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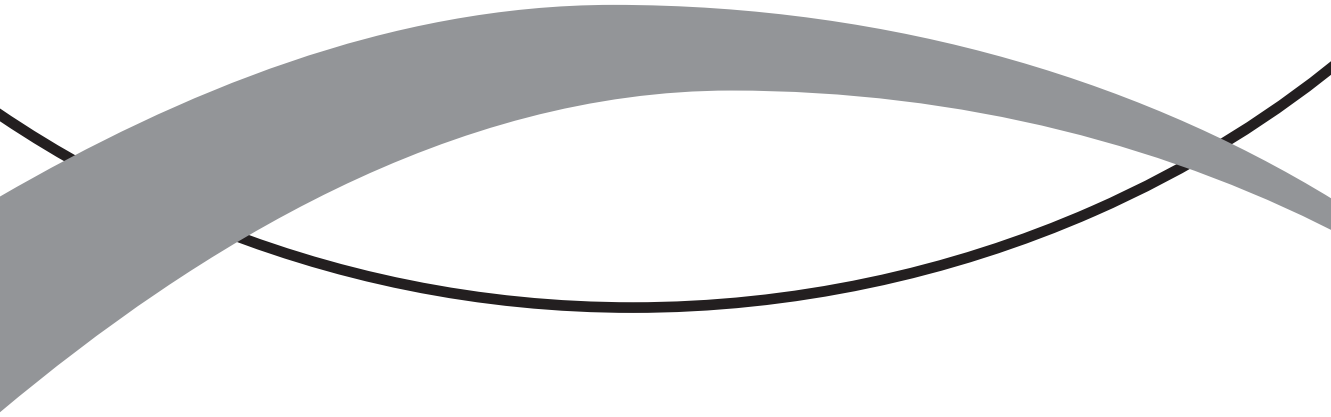

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The Liberative Potential of Creedal Traditions[1]

Joerg Rieger

Abstract

The creedal traditions of the church have often been portrayed in diametrical opposition to its liberation traditions. Considering the history of the creeds, this is not surprising. The first formal ecumenical creeds emerged when the Roman Empire developed its Christian identity. At the same time, however, empires were never able to subdue and subsume Christianity altogether. In this article, the theological surplus of the Nicene Creed will be examined as an example, investigating its imperial pedigree while also demonstrating its anti-imperial potential and the Nicene position's implications for liberative theological thinking then and now.

Creeds, Empire, and Method

The Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches agree on the authority of the first seven ecumenical councils of the church. Many Protestant traditions recognize the first four ecumenical councils. The Council of Nicaea was the first one of these councils, and has thus a special place. Since this year marks the seventeen-hundredth year anniversary of this Council, I will focus my reflections on the Council of Nicaea as a prominent example for the liberative potential of creedal Traditions.

Like the Bible, the councils of the church did not fall from the sky but were produced in specific contexts. History and context are, therefore, just as important when interpreting these councils as they are when interpreting the Bible. But while biblical studies have long engaged historical methods, much of historical theology has not. In what follows, I will be doing some of that historical work, which is also contextual work. The method I have developed for this work is not the traditional historical critical method but what might be called the historical self-critical method.[2] What it adds to traditional historical-critical work is a critical analysis of the historian and a critical analysis of the flow of power.

For the longest time, theologians have looked at the relationship of Christianity and culture – or Christianity and context. Looking at Christianity and empire, by contrast, means looking at Christianity and culture *and power*, or Christianity and context *and power*. Empire, if you will is the combination of context and power or culture and power; power includes politics, religion, and economics, and everything else we

[1] This article picks up research first published in chapter 2 of Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), and reworks it for today. Used by permission. Most of this article was also presented in at United Theological College, Sydney, Australia; Pasifika Communities University, Suva, Fiji; and Methodist Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand, fall 2025.

[2] See also Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, introduction and conclusions.

are not supposed to discuss in polite company. Without explicitly reflecting on power, even contextual theology often ends up being folklore, which may have its place but does not take the liberative potential of the creeds far enough.

