UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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CREEDS, CONFESSIONS AND CONTEXTS

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Editorial

Geoff Thompson

The themed papers included in this issue are revised versions of the keynote addresses presented at the conference, Creeds, Confessions and Contexts in the Uniting Church in Australia, hosted by United Theological College (UTC), North Parramatta, 11-13 September this year. The idea of the conference emerged from the Editorial Advisory Committee of this Journal, and was occasioned by the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicea. There were, of course, countless conferences across the world noting that anniversary, and not a few others in Australia. The theme of this conference, though, was neither the 4th century Council nor its Creed in isolation, but a more general engagement with the issue of the Uniting Church's reception of and posture towards creeds as well as confessions of faith. The Basis of Union calls the Uniting Church to a particular understanding and use of the Creeds inherited from the church catholic (BOU, #9) and to an equally particular understanding and use of the Reformed Confessions and the Sermons of John Wesley, the literary inheritance from this Church's particular historical traditions (BOU, #10). They do not have the same function or significance in the Uniting Church that they have in other Churches. This conference was an opportunity to explore that particularity but quite deliberately in conversation with the BOU's call to be theologically attentive to context (BOU, #11, although the term used there is "contemporary society"). In addition to the keynote papers published here, there were several other streams of input: an opening talk from Matthew Anslow on his recent visit to Iznik (modern Nicea); a short introductory paper about context from Liam Miller; nine elective papers; a workshop exploring if and how the Uniting Church should develop a fresh confession; and daily theological reflections from Trawlwoolway woman and academic, Naomi Wolfe.

It was clear that, despite the widespread ambivalence towards (if not *de facto* disappearance of) the Creeds and Confessions in the regular life of the Uniting Church, both the quality of the papers and the energy of the accompanying discussions were very high. The enthusiasm generated for the various issues led to the intention that all the papers (and some others) would be presented in book to be published, hopefully, by the end of 2026.

The three keynotes addressing the creedal inheritance each confront the challenges in receiving them as well as the opportunities that engagement with them provides. And it is fair to say that the Nicene Creed has, indeed, been given a high profile in these papers. Chris Budden offers a reminder of the Nicene Creed's silences, the gaps it opened for later justifications of colonialism, and the way its development reflected the church's negotiation of identity, location and relevance. According to Budden, an informed and critical understanding of this Creed in the settler colonial space that Australia is can play a role in helping the contemporary church in the ongoing negotiation of those same realities. Joerg Rieger scrutinises the binary that often places the creedal traditions in opposition to the Christian theology's liberative traditions. He argues that whilst the Creeds' imperial pedigree is as problematic as it is undeniable, the theological conceptuality that emerged had an "anti-imperial potential" which can inform the church's contemporary liberative work. Katalina Tahaafe-Williams directly confronts the issue of the Creed's ecumenical significance in the current ecumenical landscape, one so different from that in which the Uniting Church was formed.

She argues that, notwithstanding the obvious limitations, both of the classical creeds, precisely with their focus on God, provide a challenge to the anthropocentricity of the current era.

Addressing the issue of the Reformed Confessions and Wesley's Sermons, Glen O'Brien directly addresses the question of whether, despite the significance given to them in the Basis, they might actually be redundant. His answer, however, is they are not, but only so long as they are not "left embedded fossil-like in the rock strata laid down in 1977." O'Brien closely attends to the theological themes in both sets of documents, with an extended discussion of the Wesleyan inheritance in the UCA. He argues that a critical engagement with these documents can be fruitful if we listen again for their confidence in the good news and the reality of God's grace – the abiding theological legacies from our antecedent traditions. So, read, says O'Brien, they can help the UCA elucidate what it means to be Evangelical, Reformed and Ecumenical.

The Reflections and Provocations section is an occasional feature of this Journal, providing the opportunity for the publication of articles which, whilst scholarly, are pitched more explicitly to the church rather than the academy. There are two such articles in this issue. In the first, "Transforming Communities: Talanoa and Food as Catalysts", Jione Havea and Faa'imata Havea Hiliau explore how food and talanoa ("a native Pasifika practice and culture around story, telling, and conversing") can be employed to foster an environment for the church to be enabled to fulfill its mission to be a catalyst for transformation. The theme of talanoa has received significant attention in the UCA in recent years, and here in this article it is intentionally used to illuminate the theme ("Transforming Communities") of the 2025 meeting of the NSW/ACT Synod. The article is notable, also, for being co-authored by an academic and a church leader. Such co-operation is exemplary, and other instances would be warmly welcomed in the Journal. The author of the second article in this section, Dean Drayton, has himself been both a church leader and academic. His paper, "Sexuality, UAICC, Polity and the 10th Assembly: a personal statement" takes the form of a personal statement in which Drayton responds to a claim made in an article published in a previous issue of the Journal about his actions, as Assembly President, at the 2003 Assembly.[1] Drayton argues that the particular moment in dispute needs to be understood as located at the intersection, as the paper's title implies, of matters of Covenant, polity, and the topic then at hand, i.e., the ordination of homosexual members. This article, to be read in tandem with the earlier article, is a reminder that the church, no more or less than other communities, is a community which lives amidst the contestation of memories.

This issue's Book Forum engages Julia M. O'Brien's 2024 book, *Prophets Beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice*. O'Brien, Professor Emerita of Biblical Studies at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania, USA, argues that the prophets of Israel were not so straightforwardly concerned with "social justice" in the way that progressive Churches have assumed. Whilst a self-designated "progressive" herself, and actively involved in promoting social justice, O'Brien calls for more exegetically and theologically careful use of the prophets, and of the Bible more generally, in the ministry of activism. O'Brien's arguments invite careful attention from members of the Uniting Church. The responses to the book from the three

[1] Chris Budden, "A Brief History of the Construction of the Preamble," *Uniting Church Studies*, 26. No 1, June 2024: 35-47. Following normal academic protocols, Dr Budden was invited to respond to Dr Drayton's paper, but has chosen not to.

respondents, Elenie Poulos, Brian Fiu Kolia and Matthew Anslow, together with O'Brien's response to them, provides a wonderful resource for that engagement. It is also another example in this series of Book Forums of respectful, robust and intellectually deeply serious theological conversation.

This Journal has since its inception been published by United Theological College, and it is appropriate for the Journal to note the College's 50th anniversary by including a review of the book celebrating that anniversary, *Things that Matter: Essays on Theological Education on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of United Theological College,* edited by William W. Emilsen and Patricia Curthoys.

There is no article in the Uniting and United Churches series in this issue. The series will resume in the June 2026 issue.

There are several administrative matters to report. The Chair of the Editorial Advisory Committee, Mr John Oldmeadow, has completed his term in the role of Chair. The Committee has also farewelled Rev Dr Peter Walker as he moves from the role of Principal of UTC to that of General Secretary of the NSW/ACT Synod. Both John and Peter have been crucial to the life of the Journal over the last several years, not least in encouraging and overseeing the shift to the online format. I extend my warm thanks to both of them for the support they have given me, and, with the rest of the Committee, wish them well for the future. Accompanying these changes in personnel and following a decision of the Editorial Advisory Committee earlier this year, the oversight of the Journal is now moving to a different structure: a Management Committee and an Editorial Panel. Warm thanks are extended to the outgoing Editorial Advisory Committee, some of whom will continue in the new structure. And special thanks to Liam Miller for his work as Review Editor since 2019. Liam has decided to stand aside from this role, but he will be continuing in a different role in the new structure.

Prior to leaving his role as Principal of UTC, Peter Walker confirmed the appointment of Dr Deidre Palmer to that of Chair of the new advisory structure. Many readers will be aware of Deidre's various leadership, academic and other educational roles in the Uniting Church, including serving as President of the Assembly, 2018-2021. Her appointment is wonderful news for the Journal, where her expertise and wisdom will be invaluable.

Readers will note the addition of a list of Abbreviations available to be used in the Journal (see details on p.86). This recognises that there is a small body of literature and a variety of institutions frequently referred to in the articles published in its pages. Prospective authors should consult the "Submissions" page of the Journal's website in order to familiarise themselves with the original sources being abbreviated and with all the details of when and how to use the abbreviations.

Finally, an erratum. The printed edition of Rebecca Lindsay's paper, "Colonising Innocence and the Revised Preamble: between celebration and critique" published in the December 2024 issue (Vol 26, no 2) of the Journal, contained a significant amount of unrelated additional material in the footnotes. Apologies to Dr Lindsay for this error. The digital copy available on the website has had the additional material removed.

Receiving the Nicene Creed in Settler-Colonial Space

Chris Budden

Abstract

Central to the church's life is the negotiation of identity, location and relevance. That negotiation is shaped by the way the church understands God's providence; God's relationship with and location in the world. In settler-colonial society God is said to be absent because without Christians there is no-one to represent God. Christian faith begins in practice. Theology – including that of the Creeds – offers an account of faith that sets boundaries to practices and says when they are not Christian. By what it said and did not say the Nicene Creed would later allow the church to offer theological justification for settler-colonial invasion and dispossession. The issue explored in this article is whether the church can still receive and reclaim such a Creed if it is to be a just and inclusive community that genuinely loves God and its neighbour.

Introduction

Creeds offer a language for the common life of God's people as they worship and explore the shape of discipleship. They suggest what must be said and what cannot be said about God and, thus, the identity and location of the church. My argument is that the Nicene Creed was negotiated to resolve particular presenting issues of Christology, and also enable the church to continue to build a public identity inside Roman Empire in ways that would not disturb that relationship. Such a negotiation both guards against the return to persecution and protects the church's emerging place in society; a place that makes sense because of the changing view of the sovereignty and providence of God.[1]

I will offer an account of some of the theoretical foundations of the paper, including a note on theology, identity and relevance, and location and context. I will then explore the particular context of settler-colonial Australia, in order to understand the question that must be asked about the Nicene Creed in this context. I will trace the way in which a shifting understanding of sovereignty and providence, and the location of the church helps explain what was left out of the Creed so that there is foundation for the church to support colonialism. In the final section I will turn to the question of reception of the Creed into the life and worship of the Uniting Church at this time. That is, if this Church commits to a more contested relationship with colonisation and its expression in settler-colonial society, what resources are to be found

[1] That I centre "providence" rather than, for example, soteriology or ecclesiology is because of the claim, which I will develop further in this article, that central to settler-colonialism was a denial of God's providence and blessing upon land and people before Second Peoples arrived. This claim is well captured in Jay Arthur's article about the way the history of First and Second Peoples in relationship to this place was portrayed. "The Eighth Day of Creation," *Journal of Australian Studies*, Issue 61 (1999): 66-74, 222-223.

in the Creed,[2] and what else needs to be said to negotiate more just and inclusive relationships and live out a life of solidarity with our neighbours?

Theoretical considerations

Theology is a second order activity

Discipleship is first of all a set of practices – worship, spiritual disciplines, and the practices that represent love of God and neighbour.[3] Theology offers the grammar appropriate to worship and love of God and suggests the boundaries for practices – i.e., when practices are not properly Christian. It matters what is said, and what gets left unsaid by theology because of its role in setting boundaries for practices of discipleship. If certain boundary markers are omitted – as the Nicene Creed does – this opens space to justify the church's location alongside empire.

Identity, story and location

Jürgen Moltmann argues that one of the central struggles of the church is how it negotiates the tension between identity and relevance (i.e., the shape of mission and the "good news").[4] Moltmann is particularly concerned with how often the church gives weight to being relevant in society , and particularly to those with power, such that it loses its distinct identity as the community of a crucified Lord.

Throughout its history the Church has negotiated the relationship between identity and relevance, or church and world, in various ways. At one end of the response the church has focussed on its own identity and distinctiveness and has either ignored or opposed the wider society. At the other end, church and world have been collapsed into each other; discipleship and citizenship become largely co-extensive. The point is, as Marion Grau writes, "Christians have always existed under the conditions of empire, have had to function within it, sometimes hesitatingly, sometimes resisting, sometimes collaborating, sometimes heralding it."[5] There is no pure space.

Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that central to this negotiation about identity and relevance is the ability to discern when a community's stories are not the church's story.[6] For the Uniting Church, I would suggest,

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[2] The question of liberating resources in the Creed is beyond the scope of this article. For one attempt to uncover these resources see Joerg Rieger, "On the Homoousia: The Liberative Potential of the Nicene Creed," *International Review of Mission*, Volume 13, Number 2 (November 2024): 261-279.

[3] On this sort of relationship between practice and theology see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Fortress Press, 2005), Chapter One.

[4] Jürgen Moltmann explores this tension in *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (SCM Press Ltd., 1974).

[5] Marion Grau, *Rethinking Mission in the Postcolony: Salvation, Society and Subversion* (T&T Clark International, 2011), 12. Joerg Rieger re-enforces this account of the church under empire, centring the gospel's relationship with power rather than simply culture. He makes the point that our understanding of Christ has been shaped by empire, but Christ can never be totally co-opted and there are always forms of resistance. *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Fortress Press, 2007).

[6] On the need to see when the wider story is not the church's story see Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church and world and Living in Between* (The Labyrinth press, 1988), Chapter One: "A Tale of Two Stories: On Being a Christian and a Texan."

the difficulty arises at the point where the claim of social liberalism (with its emphasis on individuals and everyone being treated the same) meets the church's particular claims about community and diversity.

The context we live in, and how we explore that context, reveals what Douglas Hall calls the human *problematique*[7] – the human struggle that the gospel responds to. That is, the context understood both politically and theologically speaks of the human struggle, the cause of that struggle, and how the story of God responds to that situation. The way the context is conceived will depend greatly on the social, political and theological location of the church and its theologians.

The multilayered location of the church reveals what we believe about how and where God's providence is expressed in the world. That is, our understanding of providence is expressed through theological discourse and also by the way we locate ourselves and practice discipleship (because the church seeks to reflect God's life in the world).

The church constantly negotiates its location, identity and relevance in a conversation between its faith claims and the attempt to find a place in the broader political-economy. The church needs to embody the meaning of its central claim that "Jesus is Lord" in ways that make sense to it and the context in which it exists, the issue being who in that context the church seeks to relate to.

It is this negotiation around the Nicene Creed as the church shifted location in relation to empire and sought to interpret its claim about Jesus Christ that interests me. How did 300 years of negotiation around location, identity and understanding of God's providence find expression in the Council of Nicaea and its creed? And how does what was said and left unsaid to allow that location, identity and understanding of God impact on the way the Creed can by read in our context and where we chose to be located as a church?

The settler-colonial context

In 1770 the British Government imposed sovereignty on the Eastern half of this continent. In 1788 they established a colony as the first step in claiming land as the foundation for a pastoral industry that would support the new industrial economy in Britain. They claimed the land without reference to First Peoples.

Under "international" law imposing sovereignty over non-Christian peoples was allowed. Taking the land was not. That required treaty or purchase. Those who invaded Australia ignored this law for the deeply racist reason that they refused to recognise First Peoples as fully human, sovereign (and able to enter treaty) and capable of ownership of land.[8]

The central issue at the time was whether, as happened in Aotearoa-New Zealand, it was enough that people occupied the land for such negotiation to be necessary, or whether there needed to be signs of use

[7] Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Fortress Press, 1996), 403. The French word "problematique" is more subtle than the English word "problem". It carries the sense of "what is problematic about" or "difficult" or "uncertain".

[8] See, for example, Henry Reynolds, *Truth-Telling: History, Sovereignty and the Uluru Statement* (NewSouth Publishing, 2021), chapter 3.

and ownership. The latter position had been developed against wealthy land-owners in Britain who held large tracts of unused land needed by the people. Scholars such as John Locke argued that for land to be owned it needed to be used productively (have labour added), be fenced (so it was clear what was owned), and for there to be a legal system to protect that ownership.[9] Those who colonised Australia denied both occupation and any sense ownership. The land was considered to be *terra nullius*; empty and unoccupied. There was no negotiated settlement.

The result was stolen land, dispossession, destruction of culture, and economic, social and political marginalisation. The central aim of settler-colonial occupation was, as Patrick Wolfe writes, the taking of land and the elimination of the people.[10] The narrative justification was denial of humanity, sovereignty, and knowledge of God.

The challenge for the churches was whether they saw such actions to be in line with the providential care of God. That is, was such invasion and occupation part of God's plan for the civilisation and conversion of First Peoples?

The answer was a theology and practice – running from the church at Nicaea, through the theological defence of the Doctrine of Discovery, Luther's fight with the German Peasants, and Calvin's understanding of sovereignty – that affirmed God as sovereign over all things; a sovereignty exercised by church and state as secondary causes of God's will for the world.[11] The claim was that only Christians understand God. God was absent, and God's providence unrepresented before colonisers arrived, the land unblessed unlike the rest of creation in Genesis 1, and the people ignorant of God before Europeans arrived. As Roland Boer writes: "Australia was indeed seen as the land God had forgotten, as that which Adam and Eve found after their expulsion from Eden."[12] This was a theological *terra nullius*.

There could be no theological support for occupation of land by First Peoples, knowing of God or equal humanity. First Peoples had nothing to offer to either society or the Church. Their voice was not needed or heeded.

This is the context in which we do what the Creed did – seek to be clear about who God is in relation to the world (sovereignty and providence), explore our location in society (and how that is explained and justified), and be sure about what the good news is and for whom. We have co-operated with colonial occupation and still do, and our theological confessions have allowed that. The question hanging over our conversation is: can the Creed be part of a postcolonial conversation or is it too intertwined with Empire?

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[9] Mark G. Brett writes that this understanding of ownership and its associated agrarian ideology "was given licence both by John Lock's theory that it is primarily labor that creates private property and by an economic interpretation of the mandate in Genesis 1 to "fill the earth and subdue it."" *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical ethics for a Postcolonial World* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 50-51.

[10] Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*. Writing Past Colonialism Series (Cassell, 1999), 27. See also Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (Verso, 2016).

[11] On the nature of providence as the expression of divine will, particularly in the Protestant tradition, see for example, Terry J. Wright, *Providence Made Flesh: Divine Presence as a Framework for Theology of Providence*. Paternoster Theological Monographs (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 8-12.

[12] Roland Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*. Second Edition (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 85.

The Nicene Creed and surrounding events

The bishops who met at Nicaea in 325 – at the direction or request of the Emperor Constantine – sought to make sense of God's providence as they grew into and became aware of being the church as a public institution seeking to tell a faith story within an empire for whom unity and sovereignty were crucial. This was a significant shift from the position of the early church community.

A shift in context and location

Context and location contribute to our understanding of the human *problematique*; the gospel question and the way God's providence is understood in relation to human life.

From the time of Jesus to the time of Nicaea the reality of empire changed very little in terms of its impact on the majority of people. Like all empires, Rome was marked by invasion, occupation, stolen land, high taxes, forced labour, undermining of culture, and trauma that split and divided people as they sought to forge small spaces for survival. In that space the church had to make sense of God's sovereignty and its central claim that "Jesus is Lord".

The most significant change in that conversation occurred as the church shifted its social and political location, as it read the gospel story from alongside different people, and as it told that story and confessed Jesus in order to sustain a different place in society.

Jesus and the early church negotiated empire from the margins of social life among people broken by empire. The early disciples understood that Jesus proclaimed the immanence of the kingdom in ways that transformed life and enabled the building of covenanting communities of resistance. They proclaimed Jesus' lordship over against the lordship of the *Pax Romana* and the good news of Roman imperial proclamations.[13]

Thus, in the early community the central confession "Jesus is Lord" was expressed in the formation of radically counter-cultural life.[14] To proclaim the lordship of Jesus was to oppose the lordship of Caesar.[15] God's providence was in a mysterious way found in the crucified and kenotic life of Jesus and his living and teaching of the kingdom. It was a way of life that unsurprisingly invited persecution and martyrdom as signs of a faithful life.

Over the centuries the church's identity and location was constantly negotiated between opposition to empire, martyrdom and charismatic leaders whose authority rested on faithful resistance and suffering,

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[13] In claiming this account of the Roman empire and Jesus and the kingdom I am following Richard Horsley and others who take a similar stance. See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, ed. *Christian Origins*. A People's History of Christianity, Volume 1 (Fortress Press, 2005), "Jesus and Empire," in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, eds. Richard A. Horsley (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), and Richard A. Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message of the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (Fortress Press, 1997).

[14] On the formation of counter-cultural lives prior to baptism, and the gradual shift to confessional statements as entry to baptism, see Alan Kreider, "Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching in Early Christianity," *The Mennonite Quarterly* Volume 72, Number 1 (January 1998): 5-30.

[15] On the shift in the meaning of the confession "Jesus is Lord" see Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Christology and Postmodernism: Not Everyone Who Say to Me, "Lord, Lord"," *Interpretation* (July 1995): 267-279.

and those seeking a safer and less traumatic space in society. The church was slowly emerging as a public institution whose authority rested on the ability to protect and articulate the Christian tradition, a role held by bishops. When the emperor Constantine called the bishops to meet at Nicaea in 325CE he threw his weight behind this kind of church and leadership. This was leadership that was located among educated and relatively wealthy members of society. The question about the relevance of Jesus was not how Jesus offered hope to those crushed by empire, but whether the story of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection was really a sensible account of God and human life. And, implicitly, could such an account of God offer support for the empire and the church's place in it?

Nicaea sough to negotiate a way through these questions. Those whom history has generally lumped under the title of Arians[16] argued that such was God's difference to the world that incarnation was not possible (arguably an attempt to protect sovereignty through difference and distance). Others claimed that incarnation was possible, either because God's real sovereignty was found in Christ's crucifixion and kenotic life (a real challenge to emperors who sought to represent God's sovereignty) or because, even with incarnation, God's sovereignty was protected by the nature, authority and work of the Father. What must be remembered is that there were political implications in each option.

The Nicene Creed adopted the third position. Thus, there is protection of incarnation and sovereignty. But despite the ongoing reading of the Gospels, the credal silence on the story of Jesus' life helped ensure that his life and teachings would not disrupt the church's place in empire. The Nicene Creed narrowed the meaning of Jesus. By stressing the sovereignty of the Father the Creed leaves open space for hierarchy and patriarchy.

It could be argued that the issue of Jesus' life and teaching was not in dispute and was not the contentious issue for the church at that stage. While that may be so, the problem for us in a settler-colonial space is that we are invited to confess faith in terms of a creed that ignores the foundation for a discipleship that is different to citizenship, allows space for co-operation with empire, and offers no resources for resistance.

