Churches and World Communion of Reformed Churches. Her participation began while she was working in Africa and continued during her years with the United Church. She is identified as one of the “architects” of the Accra Confession of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (predecessor to the WCRC), which named the interlocking structures of “empire” as a threat to the integrity of faith.²⁰ She continued this focus on economic justice through her participation in an ecumenical panel that put forward a framework for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture and involvement with the World Council of Churches Ecumenical School on Governance, Economics and Management for an Economy of Life. Athena Peralta, WCC programme executive for Economic and Ecological Justice recalled that “she brought an incisive feminist and intersectional perspective and never turned her back on the socio-economically marginalized . . . she inspired many to speak truth to power including to international financial institutions.”²¹

The vision and struggle for “an economy of life,” was at the core of Omega’s theology as well as her life work. She named herself as a “feminist lay theologian” influenced by theologies of liberation that put justice at the heart of faith. She is known as one of the “matriarchs” of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Reflecting on her influence, Mwale affirms:

¹⁸ See The United Church of Canada, “Principles of Global Partnership: What’s It All About?” <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/whats-it-all-about.pdf>.

¹⁹ Omega Bula, “Five Reflections on the KAIROS Gathering,” 17-20 June 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTLMpR5x9qs> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCiSEIPPFW8>.

²⁰ “Omega Bula, an Architect of the Accra Confession, Retires,” *Reformed Communiqué*, September 2012, 11.

²¹ “WCC Mourns Loss of Omega Chilufya Bula.”

She contributed to liberative theologies by fostering a theology which promoted an economy of life in which scripture, stories and experiences were used as empowering tools for justice. Her theology aimed to promote a just economic system which dignified people, working in solidarity with women within and outside the churches and promoting the church's response to the call for justice in the economy and the Earth in concrete ways. Her narrative not only enriches African feminist liberative historiography in Southern Africa from the Zambian context but also demonstrates the potential for theologizing in the spaces where women live and work in order to contribute to the liberation of their communities and the Earth.²²

The consistent commitment to gender justice also informed her participation in the ecumenical movement. I witnessed frequently the attention she gave to creating opportunities for women to claim their voices in ecumenical spaces, recognizing the need for practice, wisdom and intentional strategizing to bring diverse issues and perspectives into the discussion. Hers was a model of "quiet boldness"²³ that called others into action.

For many who knew Omega this mentoring role is an enduring memory. Her sister Jennifer speaks of her as "enabling and pushing people she was in touch with, into available opportunities" and "always passionate about encouraging young people to look ahead."²⁴ A letter responding to a scholarship inquiry written in her time with DWO affirms "a strong case for supporting a woman from Angola in theological education" and encourages the writer with advice and wisdom.²⁵ Fulata Moyo, former staff for gender justice at the WCC remembered how Omega provided "stepping stones" towards what she could achieve. "She counselled me about the importance of embracing the building of a movement or advocacy, witness and resistance, for lasting impact."²⁶ Omega encouraged many of us to imagine and explore different options, find the strength in community, and discover the gifts we could offer for a transformed world.

²² Mwale, 347-348.

²³ "WCC Mourns Loss of Omega Chilufya Bula."

²⁴ Chiwela, WhatsApp Chat.

²⁵ Omega Bula, Letter to Adelaide Catanha, 19 December 1996.

²⁶ "WCC Mourns Loss of Omega Chilufya Bula."

Return to Zambia

Upon retirement from the General Council Office in 2012, Omega returned to Zambia, to fulfill her dream of building, in her Chipembi home, a sustainable farm and guest house. Here she would continue the tradition of hospitality and community that had characterized her life and work. The project demonstrated once again her sister's observation that "she was truly a community person—always coming up with ideas that would improve livelihoods of the less privileged around her—ensuring to put those ideas into action."²⁷ The farm would also continue her commitment to education for transformation for people of all ages, providing opportunities for local community members, visitors from beyond Zambia, and a children's camp that brought together young adults from Canada and Zambia as leaders. At the same time, the farm gave concrete form to her commitments to economic justice and sustainable agriculture, even as she chaired the Life Enhancing Agriculture Working Group of global economic and ecological action network, Oikotree: Justice at the Heart of Faith.²⁸

Returning to her roots in the United Church of Zambia, Omega continued to give leadership in such gatherings as a 2014 ecumenical conference focused on African women's ministries and responses to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, where she affirmed women's faithful questioning of "all systems, institutions, structures, practices, policies and interpretations that support the legitimization of unjust practices central to the oppression of women."²⁹ She wrote about such issues as the effects of global tourism in women's lives in Africa.³⁰ She encouraged that questioning and the search for life-giving alternatives in circles of local women through her "Women at the Well" project. And she maintained connections with the economic and gender justice work of the WCC and WCRC, declaring to a WCRC writer upon her retirement that the

²⁷ Chiwela, WhatsApp Chat.