In my book *Christ and Empire*, I show how faith and power have developed in close proximity, beginning with the Roman Empire up to the present, but I also argue that no empire was ever able to determine faith completely. Looking back two decades to when I worked on this book, I don't think I was too critical of Christian faith back then; if anything, perhaps I was a little too optimistic about its potential to resist empire. Nevertheless, some of my optimism persists even at a time when Christianity once again has closely affiliated itself with empire, especially in the United States, and I am eager to explore it further.

The theological core of my argument is what I have I called a "christological surplus" or a "theological surplus"[3] – something that is distinct from the interests of the dominant powers in any age. This surplus, my argument goes, is at the root of the Christian faith's potential to resist empire and to provide alternatives to it. Note that this christological or theological surplus is not something that falls from the sky – it is not like a theological muse that comes to theologians while dwelling in their libraries, on the mountaintops, or in the safety of sanctuaries.

The German translation of *Christ and Empire* might throw some light on the meaning of the original English.[4] There was a conversation with the translator on how to render the English word surplus into German: the options were *Mehrwert* and *Überschuss*, which roughly translate into surplus (Mehrwert) or abundance (*Überschuss*). I did not choose *Überschuss*, but *Mehrwert*, which means that any theological surplus is always produced by the hard work of the people of God – what we might call the working majority of God. The term surplus, therefore, stands in contrast to the term abundance, pointing to what emerges from the bottom rather than to what is sent from above. To put it unambiguously: We cannot fight empire with theological ideas that are falling from the sky.

The Nicene Creed and Empire

Having delineated the method, our reflections of the liberative potential of creedal traditions begin with the Nicene Creed and the emperor Constantine, who unified the Roman Empire, which was now based in Constantinople. Constantine's conversion to Christianity has always been treated with suspicion by those who think of conversions as purely religious events. Yet Constantine appears to have followed a different theological logic. If God rules over everything, religion is not separate from politics, and neither is there a clean distinction between spiritual and worldly power. Following this line of thought, it does not make sense to assess the sincerity of Constantine's conversion based on whether he combined political and theological interests. Nor does it make sense to judge the value of ancient theological positions based on whether bishops or emperors promoted them. A more useful question for evaluating these ancient

[3] For the notion of theological surplus see Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, 9–10.
[4] See Joerg Rieger, *Christus und das Imperium: Von Paulus bis zum Postkolonialismus*, trans. Sabine Plonz (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2009).

traditions is what respective theological and political strategies they endorsed. Only when that is clear can we consider what the alternatives might be.

The historical context of the Nicene Creed reflects a change that occurred in the culture of the Roman Empire, linked to a change in the flows of power. In the second century, the cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire still enjoyed certain levels of autonomy and had their own local religious and cultural identities. In the fourth century, political structures were centralized, with the result of producing more homogeneous religious and cultural identities. The new form of government in the Roman Empire of the fourth century centered on the emperor, who exercised strong influence in all areas of life, including religion. In the Byzantine East after Constantine, where the early ecumenical councils took place, the emperor was considered crowned directly by the Christian God. The emperor, in turn, consecrated the head of the Eastern church. In the West, the reverse was true: the emperor was crowned by the pope.[5]

This dynamic also affected theology. Local religious traditions were under attack, and many of the local temples and cults were shut down. The Christian churches, which had their own distinct local traditions, were pulled into the outlook of the Roman Empire as well. Emerging Christianity now supplanted the formative role of Greek culture, which provided the glue for those who otherwise had little in common. Still, in contradistinction to the more elitist character of Greek influence, Christianity also created space for the cultural production of common people, including lower-class monks. This populism was promoted by the bishops, most of whom were from the upper class and highly educated but who often used their ties to the people to accuse their rivals of elitism.[6] The bishops' support for the poor provided them with the same kind of respect and deference that was paid to other civic leaders.[7]

But the newly gained influence came at a cost. One example is Constantine putting the administration of the support of the poor exclusively in the hands of the bishops.[8] In this way, both the bishops and the poor were brought under the empire's control. As the bishops became known as "controller of the crowds,"[9] in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire the bishops became responsible for the defence of law and order.[10] The growing bonds between church and empire were solidified economically as well. Once they began collaborating with the emperors, the wealth of the bishops soon exceeded the wealth of secular holders of office.[11]

Today, the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few once again has enormous implications for Christianity. Creedal traditions, like the work of theology, never emerge in a vacuum, yet

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5 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 54, 56.