As has been suggested already, the early church was located on the fringes against empire. The confession that "Jesus is Lord" was a confession against the claims of Roman Emperors. In moving to a less fraught relationship with empire the church was able to confess Jesus as Lord, but also acknowledge the emperor's lordship. As both Moltmann and Rieger write, the role of the emperor was traditionally understood to be to ensure worships of the gods who would bring peace, prosperity and order.[17] This role was being assented to by the church, with the implicit claim that the emperor was acting on behalf of the God known in Jesus Christ. This practice of recognition of sovereignty expressed in power said what was meant in the Creed or, at least, was able to be offered while saying the creed.

[16] See Rowan Williams for an account of Arius and those who were said to carry his views, and also an account of Nicaea. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. Revised Edition (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

[17] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 322. Rieger says that Constantine followed a theological logic in which God rules everything, and so the power of both spiritual and political areas of life has its origin in God. "On the Homoousia": 263.

Where and how the church located itself in society becomes the key to interpreting what it said and left unsaid. The Creed opened the way for the church to affirm empire and colonial power in its practices and social-political location. It said that it believed that the God revealed in Jesus could be represented by empire, and the lordship of the emperor could be a representation of the lordship of God.

The church could question how the state expressed God's providence, but it could not question its place in that providence. Thus, power and control, rather than the liberation and equality of the kingdom could be seen as marks of God's providence. Daily relationships could not be lived in anticipation of eschatological promise. Eschatology could only be seen as a future promise.

As Rowan Willias says, the Creed raises questions about "the interaction of theology and models of power" that are inescapable.[18] The Creed is not entirely to blame, but it did leave open the space for the church to be too closely related to empire, and to equate the power of that empire with the power and sovereignty of God. This has meant that the tradition of the church – our tradition – has supported colonial expansion, invasion, slavery, gender discrimination, and an imperial form of mission. All with the intention of making people Christian and ordering the world.

Receiving the Creed in a settler-colonial space

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that the Nicaean Creed was responsible for enabling the church to shift to a more public identity in a less fraught relationship or, later, offering an understanding of God that would bless colonial expansion, invasion, slavery, and the imposition of European order on other peoples.

My issue is that, by what it said and by what it left unsaid – e.g., about Jesus – it left a space open for the church to defend its decisions to explore identity and relevance alongside empire. There is nothing about the way God's true nature is revealed in Jesus Christ that would help guide a more just and inclusive understanding of what it meant to love neighbour as self, to condemn racism, and to insist on the equality of all people.

Maybe it is unfair to ask the Creed to do that, given the challenge before it. But when faithfulness and unity are tested against a Creed of this kind, rather than against the practice of discipleship, it is difficult to simply confess the Creed without clarification.

There is a strong tradition in the Methodist community – which is integral to the life of the Uniting Church – that theological statements need to be received by the people in ways that contribute to their life and faith in their place. We see this in the 1986 Report of its conversations with the Roman Catholic Church.[19] In a parallel way, I believe this is what happened in the time between Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople in 381CE. There was a need to say something more about the Spirit, to affirm the Trinity, and to offer marks of the Church. There was an ongoing reception process.

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[18] Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 266.

[19] Methodist World Council in Report of the Joint Commission Between the Roman Catholic Church and World Methodist Council, *Towards a Statement of the Church* (1982-1986. Fourth Series, Lake Janaluska, NC: World Methodist Council), 20.

If we want to confess faith in terms of the Nicaean Creed, and there are good reasons in terms of ecumenical relationships to do that, we need to consider two things. First we need to very self-consciously consider how our practices around for example, providence and empire, shape our confession of the Creed. We need to seriously consider how our social-political location shapes what the Creed means for us, and how it both affirms and challenges that location and identity.

It matters who says words. For example, it matters whether the central confession of church, "Jesus is Lord", is said against empire, with empire, or by a church that has become empire. Reception should help us see who we are who makes this confession, and whose interest are protected by that confession. Words forged to protect or support freedom can, when people gain control, take on very different meanings.

The other reason why reception matters is because it highlights the tension between ecumenism and the universal, and the local and particular. Too often, I would suggest, the need for the universal has overwhelmed the particular, especially when the universal is imposed by the most powerful.

We cannot keep pretending that states and political powers can truly enact the providence of a kenotic, cruciform God. We need to be clearer about when the stories of the society are not our own and spell out the boundaries of our story.

We need to reclaim our location as an expression of our particular identity. We need to be able to read and act from the margins where God is. The church needs to understand that the decent, middle-class God does not make occasional forays to the margins, a visit to people God can take back to "civilisation" and a freedom determined by others. God is not the one who represents the definitions, stories and values of the centre on trips to the margins but is truly marginal.[20] It needs to be from that place that the church confesses and makes sense of its creeds.

The claim that our task is to contribute to the common good is a wonderful social liberal claim.[21] But it is founded on a fallacy. It ignores the inconvenient reality that there is no common good. Society is not a structural-functionalists dream of a society bound by shared interests and commonality. Society is a conflicted place because its centre is a political-economy in which people seek to negotiate a place in the face of unequal power.[22] We need to choose where we will be in that situation and whose "good" we support. That location will shape our seeing of the world and of biblical text and tradition; and it will shape what we think are the practices that express following of Jesus.

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[20] Yin-An Chen, *Toward a Micro-Political Theology: A Dialogue Between Michel Foucault and Liberation Theologies* (Pickwick Publications, 2022), 105. Chen is drawing on the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (SCM, 2004).

[21] I acknowledge that the idea of the "common good" is both deeply contested and varies across cultures. There are conceptions of the common good that are quite different to that experienced and defended in a society like Australia. My critique is centred on the dominant Australian conception and its defence in such documents as the Uniting Church's 1977 "Statement to the Nation". See Rob Bod and Geoff Thompson, eds, *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Uniting Church Press, 2008), 617-618.

[22] For an account of structural-functionalism and other sociologies see, for example, Bruce J. Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*. Edited by Norman K. Gottwald (Orbis Books, 1983).

The goal is not simply agreement about words, even very significant words about God. The goal is solidarity in discipleship in order to express together love of God and neighbour in particular contexts. That is, there is a need to prioritise practice and the local and particular.

This is the reception challenge in settler-colonial society where the terms of national settlement, reconciliation and covenant shape relationships within the UCA. The reception process needs to answer questions such as: how does the church understand the human struggle in the settler-colonial context, and how does this shape its confession of the triune God and the good news? How does the church's location shape the way it understands providence and where it is expressed? How does the way we are located in settler-colonial society offer a different reading of the Creed and what it suggests about God's providence?

We need to ask what else needs to be said that will help form a people better able to embody the counter-cultural life of Jesus and the Kingdom. So, alongside the task of finding liberative possibilities in the Creed, which I will leave to others, there is the question of what needs to be added to the Creed to allow it to be received in a way that enables the church to pursue just relationships – right love of neighbour – in this context.

Let me suggest a couple things that need to be explored further in this reception process.

First, the heart of my concern, as I have said already, is that the Creed leaves space for an understanding of the providence of God that relies on empire and power for its enactment in the world and, possibly, a quite narrow sense of the providence of God.

The UCA Preamble offers the foundation for an understanding of God's providence that is much more generous, and which gives more weight to creation. The Preamble assumes God's providence in creation and Jesus Christ, and in God's mediated presence rather than in absence represented by power. If the church in Australia is to forge identity and relevance, and if it is to centre relationships with First Peoples and the need for genuine reconciliation it will need to help people read the Creed not as an affirmation of God's hierarchical and patriarchal power, but of Trinity and suffering.

Second, there is a need to reframe our confessions as statements of loyalty and commitment, and not simply belief, and to keep reflecting on the way they point to ethical discernment in each particular situation. Creeds should draw us into renewed ways of acknowledging and responding to God who loves and desires us.

Third, we need to say more about Jesus. It is important to affirm his unity with the Father, the incarnation, his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. But that misses what attracted people to Jesus – his embodiment of God's life among them and his preaching of the immanence of God's kingdom and new covenant communities of resistance. It is to miss the way his teaching shapes the nature of discipleship, and how Christians stand opposed to empire. It misses what Jesus says about his central teaching – love of God and neighbour – and thus does not help people understand how what they do is no longer love of God or neighbour. We need to recognise that God's eschatological future can be anticipated by people who seek to live out the kingdom.

Fourth, we need a more confessional creed, one that owns the church's co-operation with settler-colonial invasion and dispossession, and names First Peoples more explicitly as fully human, knowing God, and offering wisdom to the church.

Conclusion

Creeds are part of the formation that goes on in worship. They offer the grammar of faith and help shape the theological imagination that suggests the nature of discipleship. They reflect and challenge the way the church has negotiated identity, location and relevance, particularly in relationship to empire. My argument is that the Nicene Creed has allowed a church seeking relationships with power and colonial expansion the ability to do that while making confessions of Christian orthodoxy.

To build more just relationships in this country, relationships that truly express Jesus' vision of the kingdom and presence of God, and love of God and neighbour, we need to both help people re-read the Creed and find its potential for more faithful living. And we need to go through the hard work of telling the additional story that makes it more difficult for the church to act in ways that betray its identity as a community in Christ.

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Creeds and Confessions: Reformed, Evangelical and … Redundant?

Glen O'Brien

Abstract

The Uniting Church has often described itself as an "Evangelical" and "Reformed" church and in its Basis of Union (BOU), it commits itself to careful study of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. It also recognises four particular Reformed and Presbyterian confessions, understood as "witnesses," and pledges to "listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty–Four Sermons." At the same time, it also "enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry" and expresses a desire to "learn to sharpen its understanding … by contact with contemporary thought." These good intentions may be seen as in tension to some extent, since such creeds and confessions are more in the nature of historical theology than "contemporary thought." Are these source documents, therefore, now simply redundant? If not, how are they to be appropriated today in ways that lead to "fresh words and deeds" in contexts very far removed from their original use and purpose?

Introduction

In this 1700th anniversary year of the Council of Nicaea a great deal of attention has been given to the theology of the Nicene Creed, the history that lies behind its formation, and its subsequent impact upon the church. While much of this has been scholarly and considered, in the democratic world of social media where everybody is an expert on any topic upon which they comment, a good deal of it has been negative and dismissive. Take as just one example the following Facebook comment. "I think of the Nicene Creed as a corrupt dumbing down of an original high wisdom, a political distortion of faith in service to imperial stability and security, a neutering of the profound messianic vision of the Gospels, co–opting the church into the alliance of throne and altar."[1] This is not an unusual point of view, but it raises questions in my mind about the extent to which the theological depth and genius of the Nicene Creed is being overlooked. It is worth noting that the critique touched not at all upon the actual content of the Creed but only made a comment on its supposed use.

Paragraph 2 of the BOU recalls "the Ecumenical Councils of the early centuries [and] looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated, and the Church's unity expressed, in similar Councils."[2] Then paragraph 9 declares:

[1] Facebook user's comment (author's identity removed by me) to John Squires' Facebook page accessed 23 August 2025 https://www.facebook.com/john.t.squires.
[2] *The BOU 1992 edition* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992), #2.

> The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by its use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith. The Uniting Church commits its ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age. It commends to ministers and congregations their use for instruction in the faith, and their use in worship as acts of allegiance to the Holy Trinity.[3]

If the Nicene Creed is, in the language of the BOU, an authoritative statement of the catholic faith which ministers and congregations are to carefully study and use in the worship of God, it seems rather cavalier to dismiss it as no more than an imperial tool of oppression. To what extent may we expect to sharpen our understanding by entering into contemporary thought (an absolutely essential task) without also entering into the inheritance of theological enquiry, that is, without engaging seriously with historical theology? The best contemporary theology arises out of critical and constructive engagement with the historic explorations of the faith, and not from ignorance of them.

The Reformation Witnesses

In addition to the two historic Creeds, the UCA also affirms (BOU, #10) a number of Reformation witnesses – The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and The Savoy Declaration (1658). Moreover, in the same paragraph: "In like manner the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty–Four Sermons (1793)."[4] There is a slight awkwardness here because John Wesley was not among the Reformers and his eighteenth-century theology, though it emerged out of a culturally Protestant milieu, took a turn toward "the person" that gave birth to Evangelicalism as a movement that stressed religious experience over doctrinal orthodoxy. Though Wesley was certainly a cultural Protestant he was a *particular kind* of Protestant. His emphasis on the congruence of divine and human action, his insistence that repentance and good works prior to conversion were acceptable to God, as well as his rejection of unconditional election means that the shape of his theology is in some respects more akin to something like the Council of Trent than to Luther or Calvin. I will consider Wesley momentarily but first I will briefly consider each of the Reformation witnesses referred to in the BOU.

The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)

The Scots Confession is one of the foundational documents of The Church of Scotland.[5] Primarily the work of John Knox, it was officially the work of a committee of six men (all coincidentally named John) and is a

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[3] BOU #9.

[4] BOU, #10. The date of 1793 seems odd. There were several editions of Wesley's sermons published during his lifetime beginning from 1746 but in the Model Deed of 1763, the 44 'Standard Sermons' were declared to be authoritative standard for Methodist preaching. Wesley died in 1791. Might it be that '1793' is a typographical error and that '1763' is the intended date?

[5] "The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)," in Michael Owen, ed. *Witness of Faith: Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1984), 55–79.

summation of the theology of another man named John – John Calvin.[6] It functioned to establish the Reformed faith as the theological foundation of the state church in Scotland. Parliament approved the confession in 1560 against the wishes of the devout Catholic queen, Mary Stuart. It was approved after her overthrow in 1567, by James VI. Only thirteen months old at the time, the young James later became James I of England.

The Confession makes a very large claim for itself when it states that it contains "wholesome and sound doctrine grounded upon the infallible truth of God's Word."[7] The first of the "Subordinate Standards" in The Church of Scotland, it also appears among the doctrinal standards of a number of Presbyterian denominations and remains part of Scottish law through the Ratification Act of 1560. It is somewhat overshadowed by the Westminster Confession which would replace it in August 1647.

The Scottish church is seen as in continuity with God's people extending back to Adam and Eve, so that it is in continuity with the salvation history outlined in Scripture.[8]

> So, if the interpretation, determination, or opinion of any theologian, kirk, or council, is contrary to the plain Word of God written in any other passage of Scripture, it is most certain that this is not the true understanding and meaning of the Holy Ghost, supposing that councils, realms, and nations have approved and received it. We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or yet to the rule of love.[9]

It is interesting to note here that an interpretation may be deemed unacceptable if it is shown to be "contrary … to the law of love," a hermeneutical approach that has a particularly current ring to it.

Ch. 22 on The Right Administration of the Sacraments states that, "This is why we flee the society of the Papistical kirk and participation in its sacraments; first because their ministers are no ministers of Christ Jesus, indeed (which is more horrible), they allow women, whom the Holy Ghost will not allow to preach in the congregation, to baptize."[10] The Catholic doctrine of the Mass, "we utterly abhor, detest, and renounce as blasphemous to Christ Jesus."[11] This kind of language is now, of course, problematic, especially in light of the UCA's ecumenical partnerships and the significant achievements in ecumenism that took place particularly during the twentieth century.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The Heidelberg Catechism, as its name suggests, emerged out of the German Palatinate as a summation of the Reformed faith in the form of questions and answers.[12] Most of the German princes were, of course,

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6 The others beside Knox were John Winram, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, John Douglas, and John Owen, *Witness of Faith*, 58–59.

7 "The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)," 63.

8 "Ch. V The Continuance, Increase, and Preservation of the Kirk," "Ch. XVI Of the Kirk", and "Ch. XVIII The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall Be Determined From The False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine." The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 65, 70–72.

9 "Ch. XVIII The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall Be Determined From The False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine," The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 71–72.

10 "Ch. 22 Of The Right Administration of the Sacraments," The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 75.

11 "Ch. 22 Of The Right Administration of the Sacraments," The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 75.

12 "The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)", in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, 81–109.

Lutheran but Frederick III (though officially Lutheran) personally adopted the Reformed faith and lent his weight to the support of the Catechism. seeking to unite both Lutherans and Calvinists while keeping Catholics and Anabaptists at arm's length.

Though the Catechism credits the entire theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg for its authorship, its principle authors are thought to have been Zacharius Ursinus (1534–1583) and Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587). Perhaps its chief value is that it brings together into a single document, a number of distinct strands in the larger Reformed tradition – The Calvinist tradition of Geneva, the Zurich Reformation under Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, and the Lutheran tradition particularly as expressed by its developments under Philip Melanchthon (the so–called "Phillipists").

The Heidelberg Catechism is part of the official doctrinal basis of the Dutch Reformed Church and the many Reformed and Presbyterian denominations that have sprung from its influence around the world. The Westminster Assembly of Divines would use the Heidelberg Catechism as the basis for their own "Shorter Catechism." Designed to be learned over the space of 52 "Lord's Days," it begins very personally:

> Question 1 What is your only comfort in life and in death?
> Answer That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully paid for all my sins and redeemed me from all the power of the Devil; and keeps me so safe that without the will of my Father in Heaven, not a hair can fall from my head: indeed, all things must minister to my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of everlasting life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready to love from now on for Him.[13]

It soon takes on darker tones, however with its declaration under the heading "Of Man's Misery" that, "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour."[14] God is not willing to "allow such disobedience and defection to go unpunished" but "is terribly angry with both inherited and actual sins and wills to punish them out of righteous judgement in time and in eternity."[15]

Christ is then set forth as the only Mediator able to meet the demands of God's justice by in his death bearing "the burden of God's wrath" so as to "win for us and restore to us righteousness and life."[16] This focus on retributory justice and penal substitution is unlikely to receive a warm reception in today's Uniting Church though there are probably still some places where it is set out in the form of popular evangelical songs, and unreflective sermons.

The theology of the sacraments is set forth including an explanation of how the Lord's Supper differs from the Roman Catholic Mass describing the latter as "fundamentally nothing other than a denial of the sole sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and an accursed idolatry."[17] The Christian Reformed Church's

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[13] "Question 1 and Question 2," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 87. The capitalisation of the male personal pronoun in reference to God is retained from the text as it appears in Owen, though such use is now, of course archaic.
[14] "The First Part: Of Man's Misery," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 87.
[15] "The First Part: Of Man's Misery," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 88.
[16] "The Second Part: Of Man's Redemption, "Question 16 and Question 17," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 89.
[17] "Of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ," Question and Answer 80, The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 99

2006 Synod took the view that such a statement, "can no longer be held in its current form as part of our confession." It now remains in the text of the Heidelberg Catechism but with the last three paragraphs placed in brackets "to indicate that they do not accurately reflect the official teaching and practice of today's Roman Catholic Church and are no longer confessionally binding on members of the CRC."[18] Such caveats could readily be issued by the UCA for many of the statements made in the Reformed Confessions, not only because they may not reflect contemporary Catholic theology, but also because they no longer express our own operative theology. This presents an obvious challenge in light of paragraph 10's insistence that ministers and instructors study these statements for the instruction of congregations.[19]

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

The Westminster Confession was the result of an attempt by theologians within the English Parliament (the "Westminster Assembly of Divines") to reshape the Church of England along more Reformed lines. The Assembly carried out its work between 1643 and 1653 and, though its reform agenda was not (at least in the long term) successful in the Church of England, the Confession it produced was adopted by the Church of Scotland as a "subordinate standard" and also became the basis for the 1658 Savoy Declaration of English Congregationalists and subsequently by many Presbyterian and Reformed denominations.

The world emerging from the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I was going to require a new kind of Church of England, finally purged of the "rags of popery", and the Westminster Divines were engaged in the work of preparing for the building of that new Church. It did not simply reject The Thirty–Nine Articles, however, but built upon them to produce a thoroughgoing Calvinist statement of faith, in dialogue with continental Calvinism, but also drawing upon Patristic and medieval sources, particularly the Augustinian tradition within pre–Reformation Britain.

Its thirty–three chapters set out a comprehensive statement of Reformed theology in which the sovereignty and majesty of God are contrasted with human depravity and weakness in order more sharply to highlight the priority of divine grace. The style of its language is weighty, solemn, and at times quite moving, even if at times also terrifying. We are told, for example, in chapter 3, that:

> By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated [sic] unto everlasting life, and others fore–ordained to everlasting death . . . God hath appointed the elect unto glory . . . the rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.[20]

[18] "Heidelberg Catechism", *Christian Reformed Church*, accessed 9 October 2025. https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg–catechism.
[19] BOU #10.
[20] "Ch III Of God's Eternal Decree," The Westminster Confession (1649) in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, 125–26.

Other statements that might give Uniting Church people pause today include that the Pope is the Antichrist, the Catholic Mass is idolatry and that heretics should be punished by the state.[21]

The Savoy Declaration (1658)

The Savoy Declaration was drawn up by a group of Independents and Congregationalists meeting at the Savoy Hospital in October 1658 seeking self–governing congregations entirely free from any state church. Such luminaries as Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) and John Owen (1616–1683) were among the six theologians who gathered. Most of its chapters are identical to the Westminster Confession. Essentially it affirmed the earlier confession's Calvinist and Covenantal theology with a little tweaking and added a few of its own views, particularly on church government. Though it adds little to the earlier Reformed source documents referred to in the BOU, it well served the purpose of representing the Congregational partner in the 1977 union.

Michael Owen has pointed out how "the relatively relaxed and largely functional approach of the BOU to the Scriptures, the ancient creeds, certain Reformation confession and the sermons of John Wesley," is grounded in the conviction that Christ rules the church without necessary dependence on the church's preaching and teaching.[22] What the church proclaims is always a response to what Christ is doing in the world, never simply a reiteration of creeds and confessions. Such earlier confessions remain worthy of study, as indicators of the church's response to God at given points in history but they are not understood to have captured definitive theological insights from which it would not be possible to diverge.

John Wesley's Standard Sermons

Clearly, sermons are quite a different mode of discourse to creeds and confessions. Wesley's sermons were certainly not cited chapter and verse the way Presbyterians might cite certain chapters of the Westminster Confession to demonstrate a doctrinal point. Perhaps this is why the Basis only asks us to "listen to the preaching of John Wesley." After all, it doesn't cost much to listen. Unofficially at least, Charles Wesley's hymns were at least as determinative in shaping Methodist belief and practice. There was little attempt to police doctrine in Australian Methodist pulpits. There was never anything among Methodists like the prolonged Presbyterian accusation of heresy laid upon Samuel Angus, which dragged on from 1932 to 1943, though in the early twentieth century there could be spirited debates at Conference between revivalists like William Fitchett and liberal evangelicals like Edward Sugden. Generally, Methodists were more tolerant of theological diversity on a pragmatic basis (they were busy doing other things than debating theology). Congregationalists for their part had a long heritage of intellectual enquiry in the tradition of English Dissent. It was left to the Presbyterians with a history of adherence to confessional standards to be somewhat more protective of orthodoxy.