²⁸ Oikotree Network, "Life Giving Agriculture," <https://oikotree.net/life-giving-agriculture/>.

²⁹ World Council of Churches, "African Women Celebrate Their Christian Ministry in a Time of HIV and AIDS," 23 June 2014, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/african-women-celebrate-their-christian-ministry-in-a-time-of-hiv-and-aids> .

³⁰ Omega Bula, "Threats to Women's Rights and Dignity: Tourism and Gender in Africa," *Voices from the South*, E-Newsletter, August 2014, 1-3.

ecumenical movement had been “a gift to my life. I am who I am today because of that gift of people, friends and knowledge.”³¹

Omega died on January 31, 2023, of heart complications after a long battle with cancer. She is survived by her only son Mwai, her three grandchildren Mackenzie, TwaLumba, Lebohang, and her twin great granddaughters Winona and Valerie. She lived her life as a conscious witness to the African concept of Ubuntu— “I am because we are.” She sought community wherever she lived and worked and was a persistent seeker for justice in every aspect of life. Family, friends and colleagues remember her passion for justice animated by a joy in life, care for the most vulnerable, and spirit of deep gratitude for the blessings of life.

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³¹ “Omega Bula Retires.”

FROM THE HEART**THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST****by Kieran Collery**

A statue of a man, draped in a cloak and coronated with an ivy wreath, reclining on a throne, sits at the entrance to the York Minster. The statue depicts Constantine the Great, declared Caesar in 306 CE during a campaign to conquer Britain. and I found this statue on my way into the Minster during a visit to York a few months ago. Constantine was the emperor who legalised Christianity in Rome, and more importantly, convoked the Council of Nicaea. His reign would see Rome become the centre of not only Imperial Roman power, but of European Christendom, ushering in the age of Christianity as a religion endorsed by the state's most powerful constituents. Entering the Minster, this age feels far gone: torrents of tourists vastly outnumber congregants, and England's most beautiful church's value is measured primarily in historical terms. The United Church might look enviously on a church like York Minster, facing the same crisis of dwindling attendance but without the cultural capital. Still, as a millennial prone to fits of contrarianism, I must insist that this situation is actually a good one for the future. Crisis is not new for the Church, and the culture has not set the lions on us yet. Indeed, the growing nihilism and apathy of the age finds Christianity increasingly strange. It may be a fidelity to the message of the Cross, of a God who participates in humankind's doubt, suffering and failure, that can speak to a younger generation for whom truths are being shattered and for whom no ground is sure.

The Council of Nicaea was called by Constantine for political purposes. The Arian heresy was spreading throughout the Empire, and the newly ascendant religion threatened to split into factions that could foment violence. Nicaea needed to settle the debate, lest it erupt into further civil war. Nicaea's conclusion marks the most important theological decision of the Church's history: it also saw the state collude with the Church, making an example of those declared heretics by exiling them. This act inaugurated a millennium of the Church conferring state power in Europe, and only the Reformation would see church and state begin to separate. The further secularization of the Enlightenment would eventually formalize this separation as Enlightenment humanism replaced God with the power of the philosophical mind. Religious pluralism reduced faiths to branding exercises, and value propositions as different mixes of cultural and aesthetic considerations composed of the same essential matter. In this

milieu, many felt that the pressure to choose may not matter, and this is the context of most of my millennial peers.

As a Christian I have sought to formulate answers to the occasional questions my irreligious friends pose to me. My love for these discussions and theological study saw me eventually leave a career in tech to pursue formal studies in theology in the UK. At the time of writing, I have just completed a diploma in theology and will be undertaking a master's degree by the time this piece has been published. I befriended many young Christians last year in a country that, like Canada, is increasingly seen as "post-Christian." These young friends had hearts seeking to serve God, as they seriously engaged with the questions of modernity and stood out as evangelists of the gospel message amidst their peers. They were opting out of participation in the debauched culture of British universities. They were not getting drunk and getting laid; they were living lives as witnesses for Christ to their peers.