6 See Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman, "Shifting the Focus of History: Introduction," in *Late Ancient Christianity: A People's History of Christianity, vol. 2*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3, 4.

7 See Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 97.

8 See Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 98, for reference to Athanasius, *Apologia contra Arianos*, 18.30. It is noteworthy that Christian charity was extended to all, even to non-Christians: Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 223.

9 Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 148.

10 Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 125.

11 See Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: NLB, 1974), 91.

there are options that need to be considered at any age if Christianity is to be more than a reflection of the respective dominant status quo.

A closer look at the Council of Nicaea in this light helps us draw some conclusions and points us toward the relevant theological insights. The Council followed the style of imperial government in that it produced decrees and pronouncements declared binding for all, while theological debates before Constantine had not produced such creedal expressions.

The speech of emperor Constantine at the Council, in the version of Eusebius, recalled the victory over his rival Licinius, praised the resulting unity of the empire, and addressed the theological tensions that threatened this unity: "For me," Eusebius has Constantine say, "internal division in the Church of God is graver than any war or fierce battle, and these things appear to cause more pain than secular affairs."[12] Constantine's concern at the Council of Nicaea, as is commonly noted, had to do with the unification of the Roman Empire, and he must be seen as a major player in the formation of the Nicene Creed. Remember that Constantine not only called the Council but also funded the travel and expenses of the bishops, determined the agenda, and chaired the meetings.

In Eusebius' assessment, the major achievement of Constantine was that he brought together one God and one empire: "He brought under his control one Roman Empire united as of old, the first to proclaim to all the monarchy of God, and by monarchy himself directing the whole of life under Roman rule."[13] In other words, the monarchy of the empire mirrored God's own monarchy.

The theology of the Nicene Creed becomes clearer when we take a closer look at what might be considered the centrepiece the original form from 325 (preserved in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, which is what we usually call the Nicene Creed today): that father and son are "*homoousios*." This means that first and the second person of the Trinity are of the same substance. Tradition holds that Constantine introduced the term at the council.

The confession of the *homoousia* of first and second person of the Trinity contradicts the position of the Arian opposition party, which claimed that there was indeed a qualitative distinction, with the Son taking a lower place than the Father. To protect the monotheistic faith and the absolute holiness of God, Arius and his followers claimed a hierarchy where Nicaea claimed equality. This hierarchy had both theological and political aspects. Arian theologian Eunomius made it clear that he wanted to preserve both the superiority of God and the monarchy.[14] The Arians seemed worried that putting the second person at the same level as the first would introduce significant disorder and messiness not only into the Godhead but also into the monarchy.

[12] The speech is reported in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, introduction, translation, and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 125–26.
[13] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 102.
[14] See Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als Politisches Problem: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Politischen Theologie im Imperium Romanum* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner, 1935), 94.

The *homoousios* might, therefore, present a certain challenge to the monarchical structure of the empire because it challenges hierarchy at a central place in the creed, saying there is no hierarchy between the first and the second person.

It is possible that the Arian opposition party offered a more solid protection of the interests of the Roman Empire, as it saw the potential problem of two rulers. This may be the reason why, at the end of his life, Constantine reverted back to Arianism. The inherent tension in Constantine's politics and theology should not be overlooked: while he wanted to bring the first and second persons of the Trinity together, he was not in favor of a peaceful co-existence of two emperors. While he co-authored the Edict of Milan with his co-emperor Licinius the year before the Council of Nicaea, which granted the official toleration of Christians in the Roman Empire, he quickly pushed Licinius aside and established himself as the sole rule over the Roman Empire.

But even as Nicaea emphasized the co-equality (*homoousios*) of the first and the second persons of the Trinity, Nicaea supported the ethos of the empire in other ways, for instance through a strict separation of divinity and the rest of creation. This distinction maintained imperial flows of power, in contradistinction to the more gradual differentiation of God and creation in Roman religions and certain pre-Nicene Christian theologies.