There is a neat encapsulation of the value of all of this historic material in para 10's insistence that "ministers and instructors [are] to study these statements, so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and

[21] "Ch. XXIII Of the Civil Magistrate," "Ch. XXV Of the Church," and "Ch. XXIX Of the Lord's Supper" respectively, The Westminster Confession (1649), 154–55, 157–58, 162–64.

[22] Michael Owen, *Back to Basics: Studies on the BOU of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1996), 169–70.

again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture."[23] Though such convictions, justification by grace through faith, the centrality of Christ, and the authority of Scripture, are not *unique* to Protestantism they are certainly *characteristic* of it and these themes remain constitutive of the UCA's Protestant identity notwithstanding its broad catholicity.

The Status of Wesleyan Theology in the UCA

My admittedly anecdotal impression is that when the Uniting Church wants to undertake serious theological work it appeals to its Reformed heritage. Its appeal to Methodism is usually in the context of social justice or (albeit very rarely) any discussion of evangelism. It does not seem to be an instinct to think of Wesleyan theology as a resource for serious theological work in the Uniting Church. A number of reasons for this occur to me.

First, the discovery that John Wesley's theology could be taken seriously and that Wesley himself might be considered an important and competent theologian seemed to pass Australian Methodism by. The renaissance in Wesley studies that took place in the mid–twentieth century due to the work of pioneers such as Frank Baker and Albert Outler occurred mostly in the northern hemisphere and particularly in the United States. Australian Methodists engaged with John Wesley in a totemic way, inscribing his image on their teapots, stained glass windows, commemorative plates and letterheads, but there was little by way of deep engagement with his thought. There were exceptions of course. Colin Williams, Professor of Theology at Queens College, University of Melbourne in his *John Wesley's Theology for Today* identified the elements of what later came to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as early as 1960, before Albert Outler did so, though Outler invariably gets the credit for it.[24] Important Methodist theologians such as Norman Young and Robert Gribben undertook their doctoral studies overseas in contexts more warmly engaged with Wesleyan theology as a serious form of theological discourse then was the case in Australia. Undoubtedly, such people enriched the Uniting Church, but they did not choose Wesleyan theology as the focus of their work. On the other hand, the dominance of Barthian thought in mid-century theological academies, which undoubtedly found its way into the *BOU*, was a juggernaut in comparison.

Some have (wrongly) identified Methodism with the virulent anti-modernism of groups such as the recently disbanded Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC) as though that particular kind of obscurantism were the ongoing influence of Methodist revivalism. In my limited engagement with the ACC, the dominant voices seemed to me to be almost entirely Reformed. On one occasion it was suggested by one delegate at an ACC Conference that rather than formulate their own doctrinal statement, they should simply adopt the Westminster Confession. Some point to the presence of a more vibrant Evangelicalism in the South Australian Synod (in both its geographical and non–geographical Presbyteries) as evidence of ongoing Methodist impact there. This overlooks the fact that there were always both revivalist and non–revivalist forms of Methodism in South Australia as everywhere else. Evangelical and liberal expressions of the faith co–existed in Methodism just as they did in the other precedent bodies.

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[23] BOU #10.
[24] Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: Epworth, 1960), 23–38.

Then too, any appeal at all to Methodism, Presbyterianism or Congregationalism can be seen as a backward step and a nostalgic hearkening back to the way things used to be. Thankfully we now have a generation of people who grew up in the Uniting Church and have no special allegiance to any of the precedent bodies. The time is long overdue for Uniting and United churches to develop their own particular voice which, without disregarding the gains from the past, give serious consideration to the results of their own ecumenical achievements and how that work now informs constructive theological work. Having said, that surely a great deal has been lost when Uniting Church candidates for the ministry might have a single one–hour lecture on John Wesley and Methodism and that is the sum total of their engagement with Wesleyan discourse.

Elsewhere, I have described Wesleyan theology as "an attempt to give a systematic exposition to a prior experience of grace received as transformative love. It is an affectional theology of experience grounded in the divine actions of preparing, pardoning, and perfecting. On the human level, this arises out of an encounter with divine presence that issues in both reflection upon and yielding of the heart to the reality of Jesus Christ, leading to reconciliation and transformation."[25] From this I have proposed a modest reframing of three key terms in Wesleyan theology, substituting prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace with the alternative terms, "gestating, birthing, and nurturing grace."[26] If the Reformed confessions take as their starting point, the eternal decree of a predestining God as the key to overcoming human intransigence, the Wesleyan tradition begins with the loving intention of the God of love toward all people. This involves a teleological energy that looks forward to the perfection of humanity along with all creation in which the faith filled with the energy of love that believers now experience is a foretaste of the new creation. I do not highlight these features in order to pit the Wesleyan against the Reformed tradition (we have had enough of that over the centuries) but to give just one example of how distinctively Wesleyan theological insights could serve as a resource for Uniting Church theology if we gave it more air to breathe.

Wesleyan theology has never fit neatly into the mode of systematic theology. The European tradition of "dogmatics" reflects the Enlightenment project with the desire to classify, catalogue, and quantify theology into a consistent architectural edifice. This had its roots, of course, in the medieval tradition of Aquinas and others. John Wesley's theology was more like the Patristic writers and the work of Martin Luther in its pastoral orientation and in the variety of forms it took – letters, memoir, sermons, polemical pieces, biblical commentary, and occasional treatises on a variety of subjects. Foremost interpreters of Wesley's theology have included Randy Maddox and Kenneth J. Collins whose work has significantly extended down to our present time the mid–twentieth century rediscovery of Wesley as a serious theologian.[27] The late Thomas C. Oden took Wesley's writings and attempted to shape them as though Wesley had written a systematic theology, with somewhat mixed results. The work itself was very good, but the arrangement somewhat artificial.[28] Efforts to treat Wesley's theology as if it were (or could be made into) an internally

[25] This section of the paper is dependent upon Glen O'Brien, "Gestating, Birthing, and Nurturing Grace: Reframing Wesleyan Systematics," in *Sanctifying Theology: At the Intersections of Wesleyan Theology, Dogmatics, and Practice*, edited by Jacob Lett and Jonathan M. Platter (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023), 21–36.
[26] O'Brien, "Gestating, Birthing, and Nurturing Grace," 25–34.
[27] Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), along with numerous other monographs; Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).
[28] Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*. 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012–2014).

consistent system face the problem of the messiness of it all. In spite of Wesley's insistence that he never changed his mind about anything, he did, in fact, do so over his long and tumultuous career. Historical theologians need to take this into account and any attempt to reconstruct Wesley's theology as though it were an architectural project along the lines of Aquinas's *Summa* or Calvin's *Institutes* is doomed to flounder on the rocks of the source material's innate inconsistencies. It seems not to occur to some Wesleyan theologians that Wesley may have made some errors or been wrong in some of his conclusions. The late William Abraham, of blessed memory, argued that we should stop speaking of Wesley as a systematic theologian altogether but see him instead an ascetic theologian and a saint.[29]

There has been a welcome trend in recent decades for Wesleyan theologians to take a more relational approach to theological work, especially in the discussion of the doctrine of sanctification. Some of this work has built on the trend toward social Trinitarianism a well as in dialogue with Process thought.[30] Explicitly stating that her work was not an attempt at "a British Methodist systematic theology," Angela Shier–Jones grounded her *Work in Progress*, not in John Wesley's theology but in the lived experience, decisions and statements of the British Methodist people, thus underscoring the communal and experiential foundations of the Wesleyan theological enterprise.[31] Tom Greggs has situated theological method in the believer's sanctification as he aims for "a non–competitive and non–prohibitive systematicity" grounded in the God who "lives in dynamic and superabundant relationality."[32] Filipe Maia, Jeorg Reiger, Upolu Lumā Vaai and others have most recently developed Wesleyan theology in a decolonising direction, highlighting its liberative potential.[33] This contemporary Wesleyan discourse is something that the UCA could not only benefit from but also contribute to. After all, when a Methodist denomination enters successfully into a Uniting or United church it is not so much experiencing its own demise as fulfilling its own calling to ecumenism. In 2018, the World Methodist Council (WMC) reported 80 member churches, around 15% (13) of which were Uniting or United churches. The presence of such churches within the WMC is a living reminder of their ongoing value for the global Methodist communion. They stand ready to make a significant contribution to the Wesleyan theological discourse that sustains that community.

The Function and Limitations of Creeds and Confessions

In considering now the function and limitations of creeds and confessions, it is important first to distinguish between them. A creed differs from a confession in that it has broad ecumenical agreement and purports to express dogmatic claims intended to be embraced by all Christians. Confessions on the other hand are more limited in scope, more parochial. Even if they often make global statements meant to be embraced as propositional truths for all times and places, they are usually closely associated with particular historic developments and the exigencies of history. They are, in effect, saying, "This is what we confess at this

[29] William J. Abraham, "The End of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 7–25.
[30] Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord, eds. *Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2001).
[31] Angela Shier–Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (London: Epworth, 2015), 11–12.
[32] Tom Greggs, "On the Nature, Task, and Method of Theology: A Very Methodist Account," *Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 3 (July 2018): 309 [309–334].
[33] Filipe Maia, ed. *Decolonizing Wesleyan Theology: Theological Engagements from the Underside of Methodism. Wesleyan and Methodist Explorations* (Eugene: Cascade, 2024); Jeorg Reiger and Upolu Lumā Vaai, eds. *Methodist Revolutions: Evangelical Engagements of Church and World* (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2022); David W. Scott and Filipe Maia, *Methodism and American Empire: Reflections on Decolonizing the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2024).

point in time in this context." What the Westminster Divines confessed was not intended as a creed that would be binding on all Christians everywhere in all times and in all places. It was intended, rather, as a draft confession for the reconstituted seventeenth–century Church of England patterned on the Reformed model, a vision which as it turned out was never achieved for the Anglican tradition but was successfully adapted in Scottish Presbyterianism and in Presbyterian and Reformed churches in Britain and the United States. It is essentially a confession of Reformed Christians not a creed for the entire church.

Then we must consider the relationship between creeds, confessions, and Scripture. The privileged place given to Scripture in the Protestant tradition means that confessions must always perform a subordinate function. Indeed, in the Presbyterian tradition the Westminster Confession and other confessions are often referred to as "subordinate standards" with Scripture being seen as the sole rule of faith and practise. Reformed churches such as the Church of Scotland are happy for ministers to subscribe to Scripture alone as a sole source of authority. Other churches in the "wee free" tradition insist further that subscription to the Westminster Confession or other Reformed confession must also take place if ministers are to be seen as in good standing.

If, as is now generally consented to, Scripture itself is a collection of writings subject to contextual factors, a variety of authorship, a multiplicity of theological messages and claims brought together over the exigencies of time, how much more must creeds and confessions also be accompanied by such caveats and limitations. It would be particularly odd for any Protestant tradition to cling jot and tittle to a particular confession as though it alone faithfully distilled scriptural teaching. If sixteenth–century Protestants were convinced that popes and councils may err, should not the heirs of seventeenth–century and eighteenth–century Protestants in the Uniting Church also understand that the Westminster Divines or John Wesley may also have erred? This does not in any way render their work of no value. It merely recognises but there is a contingency about such human efforts to distil divine truth. Augustine expressed it so well in the following maxim. "When the question is asked, what three? human language labours altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given, "Three persons", not that it might be [completely] spoken but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken."[34] What we speak must always be limited and the apophatic tradition reminds us never to claim too much for what we think we know about God. At the same time, we are compelled by the Gospel to be a speaking people, to bear witness to Christ.

Holding Together the Inheritance of Faith with Fresh Words and Deeds

Paragraph 11 of the BOU expresses the Uniting Church's commitment to scholarship, and its intention to "enter into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries." It seeks "an informed faith" through "contact with contemporary thought" so that it may be ready "to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds."[35] These good intentions may be seen as in tension to some extent with an accompanying commitment to a study of the Reformed Confessions and the sermons of John Wesley, since these are more in the nature of historical theology than "contemporary thought."

[34] St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5: 9–10, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post–Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1952–1956), cited in H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 211.
[35] BOU #11.

Are these source documents, therefore, now simply redundant? If not, how are they to be appropriated today in ways that lead to "fresh words and deeds" in contexts very far removed from their original use and purpose? How is the tension between historical theology and living witness to be resolved? These questions require some attention to Paragraph 11 of the *Basis*.

The inclusion of Paragraph 11 was prompted in part by Maynard Davies, a Congregationalist member of the Joint Commission who, in 1968 expressed the need for the new church to show that it was "involved through Christ in the modern world, yet would not discard our heritage."[36] Geoff Thompson has argued that the intent of Paragraph 11 was not to encourage scholarship that employed the kind of "tradition–free neutral reason which undergirded the intellectual foundation of the modern university." Nor was it intended to lead to the "abandonment of any orthodox account of the faith." It aims instead for Christian scholarship which "sustains, nurtures, develops and freshly articulates the classic claims of Christianity [across] a wide range of contemporary literary, historical and scientific enquiry." Christian scholarship does not involve gathering together experts who tell us things but scholars who help create a culture of intellectual enquiry, reflection, and action in the service of the Gospel.[37]

In order to hold historic statements and "fresh words and deeds" together, it is important, first, to recognise the value of creeds and confessions, but not to consider them a second canon alongside Scripture. For Protestants who still wish to hold on to the problematic and outdated *sola scriptura* principle (Scripture is never truly 'alone'), they can only ever be subordinate standards, limited by time and circumstance (as indeed is the Bible itself).[38] As for Catholic and Orthodox perspectives, even if a particular creed such as the Nicene Creed might be given special status it can never be understood in itself to contain all that is meant by an appeal to "Scripture and Tradition."

Second, we should see creeds and confessions as opening up to new readings, highlighting their liberative potential in new contexts. Davis McCaughey helpfully used the analogy of a map, which is a reliable guide on a journey but is not the journey itself and will need to be supplemented by historic changes to the contour of the landscape over which we travel.[39] We are not by any stretch of the imagination attempting the kind of task the Westminster Divines were attempting as they sought to reshape the Church of England. At the same time, we can recognise with them that the chief end of humanity is the enjoyment of God. As for the idea that the Pope is the Antichrist, or that the Catholic Mass is idolatry or that heretics should be punished by the state, these we may leave in the dustbin of history where they belong. The temporary blind spots that assailed the elect at a given historical juncture should no longer keep us from recognising Christ in our Catholic siblings or grace in the Catholic sacraments.

Third, we understand that those documents selected for inclusion in the BOU were selected for purposes that suited the three uniting churches at the time they were chosen. They are situated in their time, place, and context. The

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[36] Cited in Geoff Thompson, "The Church's Ministry of Scholarship: Its Basis and Foundation," in *An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, edited by William W. Emilsen (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2014), 72–73 (69–86).

[37] Thompson, "The Church's Ministry of Scholarship," 74–75

[38] For a discussion of John Wesley's approach to Scripture for a Uniting Church context see Glen O'Brien, "John Wesley, the Uniting Church, and the Authority of Scripture," *Pacifica* 27 (June 2014): 170–83.

[39] J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), 51.

Heidelberg Catechism and Westminster Confession were obvious choices for Presbyterians. The Savoy Confession satisfied Congregationalists, and no Methodist (certainly no Methodist minister) was going to set aside Wesley's Standard Sermons. The Creeds and Confessions that are formally recognised in the BOU were not intended, however, to be a cul-de-sac. The founders were not saying, "Here we stand!" Paragraph 11 makes this clear in its gratitude to God "for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr."[40]

The really puzzling thing is why it took so long before the 17th Assembly in 2024, adopted the Continuing Witness process. The Belhar Confession, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and *Laudato si'* are now formally recognised by the Uniting Church as documents of "Continuing Witness" and study materials have been prepared for the use of presbyteries and congregations.[41] The work of the Task Force on Continuing Witness will likely turn out to be as determinative an expression of the UCA's identity as has been our Covenant with Congress, our identification as a multicultural church, and our ability to live with difference over sexuality. This will especially be the case if the Continuing Witness process manages to succeed in its intention to become an ongoing pattern of life in our church. Hearing, receiving, studying, and living from witnesses that originate beyond our own interconnected councils keep us from an unhealthy focus on our own internal ecology so that we can breathe the fresh air of a larger reality.

Conclusion

The Creeds, Confessions, and Standard Sermons identified in the BOU can be understood as "Evangelical", not in the narrow sense that the word has tragically come to convey, but in the classic sense of setting forth the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ.[42] They are "Reformed", not as a synonym for "Five Point Calvinist" (since they include the so–called "Arminian" doctrines of John Wesley), but in the sense that they exhibit the key themes of grace so important to the Protestant Reformers, especially as they were given a new and creative iteration by Karl Barth and others in the twentieth century. They are only "Redundant" when they are left embedded fossil–like in the rock strata laid down in 1977. Like all theological statements, they are limited by their context, by the human weakness of their authors, and by their linkage to a European theological tradition that has now become woven into a far more diverse global patchwork of living faith. They are neither to be slavishly adhered to nor surreptitiously set aside. Ongoing engagement with them enables us both to know, assess, discriminate among, and build upon the ideas they elucidate so that we can be a church that is Evangelical and Reformed, but also Ecumenical.

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[40] BOU, #11.

[41] "Continuing Witness," *Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*, accessed 9 October 2025. https://uniting.church/continuing–witness–resources/

[42] The late Ian Breward provided a helpful portrait of Evangelicalism in the Uniting Church in a chapter entitled, "Evangelical Christianity," in William W. Emilsen, ed. *An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2014), 297–310.

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).

Imagining Creedal Authority in the Changed Ecumenical Landscape of the 21st Century

Katalina Tahaafe-Williams

Abstract

This article queries the Creeds' continuing significance as a means of unity with the whole church, whether in the UCA, its ecumenical partners, or the WCC and the ecumenical movement. By tracking through credal history and contemporary utility, the paper reflects on the Creeds' capacity as a uniting influence amidst twenty-first century challenges and realities. The point is made that the God-centred nature of the classical creeds is a significant and powerful challenge to the pervasive anthropocentricity of the contemporary landscape.

Its Basis of Union states that the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) receives the two classic ecumenical creeds, i.e. the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, and as a means of unity with the whole church.[1] Clearly, the UCA's founding document recognises credal authority, and the creeds' significance as an ecumenical instrument for church unity. A unity that speaks both to the function of the creeds as the common ecumenical formulation summarising the essential elements of the Faith, as well as the biblical and Christological imperative for oneness.

The Creeds and Unity

Undeniably, the Christian imperative for unity permeates the apostolic writings and articulated as a fundamental characteristic of the nature and mission of the church. Of course, there was at the time no conscious and intentional effort at formalising a systematic ecclesiology, given that Christ's church was a socio-communal reality before any formal doctrine of the church.

Grounded in the unity of the Holy Trinity: One God, One Lord, One Holy Spirit and One Communion among them, the credal call to church unity was thus a God-given gift that was essentially a presupposed reality grafted on to the Christian DNA, while simultaneously a goal yet to be realised in history and therefore aspirational.

It is aspirational for, while, as Christians we confess in the Nicene Creed that the church is 'one holy catholic and apostolic', throughout the church's 2000 years history there has been this perpetual tension between the church's commitment to oneness as articulated in the creed, and the historical reality of the church's

[1] BOU #9.

tendency to schisms. Indeed, from the closing of the apostolic age and throughout the patristic period, the process for formulating credal statements exposed credal differences that significantly contributed to those church divisions.

Church historians largely acknowledge that the Apostles' Creed is both the best known and the least known of the two classic ecumenical creeds. This is because while it is the most widely utilised creed by Christians, especially in regular worship for many denominations and specifically at baptisms, its origins remain a mystery to this day. A most captivating story had apparently circulated in the early church that after the Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost, Peter said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty" and Andrew added, "and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord." And so, they went around the 12 disciples in that upper room, uttering a dozen sentences that formed the Apostles' Creed! What a lovely story if it was true! What is true, however, is that the apostolic teachings are embedded in its threefold structure and within its 12 brief statements.[2]

On the other hand, the origins of the Nicene Creed (325 CE)[3], and its successor, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE)[4], are widely documented. Both are explicitly Trinitarian in structure and conceptuality, and both contain several of the lines found in the Apostles' Creed, but they are longer and more detailed. Having superseded the 325 Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 (now commonly known as the Nicene Creed) is generally held to be the most widely confessed statement about the Triune God in the Christian church.

From Credal Unity to Disunity

As mentioned above, the development of the creeds was crucial in the move toward achieving a doctrinal consensus within the early church, but it was also the cause of deep theological disagreements between factions in the Greek-speaking eastern church and the Latin-speaking western church. This even extended to lifelong struggles for specific individual patristic figures, Athanasius being one famous example, for to arrive at a common affirmation also meant excluding anything judged to be outside the bounds (i.e. heretical) of the apostolic faith.

Athanasius' fight was a stupendous effort described by one writer as "60 years of theological wrangling over not just a word but a letter"[5] in which he maintained that Christ is *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father against the Arian view of Christ being *homoiosios* (of similar substance) with the Father.[6] Athanasius' tenacity, including multiple forced exiles, finally led to a consensus at the 2nd Ecumenical Council in Constantinople 381CE, to condemn Arius and formally and permanently put Arianism out of the church.[7]

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[2] ESV Bible with Creeds, "Creeds and Confessions 101," adapted., *Crossway,* 8 Feb 2020, accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.crossway.org/articles/creeds-and-confessions-101

[3] The 1st Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.

[4] Due to significant additions made at the 2nd Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381 CE.

[5] Stephen J. Nichols, "The Nicene Creed and the Importance of a Single Letter" in *For us and For our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church,* adapted., Crossway, 16 May 2016, accessed August 20,n 2025, https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-nicene-creed-and-the-importance-of-a-single-letter/

[6] Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Volume I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979),283.

[7] Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 293.