In a sense, these students embody the active witness that the Church knows as *martyria*, that of the martyrs offering the absolute sacrifice of their lives as testimony of their faith in God. While death did not literally threaten the students I met, their self-denial of a host of worldly delights was the sacrifice of what society covets as a time of uninhibited, orgiastic fun.

This sacrifice makes them countercultural, and they can only be so because of a culture broadly ambivalent to, or subtly against, Christian norms. The sobriety and integrity of their witness did not repel but drew people to their message. At the end of the school year, the church I was attending hosted a river baptism: 15 young people were baptized, and their testimonies spoke of Christ's comforting love as the rock in their tumultuous lives. This is tumult many of us in our 20's and 30's are experiencing. Anxiety about politics, the economy, and the fundamental ability to relate to others dominate the consciousness of younger people. This angst then fuels a miasma of addictions and mental illnesses. There is a brutal weight pressing down on many young people. I saw that weight lifted by Christ's message of rest from burden and peace beyond understanding.

If this experience is that of a collapse of narratives, one such collapse is the narrative that religion is a negative influence upon the world. The marginalization of Christianity in the West has made the gospel increasingly distinct. It is unknown to many young people whose parents left churches after their childhoods. Many saw going to church as simply going through the motions, and in mourning the deaths of denominations, we should not mourn the death of this "cultural Christianity." I was deeply

influenced by the writings of Søren Kierkegaard this past year. He abhorred the innocuous, hollow Christianity of a culture that took it for granted. It was a Christianity that had become inseparable from European identity, demanding nothing more than occasional church attendance and good manners. The radicality of *martyria* had been rendered obsolete and Kierkegaard recognised this as the meaning and message of Christianity slipping out from underneath it—the message that we are called to take up our crosses, and die:

It would, indeed, be indefensible to stop ringing the alarm as long as the fire is burning. But, strictly speaking, I am not the one who is ringing the alarm; I am the one who, in order to smoke out illusions and skullduggery, is starting the fire, a police operation, and a Christian police operation, since according to the New Testament Christianity is incendiarist—Christ himself says, ‘I came to cast fire upon the earth’. . . . Christianity, which came into the world as the truth for which one dies, has now become the truth on which one . . . lives.¹

Many members of our denomination mourn the good old days, when The United Church wielded real cultural and political influence. My question is this: if The United Church of Canada has fallen from national prominence, is the church that is falling the one that prefers to preach the truth for which one dies, or for which one lives? The latter is diabolical. Kierkegaard rightly rails against this Christianity, gelded of its vitality and cut off from the Spirit. He rings the alarm, reminding Christians that their faith is the faith of martyrs. He begs the question: *when did our faith become about maintaining a status quo?* Young people widely perceive institutions and the status quo as having failed them. For them, a Christianity that is allied with the predominant culture is a Christianity that is complicit with the state of affairs they find themselves in. In contrast, an outsider Christianity that is discarded by the culture is a faith that is free to speak against the injustices of the dominant culture, and advocate for the growing number that feel they too have been discarded by society. It is a Christianity that does not need to be useful to society, so it is a Christianity that can be useful to God.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard and Thomas C. Oden, *The Humor of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 96.

Many church historians consider Nicaea to be the church's most important theological battle. Arius' formulation of Christ as a created being resulted in a Christ with no salvific power and a God with no imminent meaning in His creation. The theology of Nicaea remains more relevant than ever, particularly as a counter to the tendency to see Jesus as simply a wise man or prophet, and not the Son of Man. Still, we should not pine for a post-Nicaean Christianity whose power derives from politics and culture and whose theology must "keep the peace." The United Church, and all denominations facing crises of aging congregants and plummeting attendance, should instead face death. Bearing this martyrdom with joy is how the Church, in crisis, has testified to its faith, and it may yet be a blessing in disguise that our cultural coffers have run dry. My generation feels powerless, broken and forsaken. Such was the form of Love entering the world and dying for us. If we maintain that living faith in Christ that begets courage in the face of death and forsakenness, perhaps our faith and witness may speak to those abiding where God has now blessed to put our church: as one of the last and the least.

***Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*
Tom Holland, New York: Basic Books, 2029, 624 pp.**

I've been reading books about the history of Christianity for a few decades, off and on, as a non-specialist, and have often thought that what I really need is a book called "Okay, Why Did Anybody Think *That Was A Good Idea?*" Many writers have provided brisk surveys of the rise and fall of diverse churches and the personalities involved while others offer nuanced considerations of theological concepts and their intellectual antecedents. I've rarely come across books which do both.