The sociopolitical context of this distinction between God and the rest of the world is significant. Between the second and the fifth centuries, at a time when social differentiations between the wealthy and powerful and the rest of the population were becoming more severe, divine power was represented on earth by a small elite, headed by the emperor.[15] Church leaders and bishops played an important role in this regard; along with the emperor, they now mediated the supernatural.

With Constantine reverting back to Arianism, Nicaea soon sunk into oblivion. Only fifteen years later, after Arius had already passed away, Athanasius developed a keen interest in the Council of Nicaea, which established the impact of the council. Athanasius constructed the idea of Nicaea as ecumenical and authoritative, he came up with the novel idea of identifying the Nicene Creed with apostolic tradition, and he was the first to call the bishops "Fathers."[16]

Based on the Nicene Creed's assertion of Christ's divinity, Athanasius developed his theology of divinization (*theosis*), which held that the divine Christ was made human so that we can be made God.[17] Athanasius' approach carried with it a strictly hierarchical understanding – like Nicaea, Athanasius drew a strict line between Creator and creation[18] – that ultimately led to a devaluation of humanity. The underlying theological

[15] In the pagan Roman Empire, the emperor was thought to be divine; this did not change abruptly but "was integrated into a new Christian understanding of Roman society." See John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450–680 AD* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 29.

[16] See Virginia Burrus, *"Begotten Not Made": Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 15, 63.

[17] In his *Orations Against the Arians*, Book I.39, Athanasius put it like this: "Thus, not[:] being man, he later became God; but being God, he later became man, that instead he might deify us." In: Christopher Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 102.

[18] "Athanasius' fundamental ideas all derive from his radical distinction between the Creator and everything created out of nothing." Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 75.

presupposition is that it divinity is changeless and not to be infected by material things. Athanasius shares a strong suspicion of matter and its mutability and, therefore, saw little need to pay attention to the particulars of the humanity of Christ or to Christ's life. When he talks about the human body of Christ, he argues that Christ assumed a human body so that we can be liberated from ours.[19]

This points to the key theological problem of the Nicene Creed. Christ is shaped in the image of an imperial Godhead, omnipotent, immutable, and impassible, sharing all the attributes of classical theism. With Nicaea, Athanasius asserts Christ's divinity without any interest in Christ's life and ministry. This leads to what might be called a christological *vacuum*, which can also be seen in the Nicene Creed, which ignores Christ's life and ministry. The same is true for other ancient creeds, such as the Apostle's Creed and the Athanasian Creed.

This approach has long shaped the dominant way of understanding the *homoousia* of first and second person, from ancient times all the way to the present, which subsumes the second person of the Trinity under the first. The result is the domestication of the second person by the first. Christ is now seated in heaven, his distinct and radical ministry on earth forgotten if not actively repressed. Confessing the Nicene Creed without a strong sense of the life and ministry of Christ often results in images of the Godhead in terms of the ancient imperial attributes of God. This, in large part, is the history of effects of the Nicene Creed for the past 1700 years, not only in conservative circles but even when liberal church traditions have sought to preserve it.

Not only the content of the Nicene Creed but also its form matters. The push for unity and homogeneity, one of the strategies of empire, has been considered providential by many Christians, together with Roman universalism. It has often been assumed – both in the ancient world and today – that this is what enabled the transmission of the gospel. According to this interpretation, the *Pax Romana* was created by Christ, and therefore it was to be promoted by the Christian churches. As a result, the unity in faith was now pursued with the methods of the empire, through "clear creedal formulas, understood not only by Christian theologians, but also by the Roman officials in charge of organization, procedures and financial disbursements."[20] These readings of the creeds leave little room for liberative potentials.

Against the Grain of Empire

While such readings of the creeds are common and widespread, there are other ways of reading the creeds that point towards liberative dynamics. Reading against the grain reveals that creeds can exceed the perspective the respective empires that produced them. This is the theological surplus at work, with implications not just for theology but also for politics, economics, and everything else.