Cyprian of Carthage (modern Algeria) is another early father who looms large in the historic narrative, for his absolute commitment to church unity. Known as the leading figure and prominent theologian in the church in 3rd century western north Africa, Cyprian rejected any kind of church schism as ever justifiable under any circumstances. Practically this meant that schismatic ministers and bishops were deemed as lapsed and therefore unsuitable and disqualified from continuing to carry out their office and administering the sacraments.

Under circumstances of persecution bishops who succumbed to the pressure were considered *traditores* (traitors)[8] for submitting their copies of the Scriptures, and some even giving up the faith altogether. But the status of the church was radically transformed with the advent of the Emperor Constantine, under whose reign the church was no longer persecuted in the Roman empire. This meant that the *traditore* bishops who repented assumed their former positions and roles.

To the native African church leader Donatus (hence the *Donatist* controversy) and his largely native African followers this was unacceptable. For them such leaders were tainted and only those who remained steadfast under persecution should be in church leadership positions. The Donatists' opposition, who were mainly from the Roman settler-colonial membership of the African church, argued that since these bishops had repented and were restored to grace, they should therefore be allowed to carry out their office.

Inevitably Donatus was compelled to lead a breakaway group from the African church. According to historical accounts, the breakaway native church grew rapidly and became far bigger than the original colonial church from which it broke away. This was the situation faced by Augustine when he was consecrated as Bishop of Hippo in 395CE.

Like Cyprian, Augustine was equally committed to church unity and as passionate in condemning church schisms. He ultimately resolved the Donatist controversy within Cyprian's terms by judging that while *lapsed church leaders* and *church schism* were both sinful, schism was by far the more serious sin. The Donatists' position was thus deemed heretical on the basis that they committed the sin of church schism. The irony of course was that the Donatist schism was a violation of a Cyprian principle for the sake of upholding another Cyprian principle.

Interestingly, each of these two early controversies, which contributed greatly to church disunity, emerged out of the eastern and the western churches respectively. This, albeit inadvertently, foreshadowed the growing tension and increasing alienation between the church in the East, based at Constantinople (modern Istanbul), and the church in the West based at Rome.

In addition to the above controversies were several political and theological reasons which accounted for this growing division, including the escalating power and dominance of the Roman See, and the deep disagreement over the *filioque* clause being added to the Nicene Creed by the Western Church. Basically, the western church insisted on referring to the Holy Spirit as proceeding from both the Father and the Son, much to the alarm of the eastern church, concerned about the theological implications of the clause and about interference with what was supposed to be the inviolable creed.

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[8] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 395.

Indeed, while periodically ecumenical councils such as Nicaea (325 CE), Constantinople (381 CE), Ephesus (431 CE) and Chalcedon (451, CE) (plus three more within the next three centuries) were convened to settle these significant differences, unresolved debates such as the *filioque* disagreement (which has remained fundamentally unresolved to date) eventually culminated in the great schism of the 11th century. Since then, no ecumenical council of the 'undivided church' has ever convened.

From the European Reformation to the Modern Ecumenical Movement

Martin Luther's challenge against the Roman Church in the 16th century led to the seismic disruption known as the European (Protestant) Reformation. A key point of dispute between Luther and the other Reformers on the one hand, and the Roman Catholics on the other, was the interpretation of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. Luther's Catholic opponents accused him of fostering disruption to the unity of the church and therefore of being a schismatic which Augustine also condemned.

Here we see again the irony reminiscent of the Donatist experience, with Luther facing the dilemma of either upholding Augustine's doctrine of grace or upholding Augustine's doctrine of the church. It was one or the other, but he could not have both. How ironic that we are, here at this conference, literally discussing the Reformers' choice as members of a particular church in the 21st century, reflecting on credal authority and church unity. It is equally ironic to imagine the improbability of the UCA had the reformers chosen unity with, rather than schism from, the church in Rome.

Recognising that a divided church/Christianity is counter-witness not only to the credal confession to be one, but also to Christ's will and prayer that his church may be one (John17:21) had led to the birth of the modern ecumenical movement at the 1910 global mission conference in Edinburgh. With the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a leading instrument, this modern movement seeks to transform a church history of division to a movement towards unity.

Integral to the development of the modern ecumenical movement is the evolution of the meaning and understanding of ecumenism over these 1700 years of credal history. When ecumenical councils gathered during the patristic period as representative bodies of the yet undivided eastern and western churches, ecumenism was understood as a consensus of the *oikumene*, of the universal church, of what was assumed to be the known world then.

Since the Reformation however, ecumenism has come to be understood as the movement concerned with the pursuit of church and Christian unity. This understanding was affirmed by the WCC Central Committee in the lead up to the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the WCC in 1961[9] and has informed and guided WCC's work and programmes ever since.

As an ecumenical council the WCC Basis states that:

[9] 'Integration' that meant mutual responsibility between the commitment to the visible unity of the church and the mission of the church

> the WCC is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek together to fulfil their calling to the glory of the one God Father Son and Holy Spirit.[10]

There is obviously credal commitment embedded in the WCC's Basis, but there is also no mistaking the plurality of churches as seen in the existence of a multitude of denominations active in the global ecumenical movement. These include the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Orthodox among the membership of the WCC, excepting the Roman Catholics[11]. The burning query at this point is what church unity means when the church is so clearly disunited at the institutional level. And that is before we even mention the cascading fragmentation within such breakaway bodies, characterised as liberal, radical, conservative, evangelical, pentecostal and charismatics, let alone the various ideological differences between the *neos*, the *posts* and the *isms*.

To be sure, since its inauguration in 1948 the WCC has led to more ecumenical convergence, collaborations, agreements, and joint initiatives across denominational and other boundaries. Further, the Roman Catholic's official entry to the ecumenical movement after Vatican II, has also contributed to more ecumenical collaborations. Notably, under the leadership of Pope Francis close collaborations between the WCC and the Vatican have become especially strong and visible. Additionally, the inauguration of the Global Christian Forum in 2007, an initiative of the WCC, had brought together representatives from almost all Christian traditions. This has been a very encouraging ecumenical development which greatly contributed to the wider participation of world Christianity at the 2010 Edinburgh centenary celebration than would have been conceivable a century earlier.

Unfortunately, however, the division in Christ's church still runs painfully and deeply. While groups such as the *Lausanne Movement*[12] seems to be growing more open to collaboration with the WCC and other liberal ecumenical and mission agencies, the vision of organic unity is ever more remote.

Given that the classic credal vision of 'one church' seem unable to hold sway in institutional terms and faced with the stark reality of the disconnect between a theoretical belief in 'one church' and rampant church splits, contemporary ecumenists and missiologists have had to develop approaches to church unity which can speak to this situation authentically.

This involved recovering the true basis of the unity and oneness of the church that was pervasive in the apostolic period – that being the Lord Jesus Christ himself. As was famously declared by Ignatius of Antioch in the first century, "where Christ is there is also the catholic church" (*ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia)*. Put another way, the oneness of the church is grounded not in any organisation or institution but in a common commitment to Jesus Christ and his good news.

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[10] Adopted at its Inaugural Assembly in Amsterdam 1948 and amended at the 1961 Delhi Assembly

[11] To be clear, the ecumenical movement is distinct from the WCC and the WCC is not the ecumenical movement but an instrument of it. They are not to be used interchangeably. While the Roman Catholics are active in the ecumenical movement, as a denomination it has yet to join the WCC as a member church.

[12] Formed by conservative evangelical mission bodies in objection to the integration of the IMC and the WCC in 1961

Unity and the Credal Marks of the Church

Affirming this understanding and approach to church unity and oneness the WCC Faith and Order Commission has restated the Nicene classical marks of the church (i.e. one, holy, catholic and apostolic) as attributes that not only flow from but also illustrate the church's dependence on God.[13]

To say that the church is *one* is a statement of the unity of the church in the one creator redeemer God "who binds the church to himself by Word and Spirit and makes it a foretaste and instrument for the redemption of all creation.[14] The ecumenical movement's understanding and active commitment to church/Christian unity embedded in its conception of *oikoumene* as the household of God and of the WCC as *koinonia* or fellowship of churches, presuppose the gathering of Christians of different confessions, nations, races, ethnicities, political, social and economic backgrounds. That is, the ecumenical assumption is that churches do bring their differences with them to the movement and the commitment to oneness and the pursuit of unity are not based on an illusion that differences can be overcome by pretending they do not exist. Indeed, from its inception at Pentecost, Christ's Church was a model of unity in diversity. It is notable also that the Patristic Fathers at the frontlines of formulating the Catholic Faith's credal statements were from diverse backgrounds.

A God-centred reframing of church unity, therefore, is not a mandate for uniformity and sameness but rather presupposes a diversity of ecclesial formations where "specific languages, histories, customs, and traditions need not be denied" but affirmed.[15] In short, being one in Christ is a "lavish celebration of the communion of the different" rooted in the love of God.[16] On the basis of this understanding of oneness then, not even rampant denominationalism can compromise the unity of the church.

Further, implicit in the ecumenical vision of church unity embedded in its conception of *oikoumene* as the household of God, with its etymological connections to ecology (i.e. the underlying logic of household) and economy (i.e. the rules for housekeeping), is the commitment to ensuring and promoting the well-being of the environment. This commitment has informed ecumenical discourse and actions since the 1960s and is captured most powerfully in the ecumenical call for 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation' adopted at the 1983 Vancouver Assembly. Integral to this ecumenical call and formula (which has shaped WCC programmes in successive decades) is the concern to address relational dynamics at the interface of economic inequalities, human violence in its various forms, the inevitable ideological tensions around human subjectivities, and the associated environmental damages and injustices.

The WCC's New Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism adopted at the 2013 Busan Assembly articulates this commitment as a call to move beyond narrow human-centric approaches to mission and unity and instead prioritise efforts that reflect our interconnections to all created life. [17]

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[13] WCC Faith & Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Paper 198 (Geneva: WCC, 2005), A.12.
[14] Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church,* A12.
[15] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 411.
[16] D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), 270.
[17] WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, *Together Towards Life, TTL 19* (Geneva: WCC Publications), 9.

Recent Pacific theological engagements with *oikumene* as household, such as Upolu Vaai's notion of eco-relational *aiga* (*kainga* in Tongan meaning extended family/ relatives), firmly position the *oikos* triplets of ecology, economy and *oikoumene as* equal and mutual members of the *aiga* extended household.[18] Promoting this pervasive Pacific Indigenous worldview in which the interconnectedness of all life is normative, *aiga oikoumene* resists the Euro-centric tendency to separate the *oikos* triplets, asserting that one without the other is meaningless. Fundamentally, a God-centred reframing of oneness resists any form of church unity that lacks serious commitment to the integrity of **all** creation.

To say that the church is *holy* is a statement about the holiness of the God who calls the church into being.[19] As such the church is a community set apart from the norms of the world to bear witness to the saving love of God in Christ. This means that the church reflects its holy character most meaningfully when it stands courageously for God's justice, working to transform systematic social injustices, and caring for the poor and marginalized.

The *catholicity* of the church was widely understood during the Reformation, in the words of fifth century writer Vincent Lérins, as "that which is believed everywhere, at all times, and by all people." In recent years the New Testament notion of catholicity which emphasised local ecclesial forms as embodying the universal church has reemerged. In contemporary ecumenical circles there is consensus that the church reflects its catholicity when it is a community "in which, in all ages, the Holy Spirit makes the believers participants in Christ's life and salvation, regardless of their sex, race or social location."[20]

In this God-centred unity, there is no confusing the church catholic with Roman Catholic, with orthodoxy, or even less with a type of Swiss political neutrality. Indeed, the church reflects its catholicity most profoundly when it is boldly and "paradoxically partisan" for the sake of affirming "the universality of the lordship of Christ."[21]

To say that the church is *apostolic* is to say that it is "a faithful community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth expressed in faith and life throughout the ages."[22] The ecumenical emphasis on the apostolicity of the church prioritises faithfulness to the gospel and continuing Christ's ministry in the world. In other words, the church reflects its apostolic character best when it is not, in the words of Bonhoeffer, in "cloistered isolation" but, rather, when it is being Christ's sent community.[23]

The Changed Ecumenical Landscape

Over its 77 year history the WCC through 11 General Assemblies has produced statements that revolve around this understanding of, and commitment to, church unity. At the same time, the WCC recognises that it lives and witnesses in a changed 21st century ecumenical landscape.

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[18] Upolu Vaai, "Faith and Culture" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity: Christianity in Oceania*, eds. Kenneth R. Ross, Todd M Johnson and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 236.
[19] Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, A12.
[20] Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church,* A12.
[21] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding,* 272.
[22] Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church,* A12.
[23] D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 118.

A global ecumenical landscape where Christianity has shifted demographically to the global south, Europe can no-longer claim to be the centre of the 'Faith', the notion of the 'Christian West' is fundamentally disputed as it is already well in the process of ex-culturation as opposed to inculturation, and advancing secularism is the normative mark of western culture wherever it finds a foothold.[24]

A changed ecumenical landscape where declining membership and resources in historical mainline churches have lasting impacts on maintaining ecumenical dialogues and relations, and the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic religiosity is reshaping the global Christian landscape;[25] where a genocide and ethnic cleansing are allowed to go unchecked right in front of our eyes; where so-called progress and economic development decimate God's beautiful creation, and the cost of climate change are unjustly borne by the most vulnerable and those with the least carbon footprints; where the so-called 'free market' is a euphemism for the economic hegemony of the oligarchy and billionaire class, including the big tech company owners; where the world seems to be sleepwalking right into the AI universe in which human de-skilling is normative even encouraged, in which AI development is devoid of any democratic processes and invasive control of people's personal data go unchecked. As if these issues were not concerning enough, AI requires unlimited essential resources such as water and land for its monolithic data centres, thus adding resource depletion to the list. In his 2013 *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis' concerns about this technology highlights its paradoxical capacity to provide multiple forms of pleasure and yet is incapable of engendering joy.[26]

In this changed ecumenical landscape, it is one thing for the WCC to produce statements on the global stage, but it is another to put such statements into practice on the ground.

The UCA and Credal Possibilities

This brings us to ecumenism and the call to church unity at the national and local levels. The UCA has, from the outset, taken seriously the call to unity enshrined in her Basis of Union. Being called 'uniting' as opposed to 'united' speaks to the UCA's commitment to a journey toward some form of organic unity. However, the UCA faces the same ecumenical challenges as her ecumenical partners, domestically and globally. Most domestic ecumenical instruments such as state ecumenical councils and national councils of churches are barely surviving. In addition to the changes already mentioned are diminishing volunteerism, the consequences of historical church abuse and failures, and burdensome legal compliance and health and safety requirements.

Currently, the UCA is in dialogue with the Lutherans, a dialogue that has been going for two decades. This has been quite helpful in sharing ministry ideas and other forms of collaboration, but organic unity is not on the agenda. Committed to the Basis of Union's call to continuing witness (BOU, #10) the UCA Assembly

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[24] Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, "Christianity in Oceania" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity: Christianity in Oceania*, eds. Kenneth R. Ross et al., Todd M Williams and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 19.

[25] Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, "The Future of Christianity in Oceania" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity: Christianity in Oceania*, eds. Kenneth R Ross, Todd M Williams and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 367.

[26] *Evangelii Gaudium, §7.*

recently adopted the Belhar Confession, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, and Laudato Si in that regard. [27] The ecumenical significance of this adoption remains to be seen.

Under these challenging realities and circumstances, it is still fair to say that the UCA's commitment to the call to unity enshrined in the creeds and her Basis of Union is not in question. Indeed, that commitment is evident throughout the global ecumenical movement and in the work and programmes of the WCC. Evidently, deep respect for apostolic traditions and credal authority are key drivers in the continuing ecumenical efforts at all levels to be faithful to Christ's call to unity regardless of this changed ecumenical landscape. Moreover, belief in the credal attributes of the church is still strong after 1700 years.

During a 2024 WCC conference at Bossey, Geneva, in preparation for the 2025 Nicaea 1700th anniversary celebrations, the WCC European Regional President Rev Dr Susan Durber said this:

> The deep concern at Nicaea to be faithful to the unity of God and to the unifying love of God is still a powerful and inspiring witness. Their grappling for language to speak of a unity that is rooted in the unity of God and of God's actions can still inspire us to deepen our own visions and recalibrate our own ecumenism.[28]

Amidst 21st century challenges and realities much noise has been made about the failures and flaws of the credal statements, the gaps and holes, the assumptions and exclusions, the biases and the silenced voices, and questions about justice, power, empire, colonialism, relevance and redundancy. The validity of these concerns is not in question, but while there is no space here to address them adequately, whether they constitute sufficient reasons for rewriting or reconstructing the classic creeds is another matter.

Certainly, in the face of all these concerns, and amidst these 21st century realities and changed ecumenical landscapes, it is entirely reasonable to ask of the creeds: who is the 'I' who says, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," and who is the 'we' who confess, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth"?

Similarly, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Confessions specific to a particular denomination give us hopeful pause. For there are no obstacles preventing concerned voices from articulating through the specific confessions what is seen as missing or gaps that need filling. Any contextual concerns and socio-political worries should be appropriately addressed through denominational confessions and affirmations of faith.

Still, there is something to be said about our unsustainable level of anthropocentricity that is reflected in every concern articulated and which permeates every 21st century reality and changed landscape outlined above. In a recent online discussion between a Baptist and Presbyterian on the topics of subjectivity and individualism, the term "expressive individualism" was used in reference to this overpowering human

[27] See "Continuing Witness," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, https://uniting.church/continuing-witness-resources/

[28] As quoted in Stephen G. Brown, "Towards Nicaea 2025: Exploring the Council's Ecumenical Significance Today," World Council of Churches, News, 8 Nov 2024, accessed 20 Aug 2025, https://www.oikoumene.org/news/international-conference-examines-significance-of-the-council-of-nicaea-for-the-ecumenical-movement-today

anthropocentric bent. The term basically encompasses the human tendency to think we are the centre of the universe and that our individual feelings are authoritative, and therefore, all institutions and all realities need to reconfigure around that.[29]

With the exception of Indigenous peoples, there is a general human inability to be mindful of all of God's creation, to understand or accept the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life in God's creation. This means that humans characteristically lack any conception of our place in relation to God, to one another, and to all other living things. It is not a stretch to then put forward the point that it is our intense preoccupation with the human "self," that it is our super level of anthropocentricity, that is at the root of all the concerning realities and divisions highlighted above.

The point is made that there is an urgent need for humans to reconfigure our notion of "self" and our relationship with God in the light of this.[30] Put another way, we need to find the ways that help us not to think less of ourselves, but to start thinking of ourselves less in order that we may find the space to learn our place in relation to God and find our place in relation to all other creatures.

It is suggested that our classic ecumenical creeds can help us. That is to say, as the creeds are preoccupied with God, first and foremost, they can teach us and show us a way of thinking about God and ourselves where everything flows, first of all, from who God is. That the creeds tilt us towards really focusing our minds upon the external that is God who ultimately determines who we are.[31]

We have already discussed the necessity of recovering our oneness in Christ as the true foundation of church unity and reframing our ecumenical aspirations in God-centred terms. It may be difficult to imagine the creeds carrying the weight of all that the church needs doctrinally amidst the contextual realities in which we find ourselves, but it is not impossible to imagine credal authority as a significant uniting influence and a means of unity with the whole church, if we take seriously the creeds' God-centred message.

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[29] Albert Mohler, *"Creeds and the Crisis of Christian Faithfulness: A Conversation with Carl Trueman,"* Thinking in Public @albertmohler.com, 7 Feb 2024, accessed 20 August 2025, https://albertmohler.com/2024/02/07/carl-trueman-3/
[30] Mohler, *"Creeds and the Crisis of Christian Faithfulness."*
[31] Mohler, *"Creeds and the Crisis of Christian Faithfulness."*

Transforming Communities: talanoa and food as catalysts

Jione Havea and Faa'imata (Mata) Havea Hiliau

Abstract:

A human community is a collective of diverse peoples from diverse backgrounds, with diverse experiences, interests, and commitments. 'Diverse' is the keyword here. Because of the intersecting diversities, every community – no matter how small – has the potential to irrupt and refresh itself. In church-speak, a community is a catalyst for *transforming* as the diverse people stretch out and touch one another's lives. In this regard, a community is (in itself) a catalyst for transforming. This is the first aspect of "transforming communities" (which is the theme for the 2025 Synod of NSW and ACT, in the Uniting Church in Australia). Transforming takes place internally. The second aspect relates to a key mission of the church, to enable transforming to take place in society (in which the church functions). The church (as institution) is the catalyst for transforming a community – beyond the church's horizons. In this essay we present *food* and *talanoa* (a native Pasifika practice and culture around story, telling, and conversing) as ingredients for creating environments in which transforming communities take root, and thrive.

"Transforming communities" is the theme for the 2025 Synod of NSW (New South Wales) and ACT (Australian Capital Territory) in the UCA (Uniting Church in Australia), the ecclesial body that we currently serve. To cut our proverbial long story short, the key contention in this article is that talanoa and food are catalysts that can create welcoming environments in which the Synod of NSW and ACT enable transforming communities.

Transforming communities

To our opening assertion, we add the following qualifications: First, we acknowledge that a community is a collective of diverse people from diverse backgrounds, with diverse experiences, interests, and commitments. 'Diverse' is the keyword here, and in the UCA and the cluster of islands now known as Australia, migration is one of the causes of cultural diversities. Migrants bring their home cultures into their new homes, and this contribute to the forming of multi-, poly-, inter-, cross- and trans-cultural communities.[1] *Migration* is one of the forming causes of cultural diversity, and *negotiation* is one of the transforming agents.

Second, because of the intersecting diversities and the negotiating demands, every community – no matter how small – has the potential to irrupt and refresh itself. In church-speak, a community is a catalyst for transforming as the diverse people stretch out and touch one another's lives. In this regard, a community

[1] See also Jione Havea, "Multi-, Poly-, Inter-culturality: Catalysts for Talanoa," *Insights online* https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/blog/multi-poly-inter-culturality-catalysts-for-talanoa/, Jan 09, 2025) and "Cross- and Trans-culturality: more Catalysts for talanoa" (https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/blog/cross-and-trans-culturality-more-catalysts-for-talanoa/, Feb 12, 2025)

(in itself) is a catalyst for transforming. This is the first aspect of what "transforming communities" means to us – transforming takes place internally, within all communities, as they are being formed.