Tom Holland's *Dominion* is one of those rare works, and while it probably will not satisfy scholars or experts in all details, it offers general readers nearly six hundred pages of lively and vivid writing that lays out clearly who thought what was a good idea and (more importantly) why. He connects sociology and social history with theology, showing why certain ideas flourished in certain contexts while others declined or were suppressed.

Holland's aim is to show how Christianity and the western world made each other. He announces in his preface that he intends to show "how we in the West came to be the way we are and think the way we do . . . Two thousand years on from the birth of Christ . . . [t]o live in a western country is to live in a society still saturated by Christianity (12-13)."

He is not an apologist for Christianity—his version of the western Christian world is filled with gore, xenophobia, and failures, as well as transcendent values and prophetic vision—but he makes a strong case that this extremely ambitious thesis is true, that the central institutions of Europe and its settler offshoots are Christian in their origins and evolution. He provides a roughly chronological account, beginning five hundred years before the birth of Jesus to lay out the landscape of beliefs about humanity and divinity, and ending in the era of #MeToo.

Readers can almost feel Holland's determination not to write a dry history simmering on the page. Every chapter begins with a vignette that pulls the reader into a shorter narrative arc within which the bigger themes of the chapter can be framed. For example, Boniface the missionary wakes up one morning in the seventh century beside the river Boorne in Frisia to see pagan pirates sweeping in. Nearly a thousand years later, a poverty-stricken neighbourhood in Paris is disrupted by screams coming from the Calas family's home, where the son has just been found dead (and where the father, a secret Protestant, will be accused of contriving his Catholic son's murder). Holland eschews well-worn set-pieces (Luther nailing 95 theses to the door of a Wittenberg church in 1517) in favor of lesser-known

but no less vivid moments (the arrival in 1420 of an army of Bohemian peasants to a crag overlooking the Luznice river, intending to build the radically egalitarian and apocalyptic society called Tabor).

Sometimes this cinematic vividness can be a bit over the top, with its abundance of dramatic confrontations and declarations. At other times, it presumes too much on the writer's part, as when Holland imagines the charged personal interchanges between Elizabeth of Hungary and her confessor Conrad of Marburg in the early 13th century, or the internal monologues of Bartolome de las Casas in the 15th century, as he struggled with his conviction that the Indigenous people of South America had the same souls as Europeans like himself. Overall, however, it's an excellent storytelling device that enables Holland to answer the question at the beginning of this review, showing exactly how intelligent and knowledgeable people came to believe that certain things were good and true, including ideas which may strike 21st century readers as questionable (such as theocracy, Docetism, heliocentrism, or limited atonement).

Two themes unify this expanse of material. The first, which will be familiar to readers of Holland's *Millennium*, is the relationship between spiritual and temporal power, or between churches and states. Holland explores the evolutions of hierarchies and configurations which sometimes saw religious authorities holding sway over governments, at other sides saw faith entirely subsumed under secular rulers, and at yet other points saw the two forms of authority entirely separated. The nature of the relationship between sacred and secular governance has been contested and worried over for centuries, and Holland makes it clear that the shaky consensus in Europe and North America today that the two forms of power ought to be separate is a historical artifact, not an enduring principle.

The second theme is the constant oscillation within Christianity between revelation, orthodoxy, and reformation. Holland demonstrates that even though we may think of the capital-R Reformation as the main challenge to church power, the small-r reforming impulse, *reformatio*, has been active since the earliest days of Christianity's coalescence into a faith separate from Judaism. Holland treats this oscillation as a cycle, rather than linear progress towards a final form. He doesn't refer to it explicitly as a dialectic, but his approach is reminiscent of Hegelian ideas about how history moves.

The book is far from perfect. Although Holland does a heroic job of presenting a vast cast of players, it's still easy for a reader to get various Gregorys or Johns mixed up. Holland's players are also overwhelmingly male, with women appearing mainly as the wives or mothers of prominent men. His you-are-there scene-painting falters when he dips into mind-

reading and imputing emotions and thoughts to the protagonists (given how many literate Christians have written abundantly about their faith, he might have relied more heavily on their own words rather than his imagination). I was also not convinced by his claim that Christianity produces a set of values and predispositions which have been durable across the history of the west (the subtitle of the United Kingdom edition of *Dominion* is *The Making of the Western Mind*). The internal diversity that his book showcases makes it difficult for me to believe that such a discrete “Western mind” exists. On a minor note, Holland lapses occasionally into jarring anachronisms, such as slipping in quotes from the Beatles in odd places: of Gerard Winstanley, for instance, he says that Winstanley’s foes dismissed him as “a dreamer, but he was not the only one” (66).