For all the power and glory of successive empires throughout history, there is something about Christianity that keeps challenging the status quo of empires. When the second-century philosopher Celsus perceived Christianity

[19] Athanasius, in *Orations Against the Arians*, Book III.33, argued that "if the properties of the flesh had not been reckoned to the Logos, humanity would not have been completely liberated from them." Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, 91.
[20] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 33.

as a threat to the Roman Empire and a voice of rebellion, he perceived an important dynamic that was often overlooked. Christian monotheism, Celsus claimed, would eventually lead to the rejection of the values and gods of the wider community.[21] But what Celsus rejected as atheism, because it amounted to a refusal to bow before the dominant gods, is something Christianity might embrace as a badge of honor: the anti-theism of rejecting dominant theistic images of God might be seen as one of the most important tasks of Christian theology then and now![22]

So, where might this Christian theological surplus come from? Early Christianity was a socially and theologically diverse group that included not only the powerful but also large groups of lower-class people. Here we begin our search for the theological surplus of the creeds.[23]

In the Roman Empire, the lives of upper-class and lower-class Christians were intertwined in a special way because in Christianity the classes were not as strictly separated as elsewhere. This arrangement especially benefitted the rich because it supported their claim to power and justified their wealth. The churches themselves increasingly became major landowners and employers.[24]

Nevertheless, the links of rich and poor might also have had unexpected impacts on the formation of doctrine in the councils. As historian Peter Brown has argued, the sense of solidarity with the poor that distinguished Christianity in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries "challenged the rich and powerful to be aware of the sufferings of their fellow humans, as God himself had shared in human suffering." At the core, according to Brown, is the "early Christian sense of the joining of God and humanity in the person of Christ, and by mysterious extension, in the persons of the poor."[25] This joining of God and humanity had practical consequences that seem radical even today: The Theodosian Code of the fourth and fifth centuries included five laws that supported church asylum. Church asylum was granted not only to people unable to pay their debts but also to some who were accused of criminal charges.[26]

One of the legacies of the Nicene Creed is that the unity Athanasius constructed after the fact led to a kind of theological homogeneity that was not realized at the council itself. The theological concept of *homoousios*, for instance, is not as homogeneous as it might seem, and it is commonly noted that the term does not have much precision. Nevertheless, this imprecision and the ambivalence that goes with it might turn out to be a good thing. Even traditional historical theologians who do not otherwise problematize Nicaean homogeneity have praised the open-endedness of the *homoousios*.[27]

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[21] Reference in Peterson, *Der Monotheismus*, 60–61.

[22] See Joerg Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God (Nashville: Abingdon Press*, 2018), chapter 1.

[23] A contemporary example of theological surplus might be the discussions of an ecumenical working group that met in the summer of 2025 in Istanbul, Turkey, and traveled to Nicaea (today Iznik). See "Global Gathering Reflects on Nicaea through the Lens of Empire," August 29, 2025, https://uspg.org.uk/news/global-gathering-reflects-on-nicaea-through-the-lens-of-empire.

[24] See Averil Cameron, ed., *Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. XIV: Late Antiquity, Empire and Successors, 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 337.

[25] This is the summary of Peter Brown's book *Poverty and Leadership* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 111–12.

[26] See Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 254, 257.

[27] Aloys Grillmeier, S. J. *Christ in Christian Tradition: Vol. 1, From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 270.

We can find in this indeterminacy another mark of the theological surplus, produced by the multitude of the people who cannot easily be pressed into one form. This might be further theorized with the postcolonial notion of ambivalence, even though this is not the place to go into the details.[28]

According to an ancient principle, the *lex credendi* is the *lex orandi* – that is, what is believed is rooted in common worship.[29] If it is true, people have some agency in worship, other than merely repeating after the priests, and we need to allow for the possibility that some aspects of the indeterminacy and ambivalence of the term *homoousios* have to do with the exigencies of popular worship. This also means that the piety that emerges from the lives and struggles of the people cannot easily be pressed into Athanasius' efforts to create homogeneity.