Third, another aspect to "transforming communities" relates to a key mission of the church: the church is called to enable transforming to take place in a community. The church (as institution) is the catalyst for transforming a community – within and beyond the church's boundaries.

Fourth, from the living and transforming contexts of Pasifika, we present talanoa and food (in the following sections) as catalysts for creating environments in which transforming communities may take root, grow, and bear fruits. Food and talanoa are critical for preparing, establishing, "cooking," "feasting," and sharing formative relations, and relations warm and transform on the wings of reciprocity. A community that does not enable relations becomes individualistic and capitalistic; a community that does not encourage reciprocity cannot free itself from the transactional shackles of capitalist economies (see further the section on food).

Finally, we affirm that all human and church communities are made up of human-kind who live alongside Other-kinds (e.g., animals, plants, machines) and Earth. Actually, the human-kind depend upon Other-kinds and Earth. We will explain this affirmation in the section on talanoa, but we add here a caution: a community that fails to nurture healthy relations with Other-kinds and with Earth is self-centered and short-sighted. Such a community does not allow itself to be transforming – transforming in itself, and transforming in its presence in society.

Talanoa

The talanoa practice (something that we do) and culture (something that shapes who we are, and informs how we think and what we do) overlap so, like the chicken-and-egg riddle, we cannot say which one came first.[2] As a matter of introduction, we begin by explaining that the term "talanoa" has three registers:

i First, talanoa refers to *a story* (an account, or narrative). In native oral Pasifika circles, a story / talanoa is a weaving of several stories / talanoa. There is no isolated or unaffected story; every story /talanoa interweaves several stories.

ii Second, talanoa also refers to the *act of telling* (talking, presenting) a story. This act locates talanoa in the fluid arms of oratory. A story (talanoa) is told (talanoa) and retold (talanoa) for various purposes, from 'narrating an event' to 'dispelling mis- and dis-information' and 'setting the records straight'. Acts of telling and retelling are political; no telling / talanoa is innocent.

iii Third, talanoa also refers to the *event of conversing* (discussing) around *a story* and/or *a telling* of a story. Lurking behind this event is the question: who controls the story (talanoa) and/or the telling (talanoa)? In other words, who controls the narrative? This 'control' may be challenged through re-telling the same story to highlight other details, and in conversation with other folx; or through the telling of other stories, that preference alternative agendas.

[2] Lest we are mistaken, talanoa is not a methodology, as understood in academic circles, nor a concept or theme. Rather, talanoa is a native Pasifika practice and culture that interweaves what cultural critics reference as *orality* and *oratory*. In talanoa practice and culture the unscripted (unwritten, undecided), fluid, and fluctuating (some of the marks of orality) interweave with the spoken, contexted, and open-ended (some of the marks of oratory).

Talanoa refers to *all three at once*: story (as account), telling (as act), and conversing (as event). A story (talanoa) is dead if no one tells (talanoa) it; a telling (talanoa) tames the story (talanoa) if the teller does not make space for alternative understandings and for conversation (talanoa); and a conversation (talanoa) is adrift if it does not revisit the story (talanoa) and consider alternative talanoa (stories, tellings, conversations).

Theology as talanoa

Like talanoa, theology too revolves around stories, tellings, and conversations. And like in talanoa circles, theological reflections are set to enable and highlight – and in some cases to silence or control – some stories, tellings, and conversations.

Talanoa (story, telling, conversation) flows through all veins of life. Talanoa is in us (humans). We live with and around talanoa. We wake up with talanoa, we walk and work with and through talanoa, we eat (consume) talanoa, we breathe talanoa, we exhale talanoa, and we sleep with talanoa. And when we pass on, we die with talanoa.[3] We pass on, and so does talanoa – some talanoa die with us, and some pass on to the next generation. Talanoa flows in our veins.

Talanoa flows through all veins of life, and so does theology. Theology flows (or creeps) through all veins of life from the very distant and mysterious (e.g., God, skies, pleasures) to the very physical and indecent (e.g., earth, body, sexuality). To borrow from the Gospel of Thomas (saying 77): split a piece of wood, and there talanoa and theology greet you; lift up a stone, and you will find talanoa and theology. The point here is that theology and talanoa are everywhere, but this is not to say that talanoa and theology are in accord.

As a talanoa interweaves other talanoa, so does theology. Appealing to a current trend in critical theory: talanoa embodies intersectionality, and so does theology. Both talanoa and theology are inherently interested and political.

Talanoa is haunting and unending, and so is theology. Healthy theologies make room for restorying, for retelling, and for reopening conversations around matters of theology and of life. In these ways, theology too is ongoing and unending.[4]

The foregoing invites us to see that there is something for theologians and interpreters to learn from the native Pasifika practice and culture of talanoa. In this turn, appealing to the politics of contextual thinking, Pasifika (as context) has something to teach the christening theological enterprise (as provider of content). On that note, we return to the concern for Other-kinds and Earth indicated above.

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[3] We expect the same for Other-kinds – they have their talanoa, in their languages, and we expect that they could have a different opinion about us humans. We think that we control the narratives of life, but we have not learned to hear the talanoa of Other-kinds!

[4] For examples of the unending and haunting natures of theology, see Jione Havea (ed.), *Stirring Up Liberation Theologies: A Call for Release* (London: SCM, 2024) and Jione Havea (ed.), *Haunting Questions of Liberation Theology* (London: SCM, 2025).

Other-kinds

Sacred talanoa of creation teach us, as in the case of Genesis 1–2, that animals and plants were created before the humankind. The human community was formed and located in relation to, and in reliance upon, the animal and plant worlds.

In some of the Pasifika sacred talanoa, islands and islanders are created by animals. One of the sacred talanoa from the cluster of islands now known as Fiji, for example, names Degei – a snake god from a distant location[5] – as the creator of the islands and islanders. And several native Pasifika sacred talanoa name Tangaloa[6] – who comes in the form of a *kiu* bird in Tongan sacred stories – as the creator. In native Pasifika sacred talanoa, the humankind is one of the species of the animal world.

Sacred talanoa of creation (in the Bible and in Pasifika) also call attention to the energies of nature – wind, waves, storm, drought, light, darkness, and so forth. These energies too are among the Other-kinds that we encourage healthy relating with, and appropriate reciprocating alongside, by members of transforming human- and church-communities.

Earth

One of the Tongan sacred talanoa present the islands and islanders in relation to four interweaving bodies: sea (moana), (is)land, sky, and underground. This sacred talanoa starts with fire coming up from the *underground* (named Pulotu) through Moana (*sea*) to form an *island* named ʻAta (at the southern end of the Tonga group). This sacred talanoa opens by interweaving the underground (Pulotu), sea (Moana), and (is)land (ʻAta).

The creation of islanders brings the fourth body – sky – into this talanoa, through a bird, a plant, and a maggot (i.e., Other-kinds). Tangaloa (a *kiu* bird) came from the *sky* and discovered the island of ʻAta. Tangaloa dropped a seed onto the island, then flew away.

When Tangaloa returned to ʻAta, it discovered that a *maile* (a native vine) had grown from the seed. Tangaloa pecked the *maile* vine, and the plant fell down. Then Tangaloa flew away.

When Tangaloa again returned to ʻAta, a maggot had grown from the *maile*. Tangaloa pecked the maggot into two pieces – the top / head became Kohai (a female), and the bottom became Koau (a male). Tangaloa felt a crumb (read: leftover) in its beak and shook it off – the crumb became a third human, Momo (whose gender is not specified in the talanoa).

The talanoa continues, but at this point we celebrate how this sacred talanoa links islanders (and by extension, humans) to a maggot. In theological terms, humans are images of a maggot – who at the end will return to consume our dead bodies.

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[5] Ironically, land snakes are not indigenous to Fiji!
[6] In Niue, the name Tagaloa means rainbow.

We find the four earthly bodies in the Tongan sacred talanoa – land, sea, sky, and underground / deep – in the opening verses of the Bible:

> When God began to create the heavens (sky) and the earth
> The earth was then unformed and void
> but darkness was over the face of the deep (underground)
> and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters (sea). (Gen 1:1–2)

At the intersection of these sacred stories, we affirm that human and church communities are founded on Earth (sea, land, sky, underground) among Other-kinds. And we assert that being transforming communities requires care for and solidarity with Earth and Other-kinds.

Talanoa is transforming

In the section on food (below), we restory three gospel stories in the spirit of the practice and culture of talanoa. We do not pretend to say everything about the gospel stories, but we seek to show how talanoa-based readings of the gospel stories are transforming.

There are more to say about the gospel stories, and we invite readers to interrogate and engage our restorying of them on the basis of their own practices and cultures. We do not have the final say on the gospel stories, but we herein set the table for talanoa-informed and food-oriented engagements with them.

Food

There is a joke among Pasifika (for Pacific) natives that an event is not a "true" Pasifika event if food is not served.[7] Food is a crucial ingredient in the gathering of Pasifika communities. We gather with and around food, and in the process of *preparing*, *consuming*, and *redistributing* (leftover) food we also share talanoa (story, telling, conversing). In Pasifika circles, in the islands as well as in the diaspora, food and talanoa are vital for *forming*, and *transforming*, communities.

In Pasifika village events, and in significant family events like funerals and weddings, members of the community and relatives (*whānau, aiga, kāinga*) from other villages and islands (locally and overseas) bring food items for the event. The contributions are brought because of relations (bear in mind that extended family ties are strong in Pasifika), and in the spirit of reciprocity.

Put differently: a village or family had contributed to an earlier event / feast of ours, so when they do an event / feast, we reciprocate. The sharing of food – and of leftovers – is not just about hospitality. It is also about relationality and reciprocity, which are critical for what might be called "Pasifika economy."

[7] The second part of this joke is about how a "true" Pasifika feast includes corned beef (*pi supo, kapa pulu*) and KFC, and other non-native food items.

Pasifika economy

Food is a currency in the Pasifika economy. This economy is communal, relation-building, and reciprocal, rather than individualistic and transactional. The communal mindset is the basis for what Leslie Boseto (of Solomon Islands) called "wontok economy" – an economy that is based upon the relations between "wontok" (for "one talk" – people who communicate and share values, across village and island boundaries).[8] Wontok economy promotes and privileges relationships – in the past, in the present, and for the future – over against building profits and establishing monopolies. Wontok economy is about people, and food plays a crucial role in the co-existence of Pasifika people.[9]

In native Pasifika minds, *preparing* food is significant. Matagi Vilitama (of Niue) has developed a *umu* (lit. ground oven; read: kitchen) theology based on the critical role that cooking plays in Pasifika communities.[10] As people gather around the *umu* to prepare for a feast, they warm up old relationships and form new ones. In the process of *preparing* food people form and transform their relationships.

An essay by Tangikefataua Koloamatangi (of Tonga) reminded readers of the location of the *umu* / kitchen – it is at the back of the home (*toumui*). *Toumui* is not always neat and tidy. When the *umu* fires up, *toumui* is filled with smoke and mess. But this is the place from where people who are neat, tidy, and proper at the front of the home (*toumu'a*) are served and fed.[11] Like Koloamatangi, we see and affirm the important role that *umu* and *toumui* play in forming and transforming Pasifika families and church communities.[12]

One does not come empty-handed to a Pasifika event / feast, and most folx will not only bring their contribution but they also stay to help with the preparation, cooking, and serving of the food. There are lots of laughter around the *umu* at the *toumui*, because of the talanoa that folx share.

Moreover, people do not leave empty-handed from a Pasifika event / feast. They will take at least talanoa to munch over later, as well as some leftover food from the table. And whatever food is left at the *toumui* are distributed to those who contributed food items and those who helped with the *umu*.

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[8] Wontoks speak and act around shared relational values. See Leslie Boseto, "The Gospel of Economy from a Solomon Islands Perspective" in *Voices from the Margin: Reading the Bible in the Third World*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 179–84.

[9] For a reflection on Pasifika economy, see Jione Havea "Unsettling Economies: A Moana Account(ing)," in *Unsettling Theologies: Memory, Identity, and Place*, edited by Brian Kolia and Michael Mawson (Cham: Palgrave, 2024), 223–237. And for another reflection on food in Pasifika circles, see Jione Havea, "Food crises: Rereading Numbers 11 with and in Moana Worldviews," in *Food: How What We Eat Is Weaponized*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2025), 249–60.

[10] Matagi Jessop Vilitama, "*Fetuiaga Kerisiano*: Church as a Moving *Umu*," in *Theologies from the Pacific*, edited by Jione Havea (Cham: Palgrave, 2021), 103–115.

[11] Tangikefataua Koloamatangi, "*Ko e Punake mo 'e ne Ta'anga, pea mo e Folofola* (Composer, Composition, and the Canon)" in *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific*, edited by Jione Havea (Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 69–81.

[12] On kitchen-based thinking, see also Kathleen P. Rushton, "Whakawhanaungatanga (doing right relationship), Beyond a Failure of Nerve and Imagination," in *Theology as Threshold: Invitations from Aotearoa New Zealand*, edited by Jione Havea *et al.* (Lanham: Lexington /Fortress Academic, 2022), 57–70.

Feeding Four and Five Thousand

There are two feeding stories in the Gospel of Matthew: (1) the feeding of a crowd of "five thousand men, besides women and children" (Matt 14:21) with "five loaves of bread and two fish" (Matt 14:17), and (2) the feeding of a crowd of "four thousand men, besides women and children" (Matt 15:38) with "seven [loaves] and a few small fish" (Matt 15:34). Both stories emphasize the magical effect of Jesus's *words* (he gave thanks for the loaves and fish) and *touch* (he broke the bread, then gave to his disciples to distribute), which enabled a small amount of food to feed a huge crowd. And there were leftovers – twelve basketfuls of broken pieces in Matt 14, and seven basketfuls of broken pieces in Matt 15.

The story-world of both feeding talanoa vibrates in the power of Jesus to heal. As Jesus healed the sick with his *words* and *touch*, so did he "heal" the hunger of thousands of people with his *words* and *touch* over a few loaves and fish.

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In modern contexts where cost of living is so high, there is something encouraging about the possibility that a few food items can go a long way. A little could be shared, and there would be leftovers. This understanding gives hope for poor people who follow Jesus, because of his capacity to heal and provide. The poor do not have much, and they are broken, but their faith can help them feed and collect leftovers from the little that they have.

In the Pasifika context, these talanoa challenge our fixation on size and amount. *Big* and *lots* are sneaking into our relational and reciprocal cultures. Some of our people would not go to an event because they don't have, for example, mats, pigs, and yams to contribute. The Matthean feeding talanoa push back at the *big* and *lots* mindset, which reflect economies that are based on capital and wealth.

In Pasifika minds, everyone has something. No matter how small – like the loaves and fish in the Matthean stories – no one is empty-handed. Many do not have a pig or a mat to contribute, but they have something – like a piece of firewood, a mature coconut, one or a pair of strong hands (to help with cooking), the spirit of willingness to be present and to relate, and a few talanoa – which they can contribute to the *umu*. The Matthean stories affirm that no matter how small, everyone can contribute, participate, and share in family and village events.

The challenge for our people, both in the home-islands and in diaspora, is to *be sustainable* with the *small* and *few* that we have. Being sustainable requires what Tongans call *fakapotopoto* – being wise with what one has. The opposite of *fakapotopoto* is *fakavalevale* – being foolish and wasteful (*laiki*). The *big* and *lots* mindset makes people susceptible to *fakavalevale* and *laiki* behaviors – one of the upshots of capital and wealth. On the other hand, *fakapotopoto* intentionally makes space for relationality and reciprocity.

In the Matthean stories, we see *fakapotopoto* in the collecting of the leftovers. The broken bread and fish were not wasted (*laiki*) but, we imagine, collected for an evening snack! The Matthean stories therefore appeal to our Pasifika minds and context, in many ways.

Notwithstanding, the Matthean stories can also irritate families who are struggling to make ends meet – for example, among the homeless families in the cluster of islands now known as Australia (which functions according to the ticks and tricks of capitalism), and in war zones like those in Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, Ukraine, and yonder. There are no magic words or multiplying touch for their few morsels, and their families sleep hungry at night. Put differently, we affirm the obvious: the Matthean stories, like the fish in them, have bones!

A boy's (family's) contribution

Neither of the Matthean feeding stories could answer a critical question in the Pasifika food-economy: Who brought the loaves and fish? In both Matthean stories, the disciples gave the impression that the food were theirs.

There is another story of the feeding of a large crowd in the Gospel of John (6:1–14). This story is also about a crowd of people who followed Jesus because they were drawn by the signs that he performed e.g., healing the sick (6:2). The number of people is estimated at five thousand men (6:10), but there is no mention of women and children in the crowd,[13] as in the Matthean stories. Nonetheless, in the eyes of the Johannine story, it was "a great crowd" (6:5).

Upon seeing the great crowd, Jesus, as we expect of a native Pasifika elder, indicated that he wanted to feed them. He asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (6:5). Even though Jesus was testing Philip,[14] his question appeals to a capitalist form of economy: that bread / food are products that one could buy and sell. The transactional form of economy privileges those who have money. Philip's response is steeped in this economic mindset: he estimated that "it would take more than half a year's wages [Gk: two hundred denarii] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite" (6:7).

A different economic mindset emerges with Andrew's response: "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (6:9). Food is available. But obviously, it is not enough to feed such a great crowd. Andrew did not suggest that they buy more food, but he left the boy's food with Jesus. The story continued along the lines of the two stories in Matthew: Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, distributed the food, and after the crowd were satisfied the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers.

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Based on the understanding of Pasifika economy noted above, we offer the following readings: First, the critical question – Who brought the loaves and fish? This question is important in the Pasifika relational and reciprocal cultures. People need to know who contributed, so that they would relate and reciprocate later.[15]

[13] This oversight is significant given that, as John's talanoa goes on to reveal, the loaves and fish were taken from a boy.
[14] The next verse adds that this was a test, for Jesus already knew (and readers anticipate, if they have read the Matthean talanoa) what he was going to do.
[15] The question also draws attention to *toumui*, the place where the food was prepared, and not just the cooked food that Andrew took from the boy. Both aspects of this question inform the first and second readings that we propose.

Andrew identified but did not name the boy who brought the food. We assume that he was among the unnoticed women and children in the crowd.[16] In our Tongan minds, he was more than a "boy" – more importantly, he was a *foha* (son) or *tama* (child) that belonged to a family and community. He was not named, but with our Pasifika eyes we can see his family, especially his mother, who prepared the food for him. His family may have also been in the crowd, so the food that he carried (and taken by Andrew, whether by consent or by force – we do not know[17]) was not for him alone, but for his family.

Second, because we see this son's family, we also see other families in the crowd. We imagine that they too brought food, carried by their children, and upon being told to sit down, they would have taken their food out and ate along with the others. We respect the power of Jesus's words and touch, as part of God's transformative moments, but we also see families with their food, the leftovers from which would have helped fill the baskets that the disciples collected afterward.

Third, we also see families in the crowd that did not bring any food. Having food is about access to resources, and people do not have the same privileges. But in the wantok economy, *people who have* share with *people who do not have*. We therefore imagine that families who brought food would have invited and shared with less-privileged families who did not bring any food. In our native Pasifika ears, the twelve baskets of leftovers tell us that all in the crowd of 5,000+ had something to eat (compare to "have a bite" in Philip's response) and were satisfied.

Fourth, we wonder, what did the disciples do with the leftovers? We suggested above that the leftovers were saved for an evening snack. But for who's snack? Did they redistribute the leftovers to the great crowd? The Matthean and Johannine stories do not answer our questions, but they are the kinds of questions that arise in Pasifika relational and reciprocal cultures.

Finaly, speaking of relational and reciprocal cultures, what did Jesus and the disciples do to build the relationship, by reciprocating, with the unnamed son and his family? The Matthean and Johannine stories do not answer this question also. But in the world of talanoa, retelling (talanoa) the story (talanoa) and inviting critical conversation (talanoa) in ways that account for the unnamed son – as we have done above – is one way of building relationality and reciprocity.

So what?

We presented talanoa and food as catalysts for transforming communities. We here add that the call to be transforming communities is not limited to the NSW and ACT Synod. This call is critical for our contexts, which is marked by cultural diversities and suffocated by climate injustice.

Put sharply: Without engaging the practices and cultures of minoritized cultures, a community – church, public, academic, or otherwise – is not transforming enough. And without accounting for and acting on

[16] Women and children are often unnoticed and unnamed in the Bible.
[17] Andrew could be accused of doing what bullies do in schools – they take young kids' lunch.

behalf of the wellbeing of Other-kinds and of Earth, a community – church, public, academic, or otherwise – is not transforming enough.

We presented our talanoa as food for reflection and action. We have set the table. And we invite readers to bring their talanoa to the table. And let this feast (of talanoa and catalysts) continue!

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Faa'imata (Mata) Havea Hiliau is the 29th Moderator of the UCA Synod of NSW and ACT. She is a daughter of Pasifika and as Moderator she provides prophetic and pastoral leadership to the Synod. She is committed to First Nations' interests, and to the pursuit of justice for vulnerable and marginalized communities. She offers a prominent voice on drug policy reform and climate justice. Her preaching and storytelling encourage doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Sexuality, UAICC, Polity and the 10th Assembly: a personal statement

Dean Drayton

Introduction

The following reflection has been sparked by a claim by Chris Budden in a recent article in this journal about my actions as President during the meeting of the 10th Assembly in 2003.[1] The matter concerns whether I prevented the voice of the UAICC being properly heard in the discussions about sexuality and ministry. From my perspective, what transpired in the procedures in dispute requires a full appreciation of the Assembly's consensus approach to discernment and how that played out in this instance. I will also place my response to the specific claim in the context of my other actions as President–beyond the meeting–around these matters. I will draw on the recollections of others involved, my own daily journal and other ad hoc sources.

Certainly, the issue of sexuality and ministry was the dominant issue at the 10th Assembly. The issue had been coming to a head for some time. That it should have proved so divisive in the life of the church could not have been foreseen by those who oversaw the pathway into union of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). The debate was part of a much wider debate in society and in the global church. It presented the UCA with an important consideration – how might our polity deal with the contentious debate. How might it do so from the perspective of our plurality of cultures – and, in this instance, more precisely to the thinking to be found in the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress (UAICC).

The presenting issue

In his article, Budden states that the President closed the debate in such a way as to prevent the UAICC presenting its position, ignoring and disrespecting the covenant between the UCA and the UAICC. The key paragraph is as follows.