Nonetheless, this is one of the best books of Christian history I’ve ever encountered. I come away from it with a better sense of not only the sweep of Christian history but also the internal logic and the worldviews that made the sprawling and unfinished project of Christianity make sense in different ways to different people in different times. Holland spells out the cultural, political and institutional logics that explain why anybody thought *that* (whatever “that” may be) was a good idea. In doing so, he makes the history of western Christianity and the Christian west both less mysterious and more marvellous.

Amy Kaler

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***North of Nowhere: Song of a Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner*
Marie Wilson: Anansi, 2024, pp. 362**

CONTENT CAUTION It has been a challenge to recount my story of the Commission and stay true to one of the guiding principles in our Mandate: Do No Harm. This particular chapter might be one for Survivors to skip, or look away from, to take care of themselves. But for all others who are still learning, read on. Do not flinch. Do not hide. I cannot make it softer for you. This is what I witnessed. This history belongs to all of us.

This was my first and only time at a TRC hearing at the site of a residential school run by the Protestant church I knew best: the United Church of Canada (221).

Growing up in the United Church, I was encouraged to be proud of our missionary efforts. I can't say I was aware of residential schools as a young person and cannot remember hearing mention of them in my theological education. However, since the 1990's I have been on a learning/unlearning pilgrimage, a pilgrimage not freely chosen at first but one that I now embrace with gratitude. Yes, the truth will set us free but first make us miserable.

This is a fine book for learning a fuller history of the United Church in this anniversary year and also to come to a truer picture of those missionary efforts. The above quotations open the section on HONESTY and feature the Alberni Indian Residential School started by the Presbyterians in 1890 and continued as a United Church institution until the 1970's.

Marie Wilson was the only non-Indigenous person on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She shared this work with two remarkable Indigenous men, Murray Sinclair and Wilton Littlechild. Her spiritual support throughout the six-year process was former Moderator, Peter Short, who had accompanied her through challenging times when he was minister in Yellowknife. Although non-Indigenous, she was the only woman of the three, and Indigenous women recognized her as such. She was there conscious of being a Mother. It is because of her witness that I have become more fully aware of the devastation caused by the residential schools, not just for the children taken from families but also for parents and extended families left behind and communities gutted.

The book opens with a poem written by her husband, Stephen Kakfwi, a residential school Survivor and former premier of the Northwest Territories. His image of children crying in "the walls and the halls of my mind" is haunting. Now much further on in my re-education on these matters, I wish I could have had a conversation with a particular Indigenous man who dropped into my church office sporadically over many years. He was immensely likable but obviously troubled. I wish I had been schooled enough to ask him if he or his family had a residential school connection.

The book provides a front row seat to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The author puts that work into the context of her life story from her youth in southwestern Ontario to the present. We hear throughout the book of the physical, emotional and spiritual costs paid by her serving. She writes, "The deepest and loneliest part of any TRC hearing day was afterwards, back in some unfamiliar hotel room. Phone calls home filled a partial void. But I could only say so much without transferring a traumatic load to my family, especially my Survivor

husband. He did not need to hear residential school stories that could trigger his own memories” (4). Thus, we get poignant hints of the impact on her and her family relationships in living with a residential school Survivor.

Another front row seat to the TRC is provided by The Honourable Murray Sinclair in his oral memoir, *Who We Are: Four Questions for a Life and a Nation* published in 2024 (starting pg. 190). However, Wilson’s training and experience as a journalist with many years living in the north and working for the CBC, enriches her work with an in-depth experience of the TRC. She took many notes and there are copious quotations and descriptions of particular hearing days or significant moments in the process.

Sections and chapters are organized around Indigenous traditional teachings and the themes of each of the national gatherings: Respect, Courage, Love, Truth, Humility, Honesty, and Wisdom. The sections and chapters within each section build on each other until, by the end, the reader can see that this is the story both of the TRC and Marie Wilson. “I was so journalistically programmed toward objectivity and telling *other* people’s stories that I couldn’t see the obvious—that this was *my* story and *I* was the lead character” (344).