All this is to say that the ambivalence and open-endedness of the Nicene Creed is closely tied to the fact that no empire can ever completely control the faith and the lives of its people. Furthermore, this ambivalence might also remind us of the diversity of the bishops, who most of the time were not in agreement either, an important fact suppressed in Athanasius' later accounts. Furthermore, this implies that orthodoxy itself contains tensions and ambivalences. Once this belief in the homogeneity of orthodoxy is challenged, the homogeneity of empire can be challenged as well, and orthodoxy itself can be seen in a new and constructive light. There is a difference between the orthodoxies emerging from the top – including from the heads of well-intentioned theologians – and the more open-ended-orthodoxies emerging from below, where the life and ministry of Christ took and continues to take place.

Here we need to rethink how theological concepts are judged. In regard to the *homoousios*, it is assumed that if a term is conceptually vague and indeterminate, it must be because it is politically rather than theologically motivated. But what if the opposite were true? In the Roman Empire, the desire to give precise and unequivocal definitions was in the political interest of those who sought control and who pursued the politics of top-down power. Therefore, there may be good theological reasons to keep things open and indeterminate. In the end, Athanasius' own understanding may have been more open than is commonly realized; he later broadened his own horizons beyond the *homoousius* and accepted the theology of the *homoiousios* (meaning "of like substance," rather than "of the same substance") camp.[30] Such openness does not mean that everything is relative. While no one may have been able to say exactly what the term *homoousios* included, the key point of the Nicene Creed was that everyone would have had a sense of what it excluded. A creed that develops limits rather than positive guidelines leaves some space for theological surplus, resistance to dominant schemes, and thus for liberation.

The diversity that was a fact of life in the Roman Empire and in the early church might be the place where a theological surplus and resistance to the empire were able to ferment.[31] Contrary to a common assumption,

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[28] See Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, introduction. For a more in-depth discussion of theoretical background see, Joerg Rieger, "Liberating God-Talk: Postcolonialism and the Challenge of the Margins." In: *Postcolonial Theology: Divinity and Empire*, eds. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), pp. 204-220.

[29] This is Prosper of Aquitane's principle: "The rule of prayer should lay down the rule of faith."

[30] What matters to him is that there is a common opposition to those who see Christ as a creature. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 210.

[31] In the empire there existed a certain amount of pluralism, especially in the East, but note that "the imperial government was tolerant of cultural diversity, as long as its political authority was not challenged," Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 25.

the history of the church is not that of initial unity that branched out into diversity later. From its very beginnings, the church was a diverse and complex reality that did not easily conform to an empire seeking to enforce uniformity.[32] This diversity of the early church – manifest in the diversity of the New Testament – comprises both theological and social positions, and the related theological open-endedness can help resist the grab for power by the few over the many, empowering the many instead.

Perhaps the most important way in which the Council of Nicaea's affirmation of Jesus' co-equality with God can challenge empires has to do with what seems to have been one of the worries of Arius. Arius' concern might have had less to do with a "low Christology" resembling some liberal theologies today, than with a very high view of the unity and the holiness of God. Claiming divine co-equality and putting Jesus on the same level as God can challenge both imperial notions of the unity and the holiness of God. A God of the same substance as Jesus Christ can no longer be separate from and above the messiness of the world. In addition, putting Jesus on the same level as God can introduce challenges to God's impassibility and immutability and lead to an erosion of unilateral top-down power. In this sense, Nicaea's efforts to put Jesus and God on the same level opened the door to a very different understanding of God – although this was probably not yet recognized by most of the Nicene fathers and certainly not by Constantine.

The Nicene move to put the first two persons of the Trinity on the same level had long-term consequences, both theological and political. The *homoousia* of first and second person introduced not only equality but also a messiness into the divine itself that challenges imperial homogeneity and deconstructs conformity and notions of sameness. When the Nicene Creed introduced another person into the Godhead, difference became part of the divine heart of reality and unilateral top-down control was eventually challenged.