> The Melbourne Assembly in 2003 placed a significant strain on relationships with the Congress. One of the Assembly's central issues was whether gay and lesbian people could exercise leadership in the church. Congress withdrew from the meeting to discuss its position so that it could offer wisdom to the church. Towards the end of the debate Congress returned to the meeting and the Chairperson of Congress joined the line at the microphones to present their position. The Assembly President closed the debate and put the vote before Congress could present its position.

[1] The article in question is Chris Budden, "A Brief History of the Construction of the Preamble," *Uniting Church Studies,* 26. No 1, June 2024, p35-47. Budden during meeting of the 10th Assembly was supporting the UAICC.

> Congress members felt they had been ignored and completely disrespected. They believed there had been a breach of the covenant, and of the commitment not to make decisions they disagreed with. Outside the meeting leaders expressed the view that they might have to leave the UCA. Internally Congress had a serious conversation about whether they should continue in the Uniting Church or move towards being an independent church (italics added).[2]

Certainly, after the decision had been reached it was clear the Congress was dissatisfied that they had not a chance to make their position clear. The day after, the Chairperson of the Congress commented on this matter to the Assembly. He stated that while he had asked some questions, others in the Congress had not had a chance to speak, before the Assembly put the issue to the vote. He did not state that he was in the queue at the time discussion ended.

The issue of Sexuality

In July 1997 an Assembly Task Group on Sexuality had presented a report to the 8th Assembly in July 1997. After the 9th Assembly (2000) a series of conferences were held to explore the middle ground between those affirming the need for specific policies about sexuality and those opposed to such an approach. The last Assembly Standing Committee prior to the 10th Assembly had received a request from a group, Evangelical Members of the Uniting Church (EMU), that the matter of sexuality be clarified at the Assembly. A representative group was formed that included members of EMU, and produced a proposal that once again called the members of the Church to respect the different attitudes held about this matter.

Proposal 54, as it came to be called, was included in the papers sent to Assembly members before the Assembly. A few weeks before the Assembly, EMU members withdrew from this representative group, and disowned the proposal. Few members of the Assembly were aware that it was EMU's request that had given rise to this specific proposal regarding sexuality. Not surprisingly the contentious issue of sexuality quickly stimulated a wide range of proposals just prior to and at the start of the Assembly. On the third day of the Assembly, when the proposals were to be considered, members woke up to the morning headline in the *Melbourne Age* shouting 'Uniting Church to Ordain Gays' based on a quote from EMU. It was a highly charged atmosphere.

The Consensus Process

It is important to be aware that in 1994 the UCA had committed itself to a consensus building approach as the best way for the church to discern the will of God in a way that is consistent with its Christian character.[3] According to the Basis of Union, "the Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey his will in matters of oversight" (BOU, 15). It was a marked change from the debating approach used in previous Assemblies. The role of the President

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[2] Budden, "A Brief History," 37.

[3] The consensus approach is described in the "Manual for Meetings," Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, Uniting Church in Australia (Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 2018). Terence Corkin and Julia Kuhn Wallace describe the consensus decision making process more fully in *The Church Guide for Making Decisions Together* (Abingdon Press, 2017). Terence Corkin was the General Secretary at the 10th

is as a chairperson "presiding at meetings in a manner which assists the council to discern the will of God as far as possible in a way that meets the needs and purposes of the council and its members."[4]

Since the introduction of the consensus process nearly all the proposals considered by subsequent Assemblies have been passed by consensus or agreement. If there is no chance of consensus or agreement, a procedural question is asked as to whether a decision needs to be made and the matter is then decided by formal voting. If at least 75% agree, the decision-making process moves to resolution by formal voting procedures where a simple majority is sufficient to pass the proposal. That has rarely been necessary.

The consensus process has four stages to help facilitate decision making. They are described as follows:

1. Community Building. A great deal of time is spent building quality relationships and openness to shared faith and values through worship, fellowship and Bible study. These steps lay the foundation for community discernment.
2. The Information Stage. Each proposer speaks to their proposal and responds to questions for clarification.
3. The Deliberative Stage. In this stage the issues and options for changes are explored and attempts are made to build consensus. For this set of proposals, the members of the Assembly divided into community working groups of about ten people to assess each of the proposals. This assessment is given to a Facilitation Group that brings to the Assembly a proposal that best sums up the work of all of the community groups for the deliberation of the Assembly itself.
4. The Decision Stage. After the deliberative has progressed to the point where consensus has been reached, or the people still opposed are willing to stand aside, then the proposal is put for determination. The outcome is recorded as consensus or agreement. If no resolution by consensus or agreement is possible, the procedural question is asked. "That the Council needs to resolve the question now". If at least 75% agree, the decision-making process moves to resolution by formal voting procedures where a simple majority is sufficient to pass the proposal.

The Business Committee elected by the Assembly monitors the process, with the President chairing the Assembly meeting. The President's role is to keep reading the mind of the meeting to help facilitate decision-making. In the 10th Assembly this four-stage process took place over four days; from Monday 14th July to Thursday 17th July.

Congress participation in the Consensus Process in relation to Proposal 54/Resolution 84

Both the Information Stage 2 and the Deliberative Stage 3 took place on Monday afternoon. During Tuesday the Facilitation Committee considered the input from the community working groups. In a lunch time Business Committee meeting on the Tuesday, the Facilitation Committee indicated that most groups supported Proposal 54. The Decision Stage 4 began on Wednesday morning with the report of the Facilitation

[4] *Manual of Meetings.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 20.

Committee. The original Proposal 54 with some minor changes had become Proposal 84. The TV and print media were there.

I asked people to line up at two microphones on either side of the hall, alternating speakers from each queue. Each person was given 3 minutes to speak. There were long lines. As soon as I moved to focus on the core of the proposal, namely Section 1 on the faith of the Church, Sealin Garlett, the Chairperson of the UAICC asked to make a statement from the Congress. In it he declared:

> From the perspective of our own spirituality, our cultural heritage and Christian understandings, we do not believe that homosexual relationships and practices are right or Godly. We are unable to find in the Bible or in our own law any justification for homosexuality.
>
> We are therefore opposed to any decision of the Assembly or any other council of the church that condones such relationships or practices. We cannot agree with this standard of behaviour.
>
> For cultural reasons it is difficult for many of us even to discuss such matters in public and mixed gender settings. The debate the church is now conducting is one that is very difficult for us to participate in.[5]

Soon after this statement, the members of Congress retired from the Assembly to discuss this matter nearby. Later, during the session, the Rev Robert Johnson requested that some Assembly leaders meet with the UAICC. Meanwhile the consensus process continued. Every so often I would stop and ask for a showing of cards about the proposal. It was clear that an overwhelming number of the speakers were in favour of Proposal 84. Some speakers continued to state they would never agree to the proposal. By the end of the session on Wednesday morning, I had asked whether we were ready to move to the procedural proposal, "That the Assembly needs to resolve the question now". At that point the session was adjourned on the showing of cards.

The Business Committee met during lunch time and had a number of concerns. Was the UAICC 'in' or 'out' of the Assembly? The sexuality proposal was already taking a lot of Agenda time. The Business Committee recommended that if the procedural question was required and was passed, as was seeming likely, that the Proposal be moved *en bloc* to expedite the Agenda. That would mean John Mavor as the mover would be given the right of reply and the motion put for decision without further discussion. The next Business Committee would not be until lunch time on the Thursday. As it turned out the decision had been made by then.

After lunch on the Wednesday three people met with the UAICC. The Congress gave a report on this meeting during its UAICC report session on the Friday night:

> A meeting was held on that afternoon and an undertaking was given that Congress would have an opportunity to give voice to its views further in the discussion on the following day. We

[5] Uniting Church is Australia, Tenth Assembly Log, Wednesday 16th July, 2003 "Statement by the UAICC," delivered by Sealin Garlett DVD [Disk 2 (of 4) 00:6:20 – 00:9.00]

> also understood there would also be an opportunity for the outcomes of the discussions to be reported back to the Assembly.[6]

I have no record of receiving a report from the three-person committee. I telephoned two of these visitors to the UAICC while writing this article[7]. Each said independently that the Congress was divided in what it wanted to do and say, and did not have a particular statement. A few wanted to leave the Uniting Church, most wanted to stay. Neither could remember whether any undertakings were given with regard to reporting to the Assembly.

The Decision Stage continued the next day, Thursday, after morning tea. The procedural question as to whether a decision needed to be made was before the Assembly. I believed it vital that people be given as much opportunity as possible to make their point. Once more, people queued at the microphones to speak. At least two members of Congress spoke during the next forty-five minutes or so. I continued to check whether the Assembly wanted to keep discussing the procedural motion or move to a vote. There was at least one extension of time given. When this time was up, I sought approval to put the procedural question, a vote by ballot – "Does the Assembly require to resolve the question now?"

I have since checked with the then General Secretary of the Assembly, who was as per custom seated next to me, as to whether any members of the Congress were standing in the queues at the microphones when the extension of time the Assembly had given for discussion ended. He said that "he has no recollection of any member of Congress waiting to speak at the time of the decision to end discussion and would have been surprised if this would have been done."[8] It was a confusing time for the Congress to have rejoined the meeting that morning, only to have found that a procedural motion was being discussed.

All members of the Assembly were seated as the ballot for the procedural question was taken. After a few minutes a note was handed to me by the scrutineer – over 80% had voted for the need to make a decision, when a minimum 75% was needed.[9] We moved immediately to formal procedures. As recommended by the Business Committee, Proposal 84 was read, John Mavor gave his right of reply, and a ballot was taken. It was passed overwhelmingly. After the Business Committee at lunch time, I walked out to a media scrum. In passing Proposal 84 The Assembly had refused to change the regulations that it is the Presbytery which selects candidates and ordains. The Assembly had refused to adopt any proposals concerning the sexuality of applicants.

After the decision

There was also a proposal before the Assembly that, if a vote was taken then the decision should be referred to other Councils of the Church for their approval, a possibility under Clause 39 of the Constitution. After

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[6] *UCA – Main Assembly Catalogue:* U-1-1 Meetings of the Assembly, Box 25, File 6, 10th Assembly, 2003 ‹Statement by the UAICC in relation to the Church›s decision to ordain homosexual clergy›, Friday 18th July, 2003.

[7] Former President John Mavor, Tuesday 21st June, 2025, at 5:00pm, Rev Dr Jione Havea, Thursday 23rd June at 10:00 am, 2025.

[8] Email from Terence Corkin 20/7/2025

[9] Prior to the matter being discussed it seemed likely that we would have to come to this procedural motion to determine whether a decision should be made. It all depended upon the actual vote.

another hour or so of vigorous discussion, the vote to refer the decision to other Councils was put, but did not get a two-thirds majority. It had been a tumultuous day.

The next day (Friday), in the UAICC report to the Assembly, the chairperson Sealin Garlett shared how the Congress had found the process both confusing and disempowering.

> Apart from me asking several questions other Congress members were not given an opportunity to do so. The Assembly moved to put the issue to a vote and further discussion was prevented. This process has been both confusing and disempowering for us.[10]

The Congress members had returned to the Assembly meeting on Thursday morning to find a procedural motion was being discussed rather than the actual Proposal. Some Congress members did ask questions. There was no claim someone was in the queue waiting to speak when the procedural issue was put to the vote. And, then, in the move to formal voting there was no chance for the Congress or anyone else to make a statement. Sealin Garlett's statement correctly identifies that it is the Assembly that moved to put the issue to the vote. The President's role in the consensus process is to read what the Assembly is saying.

At 3:00pm on the Friday afternoon, aware of the UAICC's sense of disempowerment, I asked to meet with five or six leaders of the UAICC. I was told that in terms of Aboriginal Covenant Law this decision was wrong and left the UCA with a "fuzzy" gospel. I was told by one leader that the Congress was considering leaving the UCA. Others affirmed the Congress was part of the "body of Christ." In difficult matters such as this sort of issue, some pushed for more of a "campfire space" at the Assembly. One elder affirmed that the UCA was acting like a honey ant, with a big head, but very small eyes. I offered to bring a statement to the Assembly from the UAICC but there was no agreement as to what it would be. I offered to visit the Northern Territory and Queensland to sit with Aboriginal groups as soon as possible after the Assembly. It was clear the UAICC leaders had felt they were not listened to, were not used to the process, and felt disempowered.

That Friday night on the Assembly Agenda, the chair Sealin Garlett read a document called "Statement by the UAICC in relation the Church's decision to ordain homosexual clergy."

The UAICC made its position clear.

> Whilst part of the church insists there is one standard that says celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage, the acceptance of homosexual relationships seems to us to make the church have a double standard – a double standard that we find hard to accept….It appears to us that the empowerment of one group has been at the expense of disempowering the other. For the Congress, this simply reinforces our sense of marginality in the church and in the Australian society generally. We continue to be dominated by the values, economy and political power of western society….The UAICC refuses to accept that the ordination of people living in homosexual relationships is right.[11]

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[10] *UCA – Main Assembly Catalogue.*
[11] *UCA – Main Assembly Catalogue.*

There was one further shock with regard to Proposal 84. On the last day of the Assembly (Saturday), a proposal was put that Proposal 84 should be re-opened on the basis of new information from the UAICC. The claim from the UAICC was that that the Assembly had not been informed that the UAICC would have to review its covenantal relationship with the UCA because of the passing of this proposal. No such statement had been received by the Business Committee or the President. The Assembly disagreed that the matter should be re-opened. The newly elected President-Elect, the Rev Gregor Henderson, with others, then convened a meeting with members of the UAICC over morning tea. It led to the following proposal which was accepted in the last session of the Assembly.

That the Assembly

1. Apologise to the UAICC for the hurt caused by the Assembly's failure to listen adequately to the UAICC's voice in the Assembly's consideration of Proposal 84
2. assures the UAICC of the strong desire of the UCA to continue to live under God in the covenantal relationship between the indigenous and non-indigenous members of the church.
3. request the President to ensure that steps are taken as soon as possible to participate with the UAICC in response to their and our concerns for the future of the covenantal relationship.
4. request the Standing Committee to consider ways in which the Assembly's decision-making procedures may become more culturally sensitive and more informed by our cultural diversity.

Post Assembly

Within two weeks of the Assembly EMU had circulated a petition claiming that the Assembly Resolution 84 was in contravention of Paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union (Biblical Witnesses) thereby placing the Uniting Church outside the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.[12] It demanded the President and General Secretary recall the Assembly to refer Resolution 84 to Congregations for concurrence, and engage the Assembly in a service of repentance. It expressed dismay that the leadership of the Church had misled the Assembly. EMU held a series of public meetings Australia-wide and sent letters to the Assembly and other councils, in which leaders of the Assembly were condemned for their actions and given an ultimatum that unless the Assembly was recalled by the end of the year, members and congregations would leave the UCA.

How would the members of the Congress respond to the petition, given that after the Assembly decision, they had declared "the UAICC refuses to accept that the ordination of people living in homosexual relationships is right?"[13] On the Friday of the Assembly, the day after the Assembly decision, I had made a promise to members of the Congress to visit them soon in the Northern Territory. The arrangements for this meeting were in place before the petition surfaced.

[12] *UCA – Main Assembly Catalogue:* U-1-4 Secretariat, Boxes 50 – 52, "Petitions from members and attendees of the Uniting Church in Australia expressing deep spiritual and emotional dismay and concern over the decision of the 10th Assembly to pass proposal 84 (Comb-bound volumes 1-16)," 3 August 2003, – 4 May 2004.
[13] *UCA – Main Assembly Catalogue*

Three days later I flew to Millingimbi in Arnhem Land to attend a meeting of the newly formed Arnhem Land Area Association. After dinner, I was invited to a funeral ceremony of an Aboriginal leader from Millingimbi. That night was one of the unexpected high points of being President.

> I was sitting cross legged on a mat with some of these leaders as the Millingimbi Aboriginal community met in grief at the death of one of their most respected members. A ceremonial dance called 'The Tower of Babel' was underway. It had been created in this area after the great charismatic renewal in 1979. Many dancers were milling about in the open area on the sand. Then as they formed up into two columns of dancers in the shape of a cross, the Elder in Millingimbi took my hand and helped me stand. "Don't worry, just stand here. Nothing will happen to you." he mouthed quietly as he led me ten or so spaces to stand at the head of one of those columns. "What did he mean, nothing would happen to me," I wondered.
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> The energetic dance went on and I began to move with the music. Then suddenly in a heart-beat every dancer stopped. After a brief intense silence, two warriors, one from each end of the arm of the cross, rushed at me, shouting, waving spears, which as they ran, were used to jab toward me again and again. Then they stepped back, and the dance had ended.
>
> In a daze I walked back and sat in the sand, my mind reeling. What had just happened? As the leader of the Uniting Church had I just been ritually killed on the cross? I sat trying to come to terms with what had just occurred, hardly present to what followed as the funeral ceremony continued.
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> Then a second Aboriginal dance to an Old Testament theme began. This one was called "Noah's Ark". Just after the dance had started the Elder leaned across again and whispered, "In a little while will you come with me, and together we will stand and become the door into the ark?" Cautiously I nodded assent. The dancers gradually formed into a circle. We stood, walked together into the line of the circle, then stepped apart and faced each other. I followed his lead and held up my hand over my head. We formed a door into the enclosed circle. I am not sure who said it, but the announcement was made, "All in the community and the land are invited into the ark." And that is what happened. Those who had been standing or sitting under the huge Tamarind trees and on the edge of the sandy open area, came dancing, walking and running toward this human door of the Ark, passing between us and into the inside of the circle. When all had entered the dance ended.
>
> Apart from the directions given me that night, no other words were offered in explanation of what happened or questions asked re the sexual issues. What was clear was that in less than a quarter of an hour, I had first been identified with Christ, then called to be part of the doorway into the life God offers. The more I thought about these events it seemed to me as if this was the way another culture acknowledged we were one in Christ in the Church even if we did not agree with each other all the time. I still tremble when I think about that night. Here in the oldest continuous culture on the face of the planet, our aboriginal Christian brothers and sisters

> had in the language of dance brought the gospel to life in the midst of grief and difference on a northern Australian beach.[14]

It was so different to the vilification we as leaders were by then receiving from some groups within the Church.

The next day I was given a Yolngu name. When I checked my journal,[15] later in the meeting there was some discussion about Resolution 84, seeking greater clarification from me in the light of comments that came from sources other than the Assembly.

Concluding reflections

I believe that it is vital to place my action as President as stated in the article 'A Brief History of the Preamble' in the wider setting of the 2003 Assembly and the dynamics of an Assembly. The President does not chair a debate. The President's role is to discern what the Assembly is saying. Together the members of the Assembly made a vital decision about the diversity of the Uniting Church. It was not an easy time for the Uniting Church in Australia. In the midst of the Assembly addressing one of the most divisive issues in the 21st century church, it was evident that procedures, cultural expectations, and different views of the Bible were all involved. The use of the consensus process helped find a way through, and at the same time, was found to be confusing and disempowering for some groups, including the Congress. However, just before the end of the Assembly, further proposals opened the way for the UCA to find ways of being more culturally sensitive in how it made decisions. Further, it gave an impetus to a process that eventually led to the development of a Preamble to the Constitution.

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[14] R Dean Drayton, *Apocalyptic Good News*, (Wipf and Stock, 2019), 166. The events of that night had been presented in written form during the Triennium to the President's Table.

[15] I have kept a daily journal since 1983, about an A4 page a day. The pages for the Assembly, July12th-July 19th, and later meetings with the UAICC representatives, Aug 5th – 8th, have been lodged with the UCA Archives.

Book Forum: Julia M. O'Brien's *Prophets Beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice*[1]

Challenging a Progressive Orthodoxy and Sparking the Moral Imagination: Reflections on *Prophets Beyond Activism*

Elenie Poulos

I knew I was in trouble from the opening sentence of Julia M. O'Brien's book, *Prophets beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice*: "The assumption that the prophets of ancient Israel were primarily concerned about social justice runs throughout the thinking and the discourse of progressive Christianity" (1). Say what?! The '*assumption*'? What assumption?

I am not a biblical scholar, but I do have many opinions about the Bible (don't we all?), some of which, I will admit, are better informed than others. I love the Bible for so many reasons, but I am not a biblical literalist, and I do not hold that the Bible is inerrant. I try to remain alert to the complexity inherent in these texts that were shared, written, gathered, edited, collected, translated, by many different authors and editors over a long period of time. I understand it and all its constituent parts as socio-literary constructions with social, cultural and political aims.[2] I'm not sure what the phrase 'divinely inspired' means when applied to the Bible but I do believe that the biblical texts are testament to how generations of people in particular places and times have tried to understand the sacred in their lives, communities, societies and histories. And in this way, I believe that Bible holds deeply profound truths and lessons about what it means to be human and human reaching for the transcendent. It is the sacred book of my religious tradition. We find Jesus in there. I should read it more and read it better than I do. *Prophets beyond Activism* inspires me to do both.

In the introduction to her book *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*, biblical scholar Robyn J. Whitaker writes, "In truth, we all read in a way that privileges some parts of the Bible and gives little attention to others".[3] I have known this from my first class in biblical studies at United Theological College in 1993. So, when I'm working with the biblical texts, I strive to be diligent in applying the exegetical and hermeneutical tools I gained at theological college and the lessons about language and discourse I gained at university studying linguistics. These days, I also strive to bring insights gained from

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[1] Julia M. O'Brien, *Prophets Beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice* (Louisville: WJKP, 2024).

[2] I do not include 'religious' here because the concept or category of 'religion' is a contemporary (and contested) construction, see for example William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is Profane: The Political Nature of 'Religion'*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Yale University Press, 2013; and Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion,* London: Routledge, third edition 2023). The biblical writers did not know they were writing 'religious' texts.

[3] Robyn J. Whitaker, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023, Kindle edition, 11.

my ongoing apprenticeship as both a critical scholar of religion and a politics scholar interested in power and discourse at the intersection of politics and religion. But it seems I've had a blind spot when it came to the so-called prophetic roots of social justice.