For those of us in The United Church of Canada, this is our story. Marie Wilson has given us a gift in sharing her front row seat on the TRC.

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In Search of the Spirit: Selected Works, Volume One: The Spirit and Biblical Literature.

John R. Levison. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2023. 415 Pp.

John Levison is W. J. A. Power Professor of Old Testament Interpretation and Biblical Hebrew at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas. A primary focus of his career has been studying how the Holy Spirit is described in the Biblical traditions. This book collects fourteen of his previously published essays on this topic from 2003-2020. The book’s orientation is primarily academic, but Levison writes in an accessible style.

Levison’s essays cover a number of central texts for the Holy Spirit: Ezekiel 37, Acts 2, 1 Corinthians; but also many others like Genesis 1:2 and Exodus 35:30-35. He begins by making several key points. First,

the idea that there was a lack or withdrawal of the Spirit in Second Temple Judaism is illusory. In Jewish writings and religious life of this time, the Spirit was understood to be present and active. Second, Levison notes that in many places in the Hebrew Bible, the divine Spirit is understood as present in every person as the spirit-breath that gives them life. He repeatedly argues against the idea of a dichotomy between the human and the divine spirit. There are distinctions between the two, but where the divine Spirit is active, so is the human spirit. *Rûa*, the Hebrew term for spirit, could refer to both or individually, as well as to wind. Wherever there is life there is the Spirit. The life-long presence of the Holy Spirit within a person, properly nourished, is the source of insight and wisdom that at times is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as almost miraculous.

Levison also argues that the roots of Israel's understanding of the Holy Spirit lie in the Exodus tradition. The memories of the agents of this liberation, the pillar of fire, a terrifying angel, etc., eventually coalesced after the exile into understandings of the Holy Spirit as a divine agent, God's presence with God's people, a source of assurance and hope even in the most difficult times. Throughout these essays Levison is attentive to commonalities and variations in the way the Spirit is portrayed in different traditions. He notes that while the Holy Spirit can inspire and empower people, it can also be resisted. He argues that in Acts, the Spirit is associated with mission, whereas in Paul's letters it tends to be associated with notions of salvation, expressed as new covenant or new creation.

A major theme and contribution of this book, repeatedly touched upon in various essays, is the association of the Spirit's presence and activity with learning—the cultivation of skills and knowledge. Levison picks up this theme from traditions about the making of the sanctuary in Exodus 31:3, where Belzalel, a knowledgeable craftsperson, is described as “filled with the spirit.” Here, according to Levison, being filled with the Spirit does not result from a sudden irruption or invasion of the Spirit into a person or community, but from years of study, apprenticeship and practice. The Spirit is already present in people at birth, and being filled with it results from the inculcation of virtues, knowledge and skills. Levison seeks to show how this connection between the Spirit and learning is present in many other passages.

The Holy Spirit emerges here as a teachable Spirit, that can be imparted through education, dedication to a particular activity, and mentoring. Levison acknowledges that in the Hebrew Scriptures the Spirit sometimes manifests itself in history by rushing upon someone, being poured out, or catching people up in an ecstatic state. But he argues that all

these manifestations of the Spirit are linked to education and learning. Learning paves the way for people to do the work of the Spirit.

Levison is surely on to something important here. The Spirit can use media like education, mentoring, apprenticeships, etc., to equip and inspire people. Churches support their seminaries for a reason. This emphasis on the link between education and the Spirit's inspiration and empowerment has similarities to the understanding of how the Spirit works in the Pastoral Epistles.

Yet in Acts and other Biblical traditions, the Spirit frequently sweeps in like a mighty wind to inspire, guide people and help leaders make difficult decisions. More recent events like Vatican II, the American civil rights struggle, or the establishment of Medicare in Canada are examples of the Spirit acting in an undefinable way to transform church and society. Learning certainly played a role in these movements. Yet here the Spirit demonstrated a freedom and transcendence to re-orient church and society from what it was accustomed to teach and practice, to a new vision that more closely approximates the reign of God.

This is an important, thought-provoking book, with a wealth of exegetical insights into how the Spirit is understood in various Biblical traditions. It opens up the diversity of how the Spirit is seen to work in Scripture. It will be important for theologians and Biblical scholars working on the Holy Spirit, and for clergy and educated lay people seeking a deeper understanding of what Scripture teaches on this topic.

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