Most importantly, whereas the dominant interpretation of the Nicene Creed interprets the second person of the Trinity in light of the first, it is also possible to read the relationship the other way around. Based on Jesus' life and ministry, images of the first person can now be reinterpreted in relation to the second. This is the ultimate challenge of reading the Nicene Creed against the grain, and it makes all the difference. Reenvisiong the first person of the Trinity in light of the birth, life, death, and ministry of a day-laboring construction worker from Galilee challenged not only an imperial theology that fashioned God in the image of emperors, dressed in royal garbs and sitting on thrones; this change in perspective also presented challenges to imperial politics and economics.[33]

Conclusions

By introducing Jesus into the Godhead, the Nicene Creed opens the way for future theological questions about the immutability and impassibility of Godself – although virtually everyone at the time, from Arius to Athanasius, agreed that God was impassible. But if Jesus was of the same substance as God and did indeed suffer and die on the cross, God's own immutability and impassibility would eventually need to be

[32] If it is a misunderstanding that the church was unified at first and then branched out into diversity later. The image of the "hourglass" is more appropriate – the narrow part signifies the efforts of the councils to create unity. See Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 101.

[33] For extended theological reflections on this dynamic see Joerg Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar*.

reassessed.[34] In addition, including Jesus into the Godhead as co-equal challenges a kind of metaphysics that regards being, *ousia*, as static and predetermined. God's being now needs to be seen in connection with the work of Jesus Christ – Christ's life in all its complexity, divine and human, including his resistance to the powers that be and his efforts to organize people for the kingdom of God.

It is, therefore, hardly an accident that the life of Christ is left out in the creeds; such "accidents," like Freudian slips of the tongue, always point to deeper repressions (and the surpluses that eventually spring from them). The challenge to the Roman Empire and its church posed by the life of Christ would just have been too great. Yet the liberative potential of the Nicene Creed and any of the other ancient creeds is located precisely where they are connected to the deeper realities of Christ's particular life (in solidarity with the outcasts of his time and challenging the religious and political establishment, as spelled out in the biblical narratives). Where the creeds without particular attention to the life of Christ and without attention to the biblical narratives are considered sufficient, on the other hand, this challenge is lost forever.

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[34] In modern theology, this is the accomplishment of Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology,* trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

About Uniting Church Studies

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Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

AssMin	Assembly Minutes
BOU	Basis of Union
CS	Covenanting Statement
RP	Revised Preamble
UCMC	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
UCAConst	Uniting Church Constitution
UCARegs2025	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
UIW2	Uniting in Worship 2

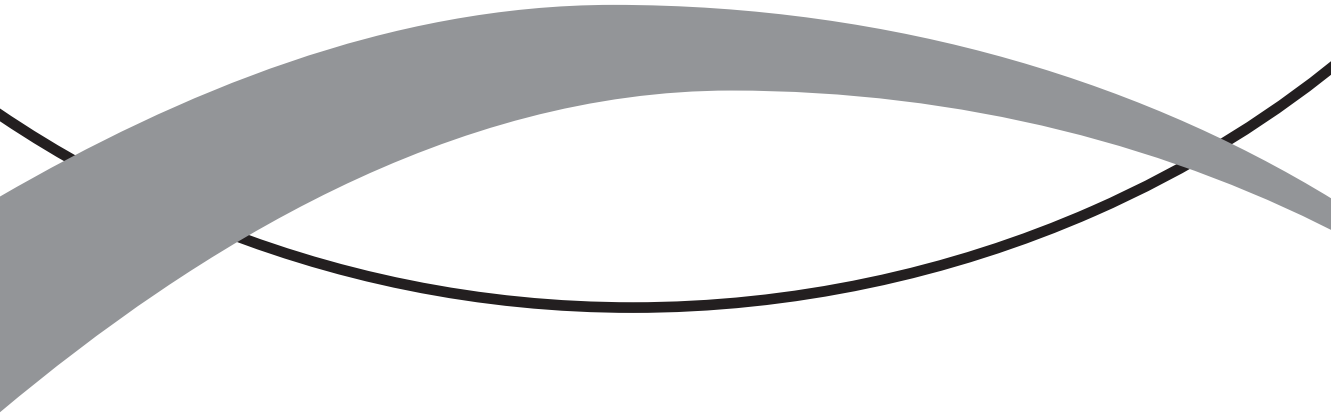
Institutions and Organisations

UCA	Uniting Church in Australia
UAICC	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
WCC	World Council of Churches
ASC	Assembly Standing Committee

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

UCS	Uniting Church Studies



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