In her book, Whitaker asks, "What can we learn about interpreting the Bible from the Bible itself?"[4] O'Brien offers a case study in exactly this and it is an explicit and a direct challenge to me and my Christian 'tribe' – theologically and socially progressive Christians and churches who make assertions along the lines of this one, "The Uniting Church in Australia believes it is called to take a *prophetic stand* in this world, standing with those who are marginalised and confronting the interests and the powers that perpetrate violence, injustice and oppression."[5] *Prophets Beyond Activism* is littered with such statements from O'Brien's own denomination (the United Church of Christ), the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, the Lutherans, the Anglicans and more. You may better understand the personal challenge of this book for me knowing that for many years I was writing statements like this for the Uniting Church in Australia and ecumenical organisations. The book is not, however, a take-down of Christian churches, people, and organisations committed to social justice or Christian justice activists. On the contrary, it is a plea from a progressive biblical scholar to other progressive Christians: unpick the progressive, interpretative *orthodoxy* that claims that "the Hebrew prophets were primarily concerned with social justice" (3) so that "we can do better" (9) with the texts (honesty) and with talking and working with Christians who understand the prophetic witnesses differently (humility).

O'Brien's book has unsettled me but also convinced me that I can no longer casually throw around phrases such as 'the prophetic call to justice' to justify a call to action for social justice.

O'Brien begins her short, punchy book with an exploration of the "origins and problems of the 'prophets were social critics' orthodoxy" (13). Drawing on recent scholarship of the prophetic books, she situates the prophets in the context of the worldviews of ancient Mediterranean cultures. Hebrew prophets were 'diviners' who read signs, dreams and visions, and foretold the future for kings, just like the diviners mentioned in ancient texts found in Mari (in what is now Syria) and Ninevah (Mosul in Iraq). O'Brien also makes extensive use of redaction criticism to consider the "retrospective" (17) editing of ancient texts from a post-exilic perspective around 550-350 BCE. The prophetic books look back to explain why Israel and Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire, defend "YHWH'S justice in carrying out this punishment" (19), and "offer hope [of] divine forgiveness" (17). The main point of the books of Deuteronomy and those from Joshua to Kings (inclusive) are to drive home the lesson that when Israel fails to worship and obey YHWH it falls. These are stories, poems, prayers of a traumatised people trying to understand what happened to them – why YHWH punished them so violently and devastatingly – and reaching for a better future. The prophets were offering explanations of harsh times and hope for the future, not treatises on social or economic justice or what happens in the world when injustice rules.

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[4] Whitaker, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*, 11.

[5] Uniting Church in Australia, 'An Economy of Life: Re-Imagining Progress for a Flourishing World', Resolution 09.21, Twelfth Assembly, 2009, p.6 (italics added), accessed August 6, 2025, https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/16

In ancient, intensely poetic forms, the meaning of many metaphors, puns, and wordplays will be elusive but what should not escape us, however, are the violent, patriarchal, hierarchical and misogynistic ideologies evident in so many of the texts – ideologies that are all too often obscured by the lens of 'the prophetic call to social justice'. In a contemporary critique that offers readings of the texts (tasters, really) from womanist, feminist, queer, postcolonial and trauma-informed perspectives, O'Brien asks us to take seriously the "multiple layers of oppression" (36) both represented in the prophetic books and perpetuated by the imagining of a god who punishes through violent dispossession and war where women, children and those who live in poverty are crushed: "Maintaining this paradigm [the prophets as social justice advocates] requires selective reading, the universalizing and generalizing of prophetic discourse, and denial of the ways in which the language of the prophetic books perpetuates problematic ideologies" (41). So, O'Brien asks, where did this paradigm come from? And then, I ask, what is left?

O'Brien answers the first question with a genealogy of the politics of biblical interpretation and scholarship that begins with early Christianity, passes through the Enlightenment, the influence of nineteenth century German scholars, and the Social Gospel movement of the twentieth century. On the way through she interrogates those scholarly movements for antisemitism and racism. It is a salutary reminder that interpretations are *made* – made over time and to serve particular purposes – and have consequences. She writes, "progressive discourse about social activism continues to employ many of the racialized and Eurocentric tropes of the past. It privileges the rational, universal, the intellectual, and those who see prophets as conforming to these values" (61). Like the category religion itself which is not a "neutral descriptor" of something found "in the wild"[6] neither are the "intellectual frameworks" (66) which we use to construct our worldviews. Her use of Willie Jennings's book *After Whiteness*[7] draws much needed attention to the white, masculine, individualism that underlies the production of knowledge in western scholarship and its institutions, including the theological.

O'Brien also aims to crack open the stereotypes in progressive Christian discourses which cast alternative understandings of prophecy as "naïve, uneducated and superstitious" and neglect "the nuanced ways in which the category of prophecy is utilized in other understandings of past and present phenomena" (61). The arrogance of this stance, she believes, hinders the work for justice because it places a barrier between charismatic and progressive Christians, hence her call for humility. I find this significant thread running through the book less than convincing. If I had been more open to a wider and deeper understanding of prophecy, I'm not sure it would have changed the mutually respectful relationships I've been privileged to have with charismatic and Pentecostal Christians as we struggled together against climate change, violence and injustice.

So, to my question, what then is left? Where we can we go with our beloved prophets if they are not (or not just) the courageous social justice advocates we have imagined them to be?

Using some of the most well-worn texts with an eye on the Revised Common Lectionary (think Amos 6 and 8, Micah 2 and 6, Isaiah 2, 61 and 58 and the book of the Prophet Jeremiah), O'Brien presents a number

[6] Arnal & McCutcheon, *The Sacred is Profane,* 126
[7] See *Uniting Church Studies* 26(1) and 26(2).

of case studies that interrogate the progressive orthodoxy of the social justice prophets: were Amos and Micah, for example, really calling for economic justice and if so, for whom?

If, from the texts, we can't be sure about "who was oppressing whom and how" (81); if from a deep reading of the texts, the calls for social, economic, ecological justice reveal themselves as ambiguous: then what's to be done in our advocacy? O'Brien suggests that the way forward for Christian social justice advocacy is to start with "social scientific analysis" of the issues we face and only after that, listening to "how the interpreter finds resonances with the biblical text" (77). This is not new practice for many Christian social advocates I have worked with. But her point is well made. At a time when a particular biblical vision of the world and its future is "being granted divine authority" (129) we need to be clearer than ever about what we're advocating for and why. We …

> must be talking about the details of justice, speaking in our own voices about what environmental justice entails and why it matters to our faith, about what forms of racial justice we pursue and whose voices inform that pursuit, about how we define criminal justice, and about the basis of our convictions about gender and sexuality (129).

The prophets may not provide the social and economic foundations for a contemporary vision of a just, inclusive and peaceful world but they can still, over 2000 years later, move and inspire us to action, spark our moral imagination and creativity, and remind us, as does First Isaiah, that after destruction comes hope.

And, as O'Brien argues, "good biblical interpretation is important because the Bible is being weaponized against the planet, and the harm being done in its name must be challenged" (125).

Prophets Beyond Activism: a Pasifika response

Brian Fiu Kolia

In her *Prophets beyond Activism*, Julia O'Brien seeks to rethink a widely accepted interpretive framework for progressive Christianity: that the Hebrew prophets were primarily social justice activists. She argues that this 'prophets-as-justice-warriors' view has become such an interpretive orthodoxy, that it is often assumed rather than critically examined. O'Brien does not deny that the prophets speak about justice or spoke truth to power. Instead, she cautions that the way the prophets are read can obscure the complexity of the prophets, while perpetuating unexamined ideologies. At the same time, such readings may limit how prophetic texts may be used for justice today. She invites readers to a more nuanced, contextual, humble, and honest engagement with prophetic texts, by recognising their historical layers, literary complexities, and the ways our own modern biases may shape interpretation.

In outlining her argument, O'Brien organises the book into two major parts. In Part 1, "Troubling the Progressive Orthodoxy about the Prophets," which consists of four chapters, she critically examines how the common picture of prophets as primarily social justice activists developed and the assumptions that

underlie it. The chapters attend to historical context, modes of reading, interpretive origins, and the limitations of the orthodoxy.

In the second Part of the book, "New Approaches to Justice and the Prophets," which contains five chapters, O'Brien revisits specific prophetic texts with a view toward justice but doing do in ways that attend to the prophets' distinctiveness and complexity. She takes a specific look at Amos and Micah with respect to economic justice and oppression structures, Isaiah with regards to inclusive justice in conversation with the Gospel of Luke, Jeremiah and the dynamic between the voice of community and the solitary prophetic voice, and Second Isaiah in light of ecological justice. Each chapter explores how these texts might contribute to contemporary justice concerns when interpreted more carefully.

As a Pasifika person, I am naturally drawn to the final chapter on "The Prophets and Ecological Justice." O'Brien expertly brings into discussion the beginnings of the harmful expositions of Scripture which perpetuate anthropocentric attitudes towards Earth. She then proceeds to explain the foundational text of Earth readings, Genesis 1–2, which formulates a "creation paradigm" from which other biblical stories and poems about creation follow. Intriguingly, O'Brien argues that there is an advantage to this creation paradigm as it helps counter many Christian perspectives of millennialist and apocalyptic theological leanings, which deny climate change and human responsibility for climate change. Many of such readings, as O'Brien notes, emerge from the New Testament (see Mark 13:28; Luke 21:11). She writes that a "creation paradigm for climate advocacy provides an important counternarrative to such views, fascinatingly by turning to the Old Testament to challenge particular readings of the New Testament" (115).

As her argument progresses, it is noteworthy that she references Christians with millennialist and apocalyptic perspectives without clarifying which specific denomination or group holds these views. I am inclined to believe that progressives are not climate change deniers, nor do they deny human accountability in the climate crisis. But this dichotomy between progressives and conservatives does not seem to hold in the Pacific, a region considered by many to be on the frontline of the climate catastrophe. And it is in this chapter, from a Pasifika standpoint, that I realise what O'Brien had acknowledged before in earlier chapters: that white privilege, or more specifically, the whiteness of scholarship, may obscure diverse voices which offer new and alternative insights. It is a crisis – I call it a 'crisis' because white scholarship is often normalised while minoritised voices are either ignored or have assimilated into the depths of normalised white scholarship – in scholarship that is overlooked, and in the discussion of climate and the ecological crisis, the very people whose scholarship warrant an ecological reimagining in light of the urgency of the crisis in their contexts, often play second fiddle. Here, I invite O'Brien to engage with some of these authors. Pasifika scholars such as Teresia Teaiwa, Katerina Teaiwa, Epeli Hau'ofa, Maina Talia (now the Tuvaluan Minister for Home Affairs, Climate Change and Environment), Winston Halapua, Jione Havea, Nāsili Vaka'uta, Cliff Bird, Upolu Vaai, and others, have evaded the "orthodoxy" of climate scholarship in this chapter.

Being viewed as small and insignificant, and therefore ignored by dominant discourses, is a common experience for Pasifika peoples. Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa explicates the issue by pointing to our existence and the way our world is viewed by our people. While the rest of the world views Pasifika as tiny islands in the sea, Hau'ofa states to the contrary, saying that Pasifika peoples …

> did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions.[8]

When O'Brien speaks of climate change in this final chapter, she only accounts for Earth, but does not consider the heavens above, nor the ocean, the *moana*! I want to extend the invitation to O'Brien to consider these other spaces for an alternative view of the world. A view that perceives the sea spaces to be just as important as the land spaces. To envision an inverted view of the globe, where the sea spaces are seen as land masses, thus portraying the Pacific Ocean as one gigantic continent. Currently, the oceanic spaces do not seem to matter to most mass land nations, and this is the "orthodoxy" in climate scholarship which I invite O'Brien to consider. In the spirit of Hau'ofa (and other Pasifika scholars), any serious reading of the prophets in the climate crisis, needs to take into account the ocean, connecting all the different (is)lands in Pasifika to form one huge continent.

Additionally, the realities of the ocean need to be considered also, and particularly the realities of rising sea levels for Pasifika. O'Brien writes that "YHWH makes the Earth different so that humans can travel safely to Jerusalem as 'home.' Second Isaiah's vision is clearly anthropocentric, treating nature as a resource to serve human needs" (122). I agree that the text is clearly anthropocentric and favours the return of Judah back to Jerusalem. And O'Brien is right in concluding that "Second Isaiah's vision is for some and not for all" (122). The focus in its modern application, as O'Brien rightfully notes, would seem to "privilege some over others" (123). A reimagining of creation theology is needed, and what O'Brien might consider as not fitting the creation paradigm, might actually fit with a new creation paradigm, one where relocation and repatriation become the realities for climate refugees, particularly for natives of Tuvalu, Tokelau, Kiribati and Marshall Islands, who are forced to relocate to other islands and other nations, due to rising sea levels.

This would offer an alternative to how O'Brien reads Second Isaiah, with regards to YHWH's "geological tampering" (122). Geological tampering privileges one group over another, which means there are those who stand to suffer as a result of the geological tampering. As the exiled nation are imagined to walk freely back to the land, we are reminded that Isaiah is saturated with Exodus imagery.[9] One wonders whether this aspect of the exiles returning should be "read intersectionally" (cf. 123) with the famous "return" of the Isaraelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, and the subsequent conquest narratives which also saw geological tampering, such as the dividing of the Red Sea and the drying up of the Jordan river. Understanding who is being privileged and who stands to suffer when creation is "tampered" with, procures an alternative view of the creation paradigm which would resonate with Pasifika (and other islanders), who suffer from geological tampering by humans, "or more precisely … the people and the systems that facilitate and even normalize devastation" (124).

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[8] Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We are the Ocean: Selected Works,* edited by Epeli Hau'ofa (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 31.

[9] Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, ed. William P. Brown, Carol A. Newsom, and Brent A. Strawn, 1st ed., The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 302.

In sum, O'Brien's discussion throughout is built on deconstructing the orthodoxy of progressive readings of scripture, that might seem well-intentioned, but fail to give a critical account of prophetic literature. As a biblical scholar, I resonate with this intention for the pure goal of paying critical attention to the ancient context from whence those words emerged and to explore the complexity and nuance of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, as opposed to subscribing the text to a single agenda. However, I wonder if O'Brien's discussion is based on a caricature of progressives as social activists who use a selective and unnuanced range of proof texts to advance a particular version of the Bible which prioritises social justice. Yet, it is not clear if she is referring to her own context, or to progressives in general. Many of the Pasifika scholars mentioned above are progressives, and two of them in particular, Jione Havea and Nāsili Vaka'uta, are pioneers in biblical scholarship in Pasifika, who are always engaging in nuanced readings of the biblical text, to (re)claim justice for the poor, the marginalised, and in particular, the suffering plight of Pasifika peoples who are on ground zero in the climate catastrophe. Despite the prolific scholarship of Havea and Vaka'uta, I notice that O'Brien has not referred to their work, and this adds a different dimension to the orthodoxy, which, in my view, *Prophets Beyond Activism* itself reflects.

Prophets beyond Activism is a great reminder in reading the Prophets with respect to the rich tapestry of the diverse works, and the complex diversity of its messages for different eras and settings. The progressive agenda is a noble one, and O'Brien, a progressive herself, invites the reader to be more self-critical in reading by way of a nuanced interpretation. We could do well to follow O'Brien's plan, to be honest with ourselves, not just of our progressive or conservative paths, but of our privilege and paying more attention to the voices our privileges seek to obscure.

Beyond Activism, Yes, but Beyond Progressivism?

Matthew Anslow

In the 2023 volume of *Uniting Church Studies* focused on activism, I penned an article on a particular expression of Christian activism, namely a movement known as Love Makes a Way (LMAW). This was a movement and campaign I co-founded with two friends and co-led for around four years. I will refrain from going over the story of LMAW here since interested readers can peruse that article now freely available via open access.[10] I will simply explain that LMAW, which was most active from 2014–2018, focused on advocating for refugees, primarily using civil disobedience, in the face of Australia's draconian immigration policies. It has a legitimate claim to being Australia's largest-ever Christian activist movement and is almost certainly Australia's largest church-based civil disobedience campaign to date.

I mention this not to signpost my own history or credentials regarding activism, nor to boast about my achievements (which, in any case, are hardly mine). Rather, I mention it as a foundation on which to reflect on a point of great appreciation I have for Julia O'Brien's arguments in *Prophets beyond Activism*.

[10] Matthew Anslow, "A Distinctly Christian Activism: Lessons from Love Makes a Way," *Uniting Church Studies* 25, no 1 (2023): 9-24.

O'Brien's central purpose in her book is to trouble the firm conviction, found widely across contemporary progressive Christianity, that the Hebrew prophets were primarily concerned with social justice. Frequently depicted as fierce individualists courageously standing against injustice, the prophets are often equated with activists, who, like progressive activists, "speak truth to power." O'Brien rightly takes this characterisation to task.

My experience of Love Makes a Way confirms O'Brien's observation about the way the language of "prophets" and "prophecy" is utilised in progressive discourse. LMAW was regularly labelled a "prophetic movement," a "prophetic voice," or some such similar designation. I never considered it such. Indeed, such designations made me enormously uncomfortable. Theologically speaking, my doctoral studies in the Gospel of Matthew's prophetic christology had helped clarify some of my objections. But I was also immensely nervous about the implications for public discourse of labelling something "prophetic." Prophecy, after all, involves the conviction that one is speaking or acting in some sense on behalf of God. If one's social and political expressions are equated with God's will, what room can there be for compromise, much less the possibility that we are wrong? Tribalism, arrogance, and self-righteousness seem to me the likely consequences of identifying our activism as prophetic.

For these and other reasons, I am immensely grateful to O'Brien for her work in bringing attention to what she calls "progressive orthodoxy" about the prophets. I suspect that only a progressive Christian, which O'Brien explicitly identifies as (e.g., 2, 126), could have written this book. Despite the fact that *Prophets beyond Activism* is explicitly aimed at progressives, and that I am not a progressive (nor a conservative, mind you), I learned much from its pages.

O'Brien's introduction gets right down to business, outlining eight problems that she perceives with the progressive orthodoxy regarding the prophets that are explored in the book's chapters (3–6). For instance, she points out that progressive orthodoxy is selective in its reading of texts, that it is often blind to its own contextuality, that it can be intellectually arrogant, and that it invokes the authority of the Bible for its own agendas (what she calls "biblical ventriloquism"). Of course, these are problems that *any* orthodoxy can face. In the context of progressive Christianity, these represent important observations about the way the prophets are appropriated in service of a concern for social justice. The result is a truncated and stereotyped rendering of the prophets that goes unnoticed or excused because the social justice goals of progressives are deemed an end worthy of such a misleading portrayal.

O'Brien spends the next two chapters outlining the historical problems with the progressive understanding of the prophets, problems both ancient (Chapter 1) and contemporary (Chapter 2). In Chapter 1 she shows convincingly that the prophets are rather diverse – even discordant – in their message and activity. Moreover, O'Brien shows that prediction plays a larger role amongst the Hebrew prophets than progressives are usually willing to admit. The common notion that prophets are "forthtellers" rather than "foretellers" does not sit so well with the evidence. Her account here is incisive, revealing the simplified progressive account of the prophets stands on shaky historical ground. Chapter 2 exposes the sheer difficulty of ascertaining what these poetic and affective texts mean, before turning a contemporary liberationist eye on them to show that they are not as commensurate with progressive notions of social justice as some would like.

To my mind, Chapter 3 is a highlight of the book. O'Brien deftly outlines the origins of the "progressive orthodoxy" about the prophets, tracing major shifts in understanding, particularly through the Enlightenment period. Here, O'Brien shows how modern philosophical shifts, particularly in epistemology and metaphysics, narrowed the window on what was acceptable discourse. The result was a distillation of the prophetic so that it fit into this narrowed, scientific, and rationalist – and also Romantic – account of reality. Such understandings of prophecy jettisoned its predictive or "supernatural" character and confined it within the realm of the ethical. This is a chapter worth the price of admission alone.

Chapter 4 sees O'Brien evaluate the picture she has so far painted. She suggests that, despite its own self-perception, the progressive approach to the prophets is in fact bound to the Enlightenment project, championing what Willie Jennings calls "white self-sufficient masculinity" (55) and perpetuating various troubling trends, not least antisemitism and colonialism. Indeed, she notes that the elitist progressive approach to prophecy – in which alternative views are deemed "naïve, uneducated, and superstitious" (61) – is both Eurocentric (in privileging Enlightenment values) and conservative (in taming the prophets according to modern categories; 63).

From here the second half of the book turns toward particular passages, bringing them into conversation with contemporary issues for activists (economic justice; structural oppression; inclusion; "heroic individualism" and trauma; and ecological justice). I will refrain from summarising these chapters, lest my comments here become little more than synopsis. But, again, I applaud O'Brien for her penetrating critique of progressive orthodoxy regarding prophets, and also her constructive suggestions for our work for justice.

Not that I do not have questions for and disagreements with O'Brien. Her arguments are bold and, as such, they are likely to generate fruitful disputes. For my part, the most central issue raised by the book is the nature of our political and ideological allegiances. Put another way, if I take issue with O'Brien's arguments, it is not so much the arguments themselves that I question, but rather some of the suppositions that underlie them.

Here I want to try to retain the nuance that O'Brien's book deserves. All biblical scholarship involves underlying socio-political allegiances, and to point this out or to identify a particular such allegiance is banal. O'Brien is as forthright as one can hope in identifying her own commitments as a progressive. However, her critique of progressive treatments of the prophets is undertaken in such a way as to forego any kind of critique of progressivism itself. Indeed, progressivism becomes the grid through which all else is judged, including Scripture. Not that critiquing Scripture is inherently wrong – I am not a fundamentalist, and I am not opposed to pointing out potential issues with scriptural texts, particularly when considering a text's *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effect/influence). But Scripture remains, for me at least, authoritative, able to call my own view of the world into question.

In *Prophets beyond Activism*, however, critique generally goes only one way. True, the "progressive orthodoxy" regarding the prophets is challenged. But this speaks only of a progressive interpretation, not of anything substantial about progressivism as such, which is generally presented as self-evidently correct in its basic intuitions about the world. This results in certain disagreeable moments in the book.

For instance, O'Brien points out how progressives reduce the prophets to social activists and, in doing so, divorce them from Judaism (esp. 56–59). This, she rightly notes, perpetuates harmful anti-Jewish tropes (58). However, much of the book, particularly its latter half, involves critiquing the prophets – who, remember, have been firmly identified as Jewish – for their failure to live up to progressive ideals. For instance, "Amos produces … mixed justice results" with regard to gender and race (86). Likewise, Micah comes up short regarding the gendered dimensions of its concern with land loss (87). I remain unsure how these two strategies cohere. To insist upon the centrality of the prophets' Jewishness in order to combat antisemitism, whilst also critiquing these prophets for being racist, misogynist etc., seems confused. Does the latter not constitute a kind of anti-Jewish move that the book earlier warns against?

Likewise, the Bible is said to have as its most enduring legacy not its laws but its function "to shape and reshape our moral imagination" (89). It is difficult not to perceive here the traces of an older liberal theological view wherein the substance of Jewish law was deemed irrelevant in favour of the more universalistic ethic or principle underlying it.

The problem, I think, is the way the book centres a progressive worldview; the progressive way of seeing the world is simply assumed to be good, right, and true. O'Brien never broaches the possibility that the issues she raises about the "progressive orthodoxy" regarding the prophets might stem from maladies within progressivism itself. As mentioned above, she judiciously points to the way the progressive reading of the prophets is captive to the Enlightenment project, not least its rather conservative ratification of the self-sufficient individual, as well as its perpetuation of antisemitism, colonialism, elitism, Eurocentrism, etc. Elsewhere, though, judgements from a progressive viewpoint are self-evidently true. There is something of a contradiction here.

The result is that progressivism stands over the scriptural witness. O'Brien regularly states that the prophets fall short of a variety of progressive convictions. Such convictions, rather than Christ, serve as the hermeneutical key of the prophetic literature. Indeed, the book at one point appears to subject Christ himself to this standard, seemingly affirming the judgement that he fell short of a liberative attitude to women (64). I cannot help but get the sense that progressive values have displaced Christ as the guiding light in this book.

Moreover, O'Brien speaks of not needing advocates for economic justice "to use Amos or Micah to tell me what is wrong about my world or to provide biblical precedent to challenge those wrongs" (78). Instead, we ought to use social scientific analysis of the world to analyse the present, and only then find resonances with the biblical text (77). This makes me wonder what the role of Scripture (and perhaps tradition) might be for O'Brien. If we already can determine what is wrong with the world, and if we have enough of the answers such that we can reproach the prophets for not attaining to our present understanding, what need have we for Scripture at all?

Of course, I realise that matters of biblical interpretation are complex. And, again, I am not commending a fundamentalist approach such that we simply adhere to a plain reading of the scriptural texts, never mounting any challenge to its words. But whereas O'Brien centres progressive values as the standard for such challenge, I would stridently insist that Christ is that measure.

In sum, I see tensions in O'Brien's work that require ongoing reflection. In particular, there is friction between the centring of progressivism in a seemingly unquestioned way and the book's important call to humility:

> I am convinced we need fewer churches where everyone agrees with one another and more churches able to engage in dialogue across difference. Because each of us, including the most passionate advocate, has a limited view of justice, we need to talk and rub up against each other in hopes of discovering both the values we share and our own blind spots. (78)

Here I would question the need to discover mere *values* we share (I am critical of the reduction of ethics to "values," but this is an issue for another day). And I would want to interrogate the apparent reduction of the purpose of dialogue to the advocate's quest for justice. Still, I am wholeheartedly in favour of the substance of this call, to engage in genuine dialogue with those different to us. In what I have said, I am not telling progressives not to be progressives. But if we are unable to bring our own assumptions into question, such that dialogue might challenge and alter our social and political convictions, I fear such dialogue risks fostering the status quo and generating a false humility.

I say all of this with some trepidation, for at least two reasons. First, the current political climate in the West is such that my comments could easily be construed as a contribution to our insufferable culture wars. I have no interest in this. I do not mean my comments as an attack on progressives, much less a defence of a conservatism to which I do not subscribe. I mean only to probe tensions inherent to O'Brien's book, which is explicitly progressive. Second, I would not want my comments to suggest that O'Brien's book is not an important and thorough corrective to certain troublesome ideas about the prophets. On the contrary, this is a book well worth reading and contemplating. I do not think its critique, though aimed at progressives, is relevant only for them. Further, the constructive work undertaken in the book is exceedingly valuable for those of us who seek after the reality of God's kingdom to be embodied in our lives and communities.

Appreciation and Response

Julia M. O'Brien

I am grateful for these authors' gracious and challenging reviews of *Prophets Beyond Activism*. Each has understood my goals in resisting the tendency of progressive activists to flatten prophetic literature in the service of a worthy agenda. And each has raised important questions about the shortcomings of my work. Throughout the volume, I invited others to add their wisdom to my own, and I thank them for doing just that.

Elenie Poulos helpfully voices the "ouch" factor of my criticism of the progressive use of the term "prophetic." As she is painfully aware from her own activism, the work of social justice is so gruelling and underappreciated – especially in our own time and place – that most of us desperately long for support. Do we really need critique from our friends right now? Elenie also articulates the ensuing problem: if the prophets are not clear beacons of social justice, then what can continue to us fuel our vocation?

The second half of the volume attempts to answer this question. We can be enriched by wrestling with prophetic literature while avoiding what I call "biblical ventriloquism," the tendency to cite biblical texts in ways that that amplify and authorize our own voices. My claim is that "when [biblical interpretation is] done with care and honesty, it has the potential for inspiring and empowering social change" (p. 125). Of course, my call for a nuanced and at times critical reading of biblical texts requires a great deal of effort and offers no easy formula for crafting rousing sermons or punchy placards. And yet, I know of no other way to be true to these texts and to ourselves. I understand my calling as a biblical scholar and theological educator as calling for greater attention to texts and to our patterns of interpretation.

In describing my approach to activism, Elenie hears me as prioritizing social scientific analysis. Of course, the Prophets and the Bible as a whole go beyond the realm of social science, deprioritizing human structures and insisting upon Ultimacy in ways that analysis cannot. My larger point is that simply citing biblical passages does not answer the difficult question of what justice entails in a specific context. The rousing demand of Amos to "let justice roll down like water" (5:24) and of Micah "to do justice and to love kindness" (6:8) does inspire, yet these words can be translated and applied to the present in very different and equally legitimate ways. I implore preachers to help me better understand what is going on in the world and to explain their own formulation of a Christian response.

Brian Fiu Kolia appropriately listens for the voices missing in my attempts at conversation. He suggests that my characterization of progressive activists as dismissive of conservative theology and selective in their reading of biblical texts does not ring true in the Pacific, where he finds greater theological fluidity and hermeneutical nuance. He invites me to engage more directly with Pasifika biblical scholars in order to recognize and dismantle the cultural assumptions undergirding my thought.

Brian is right that my argument has particular interlocutors in mind, ones who should have been named more clearly. I am not challenging the work of all Christian social activists but instead those who anoint their social justice agendas with the label "prophetic" and cherry-pick passages to undergird their claims. Not all activists behave in this way, of course (even in my own context), and I would have done well to draw attention to alternative modes of faithful activism. Indeed, doing so would have supported my insistence (particularly in ch. 4) that this particular orthodoxy about the prophets emerged from and continues to undergird a dominant Eurocentric worldview.

Much of Brian's critique appropriately focused on my chapter devoted to Second Isaiah and ecological justice. I have indeed read Jione Havea's evocative commentary on Jonah (Earth Bible Commentary, Bloomsbury 2020) and appreciated its important disruption of the traditional genre of biblical commentary; I assigned it to students in my course "The Bible and the Climate Crisis." I also have devoted much attention to climate science and the existential threat to the islands posed by rising sea levels. And yet, clearly, I still am in the early stages of "thinking with" Pasifika insights. After marinating for decades in the critiques posed by feminist, womanist, Black, queer, and postcolonial voices, these latter insights come naturally to me. I look forward to learning more deeply from Brian and his colleagues.

In response to Brian's criticism that I focus on land masses rather than oceanic spaces, I have been pondering how to read Second Isaiah with and for the ocean and its inhabitants. On the surface, these chapters seem

also to merit Brian's critique. Isaiah 40-54 primarily invokes the sea as a vehicle for transporting riches to land-dwellers, calling unidentified "coastlands" to witness the miracle of the repatriation of Judean exiles to Jerusalem and to ferry her children home in ships laden with silver and gold (Isa 42; also 60). Throughout, water enlivens not when it fills the ocean but when it spouts forth in the desert to quench the thirst of those journeying from one land boundary to another (Isa 44; 48).

More central to its claims (and seemingly more problematic in a Pasifika context) is Second Isaiah's delegitimizing of Diaspora. It single-mindedly attempts to convince Judeans living in Babylon to (re)locate to Jerusalem: the land of their ancestors is their only true home, such that Diaspora is a tragedy to be reversed by return migration. For this reason, modern climate refugees may find Second Isaiah less generative for their own spatial re-orientation than the perspectives of Judeans who remained in Babylon, seemingly embracing their hybrid identity, and that of modern thinkers (Jewish, African) for whom Diaspora is a valid and even productive way of living. I engage with these voices in my forthcoming commentary on Isaiah 40-66 (Interpretation Bible Commentary) but am eager to hear more Pasifika voices on the nature of Diaspora.

Matthew Anslow poses two major critiques to which I respond. The first regards my hermeneutic, which he describes as grounded in unquestioned progressive commitments rather than the mind of Christ. Matthew is right that there are some progressive values that I simply acknowledge rather than debate. I learned long ago that argumentation will not convince others to join me in addressing disparities in gender equity, racial justice, and economic status, but that it is my responsibility to explicitly articulate these commitments. I do however forcefully challenge other values that typically characterize progressivism, such as the denigration of tradition and ritual, particularly in Part 1 of the volume.

Matthew also is right that I do not espouse the Christocentric hermeneutic that informs his faith and activism. Like the Anabaptists with whom I co-labour in my own geographical context, he grounds his advocacy for asylum seekers in Jesus's care for the stranger. Yet while I recognize and celebrate the fruits of this framework, it is not my own.

In brief autobiographical comments in ch. 4, I explain that my progressive ideals were formed within the Christian tradition and while reading biblical texts. But I do not presume that my values clearly replicate the mind of Jesus. My study of the New Testament and the diversity of its interpretation has convinced me that while one can legitimately prioritize certain Gospel passages and understand them in particular ways (as teaching nonviolence, care for the stranger, etc.), other texts and other meanings also can be – and have been – framed as central to Christian belief. Those espousing just war theory, rigid standards of purity, and asceticism also have found warrant in the witness of the Gospels; and feminist and postcolonial interpreters have drawn attention to the implicit violence and scripts of patriarchy scaffolding even our most beloved texts.

We can and should articulate the values that inform us, but to claim them as "biblical" or the "mind of Christ" requires us to interpret the New Testament with the same textual and interpretive transparency that I am seeking for the Prophets. I find such transparency missing, for example, in *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Augsburg, 2009), where biblical scholar Eric Seibert "solves" the violence of the Old Testament by proposing that Christians evaluate problematic passages

according to the standard of Jesus: since Jesus reveals a God who is kind to the wicked, nonviolent, does not punish people with infirmity or disaster, and is loving, any contrary witness must be seen as human perception rather than divine revelation. To maintain this characterization of Jesus, however, Seibert is evidently selective in his choice of Gospel passages and discussion of debates regarding the historical Jesus.

A Christocentric hermeneutic also too easily draws a distinction between Jesus and the ethical power of the Hebrew Bible. Like the Christian appropriation of the prophets as proto-Christians, it credits Jesus will all the good of the Bible while dismissing the bad as "Jewish" or, more politely, as "tradition-bound." Understood in this way, Jesus becomes an innovator, a disruptor of ancient faith rather than its extension.

Given that resisting Christian anti-Judaism has informed my life and scholarship, Matthew's critique that the logic of my volume is implicitly anti-Jewish touches an especially tender spot for me. He claims that (1) if I describe the prophets as Jewish, and (2) I critique the prophets, (3) then I am necessarily critiquing Judaism. I respectfully disagree with this framing of my claims.

Regarding (1), while I resist attempts to separate Jesus from ancient Judaism, I actually do not characterize the Hebrew Bible as Jewish, at least not in the ways that label is typically understood. The prominent Jewish scholars with whom I studied at Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati) and Duke University insisted that the Hebrew Bible is not coterminous with modern Judaism, which has been profoundly shaped by the rabbinic tradition, its liturgical formulations, and its modes of interpretation. Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are two trajectories of thought carrying forward the ancient Israelite texts that we call the Hebrew Bible; the prominent Jewish scholar Allan Segal describes them as siblings born from a common parent (*Rebecca's Children: Christianity and Judaism in the Ancient World*, Harvard University Press, 1986). Similarly, Marc Brettler and Amy Jill Levine's excellent volume *The Bible with and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (HarperCollins, 2020), demonstrates than both Jews and Christians read the Hebrew Bible through the interpretive frameworks of their later traditions. I do resist supersessionist claims that these texts are now only for Christians, and I honour and seek to learn from Jewish interpretation. But I understand neither the Jewish nor Christian interpretive traditions as determinative of meaning.

In response to (3), I adamantly insist that asking hard questions about texts claimed by a tradition does not disrespect the tradition itself. The work of Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, Amy Kalmanofsky, and Tamar Kamionkowski makes this abundantly clear. So too do the insights of Christian interpreters who critique the patriarchy and violence of both Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts, such as the prolific and incisive prophetic scholarship of Carolyn J. Sharp, Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School, and volumes in the feminist-oriented Wisdom Bible Commentary series (Liturgical Press).

These responses have pushed me to clarify my assumptions and goals – including for myself. And they have appropriately pointed to missing voices and perspectives. I am grateful to all three, and to Geoff Thompson for inviting me to this conversation. By learning more about their social justice ministries and the powerful work of the Uniting Church of Australia, I have been inspired to listen better and do more. While activism may be lonely, we are not alone in seeking to address the needs of a suffering world.

Julia M. O'Brien (B. A., Wake Forest, 1981; M. Div., Duke, 1984; Ph. D., Duke, 1988) is Professor Emerita at Lancaster Theological Seminary (USA). Publications include *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor* (2008), three commentaries on the Minor Prophets, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies* (Editor-in Chief, 2014), and *Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets* (Editor, 2012). *Isaiah 40-66* (Interpretation Bible Commentaries) and *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, sixth edition (Associate Editor) will be published in 2026.

Elenie Poulos is an ordained Minister of the Uniting Church and an Adjunct Fellow in Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University and past Visiting Fellow at Harris Manchester College at the University of Oxford. Her research on religion and politics is interdisciplinary, drawing from politics, sociology of religion and critical studies in religion. She was the director of the UnitingJustice Australia for 15 years and is a former Commissioner of the World Council of Churches' advisory body on international affairs.

Brian Fiu Kolia is a second-generation Australian-born Samoan. He is a lecturer in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament at Malua Theological College. He holds a PhD from the University of Divinity, in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of Carrying Qoheleth's Maota (House): An Australian-Samoan Diasporic Reading (SBL Press, 2024) and co-editor with Michael Mawson on Unsettling Theologies: Memory, Identity and Place (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). More importantly, he is a husband to Tanaria and a father to Elichai.

Matthew Anslow is Educator for Lay Ministry with the Uniting Church's NSW/ACT Synod and Lecturer at United Theological College. He is the author of *Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets: The Prophetic Vocation of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (2022). Matt has published numerous articles in the areas of biblical studies and theology, philosophy, peacemaking, direct action and civil disobedience, preaching, and agriculture. He was a co-founder of Love Makes a Way, Australia's largest ever church-based civil disobedience campaign. He lives with his wife, Ashlee, and their three children in Blackheath, New South Wales.

Reviews

Things that Matter: Essays on Theological Education on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of United Theological College, William W. Emilsen and Patricia Curthoys (Editors), Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025 (ISBN: 979-8-3852-1331-3)

Geoff Thompson

Theological Colleges occupy a highly contested place in the life of the Uniting Church. Moreover, the place they occupy is distinct, privileged and complexly multi-layered. They are communities which variously frustrate, inspire and excite those who teach and study in them and those in the wider church and Churches which they serve. Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of United Theological College (UTC), the ten essays in *Things that Matter* provide important insights into this complexity and contestation, at least as manifested in one significant Australian theological college, and as presented through well-chosen and illuminating topics.

Precisely in their concreteness, the essays not only illuminate the life of UTC, they also help us understand the many things that colleges – their faculty and students – do under the somewhat deceptively simple heading "theological education." For that reason, this volume is timely. Timely, in part, because the Uniting Church in Australia – the Church which UTC most immediately serves – is itself currently engaged in what is arguably the most serious exploration of its own theological culture and the role of the colleges in that culture which it has ever undertaken.

It is timely also because the issues the Uniting Church is facing in regard to theological education are not parochial: they are global. Churches across the Western world are often unsure of the purposes and value of theological education, or indeed of theology per se. And, quite apart from issues of decreasing student numbers, limited finances, and institutional decline, the very nature of theological colleges as communities has been vigorously interrogated – in recent times perhaps most acutely by Willie James Jennings in his *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging,* a book that is rightly referred to at various places in *Things that Matter.* At the same time, in the majority world, there is a flourishing of theological education, indeed a hunger and enthusiasm for it that is not so obvious in the West.

This collection of essays shows not only how UTC is addressing both the particularities of the Uniting Church in Australia, but also how it is allowing those particularities to be informed by its own engagement with the global conversations. Or to put it even more sharply: UTC is demonstrating that those global conversations are intrinsic to the particularities of the UCA. This is an example of UTC constructively navigating the various tensions that are embedded in the complexly mutli-layered nature of a college. Each of the 10 essays in some way attends to the navigation of those creative and productive tensions.

In the opening chapter, Ross Chambers explores the "intersection" of Church and University, and the challenges and opportunities of constructively navigating that intersection. Importantly, he notes that participating in School of Theology at a public university was conceived by the Synod as "a form of mission and public engagement" (5) – a rationale for *academic* theology which I would argue is not widely grasped in the Church.

Ben Myers' chapter exploring 25 years of Systematic Theology at UTC is, perhaps, the one that most explicitly brings to the surface the theological tensions that have surfaced in the college, posing the question of how the "larger inheritance of Christian thought" (39) will shape the Chruch's identity and the formation of ministers.

In their essay, Peter Walker and Nicole Fleming explicitly name the "formative" nature of the tension generated in the college by the diversity of the ministry candidate community, noting, very importantly, the "naïve distinctions between evangelical and liberal theology do not even begin to map the theological diversity of the college community" (48).

Employing an auto-ethnographic approach, Rebecca Lindsay brings the lived experience of being a student to the book through describing the college in David Ford's term, a "community of the heart" (56). She relates the sometimes daunting and overwhelming 'unmaking' that comes with theological study. She forcefully notes the continuing influence of the whiteness of the culture of theological education.

Using oral history, Seforosa Carrol and Carolyn Craig-Emilsen take the question of "Multiculturalism, Theological Learning and Community" head on, employing with great effect the concepts of space and place as filters through which to address the topic and to describe the kind of learning that occurs here. They too pick up the theme of "intersection," describing UTC as a place where learning, culture and faith intersect.

Clive Pearson's chapter, "Pasifika Voices Flourishing in the Presence of Others," offers a very comprehensive account of the Pasifika presence in the college and the many consequences of that for the college and the church. These consequences are not trivial. This presence has, he writes, "initiated fresh methodologies, addressed difficult issues, wrestled with issues to do with belonging, identity and homemaking" (106).

Also using an oral history approach, Myung Hwa Park, also brings the voices of past students to the book, in this case the specific voice of Korean students. We are given an insight into the rawness of the experiences of minority, difference, hybridity, and also discouragement. Nevertheless, something that struck me forcefully in this chapter was the sense of enthusiasm and importance attached to theological study and formation. For all those raw challenges, these students deemed that theological study was worth persisting with.

William Emilsen's chapter on the Camden Theological Library is a very important inclusion. Libraries are vital to any community. He tells the story of how the Library Manager, Moira Bryant, has worked to ensure that the Camden library offers such vitality to both the academy and the church. It is a chapter which also names and deals with one of the abiding tensions that shape theological colleges: the finite nature of the Church's financial resources, a tension that has strongly shaped discussions about theological colleges in the UCA in recent decades.

Mark Hillis's chapter on Life-long Learning outlines the impressive schedule of conferences hosted by UTC pitched at a variety of audiences, but all reflecting the ways in which UTC has served that interface between academy and church by keeping scholarship available to a wider audience, but also, as he says, by being a place of encounter between people from all walks of life.

The final chapter, John Squire's "With Heart and Mind: Research and Publications at UTC," is a nice follow on to Hillis's. It is a reminder that UTC has not just hosted scholars, it also is the business of producing and nurturing them. Squires acknowledges that some would argue that the kind

of research undertaken and which he has outlined is not among "the things that matter." I agree that it does. If our Church's founding document encourages us to thank God for "continuing witness and service of …scholar", then we should be intentional ourselves about producing scholars who themselves contribute to global scholarship.

The chapters in this book are serious essays. Notwithstanding the fact that most of the authors have been closely associated with UTC, their essays are neither nostalgic nor romantic about the College. Nor are they either defensive or reactionary in their explorations of the tensions embedded in its life. All are written with honesty, insight and clarity as well as deep appreciation for the college. And none of them seek unduly to glorify the college. This is a well-conceived collection of essays, and it has been very well edited Emilsen and Curthoys.

Scholarly studies and analyses of the Uniting Church's theological colleges are rare, despite, as I noted at the outset, the contested place which the colleges occupy in the Church. This absence is one factor contributing to the cross-purposes that often characterises discussions about them. This alone is reason to welcome this volume. Despite being occasioned by an anniversary, the volume is not an historical study per se. Its thematic approach invites a different kind of perspective on the College's past. This is well captured by Stephen Pickard in his Foreword to the volume when he writes: "Whilst *Things that Matter* seeks to avoid the triumphalist temptation to eulogize the past, it nonetheless has been written in the hope of encouraging people to look at the College's history anew, expecting to be surprised and, just maybe, reflect on what has happened" (xiii).

The book deserves to be read by faculty of the Uniting Church's other theological colleges, decision-makers in Presbyteries, Synods and the Assembly, as well as anyone who would like to expand their own understanding of what the phrase "theological education" embraces.

Geoff Thompson is a retired Uniting Church Minister, having served in congregational and academic placements. The author of various books on Uniting Church theology, he has also published essays and journal articles on Karl Barth and more general matters of doctrine. He is the author of *Christian Doctrine: a guide for the perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2020). Thompson is a Research Fellow of the University of Divinity, a Fellow of the Wesley Centre, and Editor of *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

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UCS	Uniting Church Studies

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