

On the *Homoousia*

The Liberative Potential of the Nicene Creed*

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Abstract

The affirmation of the co-equality (homoousia) of the first and the second persons of the Trinity at the Council of Nicaea is a major milestone in the history of theology and the church. Established at a time when the Roman empire developed its Christian identity, it has often been assumed that Nicene theology was imperial theology. In this article, the theological surplus of the Nicene position will be examined, investigating its imperial pedigree while also demonstrating the anti-imperial potential and the Nicene Creed's implications for liberative theological thinking then and now.

Keywords

trinitarian theology, religion and empire, theology and empire, theological surplus, church and state, political theology

The ancient ecumenical council of Nicaea marked an important theological turning point when in 325 CE it affirmed the co-equality of God and Jesus, that is, the first and second persons of the Trinity. While this notion of co-equality, *homoousia* in Greek, is at the heart of the development of early Christian theology, it must be considered an ambivalent term in the context of the Roman empire out of which it developed.

* This is a fresh take on an earlier and more extensive version published as chapter 2 of Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). Used by permission.

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While some modern theologians have assumed that these councils are antiquated and outdated, there is a renewed interest in the creeds. The most interesting approaches are engaging the complexity of these ancient traditions and the challenges that they hold, both for their own times and for ours. What is missing in many contemporary efforts, however, is a critical investigation as to what sense the orthodox movements themselves are and are not part of the powers that be.¹ Unless this is explored further, we cannot engage the truly constructive theological elements that emerge here.

The Creeds of the Empire

The peculiarly Christian identity of the Roman empire was established simultaneously with the ecumenical councils of the church. The coincidence is not unusual, since in the ancient world, questions of religion and politics and questions of theology and power go hand in hand. Applying modern conceptions – such as, for instance, the “separation of church and state” – to these ancient theologies can only lead to anachronistic misunderstandings. Still, many theologians and a few historians have tried to disentangle church and state to find pure theology at the core of the decisions of the councils. These efforts mean to rescue the councils from being labelled as sheer political maneuvering, but they are nonetheless misleading.² Rather than trying to secure theology by playing down its connections to empire, we pursue a different path. The search is on for the ways that the unfolding of Christian theology in the Roman empire has been shaped but cannot be entirely explained by the dynamics of empire. Is there a theological surplus³ that is distinct from the interests of empire and thus might have the potential to resist empire?

Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity (in 312 CE; Constantine ruled from 305 to 337), as narrated by his contemporary the early church historian Eusebius, has always been called into question by those who think of conversions as purely religious events. Constantine's conversion, in the words of Eusebius, was based on his realization

¹ For some efforts in this regard, see *Empire and the Christian Traditions: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, ed. Don Compier, Kwok Pui-lan, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

² This position is represented, for instance, by 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). Some historians have tried to show that the influence of Constantine at Nicaea was not as strong as others have argued. See, for instance, Timothy Barnes, *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984). Barnes points out that Constantine did not preside at the Council of Nicaea and was technically not even a member; Ossius, his personal theological advisor, presided instead (Barnes, *Early Christianity*, 57). But for the empire and its theology to function smoothly, there is no need for the emperor to be physically present at all times.

³ For the notion of theological surplus, see Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, 9–10.

that “he would need more powerful aid than an army can supply” and that “those who had confided in a multitude of gods had run into multiple destruction.” Constantine came to the conclusion that the one god “who transcends the universe” was the most powerful source of that aid. After a prayer to this one god, asking him to show “who he was,” Constantine saw a sign over the midday sun, consisting of a “cross-shaped trophy formed from light” and a text that said, “By this conquer.”⁴ Thus, it became clear that the one god was the Christian God. That the Christian God was the most powerful god was subsequently confirmed for Constantine when he triumphed over his enemies. Religious and political concerns cannot be separated in this account; they cannot even be clearly distinguished. Consequently, those who see religion and politics as separate realms have to doubt the sincerity of Constantine’s conversion.

Yet, Constantine follows a different theological logic that is not as foreign to Christian theology as it may appear to modern theologians: if God rules over everything, religion and politics cannot be strictly separated, and neither can there be a clean distinction between spiritual and worldly power; both powers have their origin in the one power of God. Following this line of thought, it does not make much sense to try to assess the sincerity of Constantine’s conversion based on whether he combined political and theological interests or not. Nor does it make sense to judge the value of ancient theological positions based on whether the bishops or the emperor held them. The emperor did not see his realm as limited to politics, and the bishops did not see their realm as limited to theology and religion. The Orthodox Church rejects such bifurcations when it recognizes Constantine as a saint, “equal to the Apostles.”⁵ Constantine talked about himself as being “a bishop appointed by God over those outside [the church],” just as the bishops were appointed over those inside.⁶ If an analysis of these theological positions cannot be built on pointing out the lack of separation between religion, theology, and politics, a more useful question for evaluating these theologies and searching for alternatives is which respective theological and political strategies are endorsed and how to evaluate them.

In the 4th century, a new and closer relationship between the Roman empire and the churches developed. To note this close relationship does not imply that the creeds of the 4th and 5th centuries are mere manifestations of the empire. A certain ambivalence remains in these creeds, a “surplus,” that cannot be fully controlled by the powers that

⁴ See Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, introduction, translation, and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 1.27–28, 79–81.

⁵ John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450–680 A.D.* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 7.

⁶ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, IV.24, 161.

be. But in order to gain access to this surplus, we first need to understand the interconnectedness of the Roman empire, the emperor, the bishops, the church, and the creeds.

The connections of church and empire have their beginnings long before Constantine.⁷ Historian Peter Brown notes that already in the 3rd and early 4th centuries, the church had gained power and unity. “It had become a universal Church, claiming the loyalty of all believers, at just the same time as the Roman empire had become a true empire, with ideological claims on all its subjects.”⁸ The heritage of the church – in all its orthodox and heterodox forms – has been shaped by the intersections of empire and church since the early days. Even the theology of the apostle Paul needs to be read in this light.⁹

Nevertheless, as time went on, a change occurred in the culture of the empire itself: in the 2nd century, the cities in the eastern part of the Roman empire still enjoyed certain levels of autonomy and had their own localized religious and cultural identities. In the 4th century, more centralized structures began to produce more centralized religious and cultural identities. The new form of government in the Roman empire of the 4th century centred on the emperor, who exercised strong influence in all areas of life, including religion. In the Byzantine East after Constantine, where the most important early ecumenical councils took place (Nicaea was no exception), the emperor was considered crowned directly by the Christian God. The emperor, in turn, consecrated the head of the eastern Church.¹⁰ In the West, the reverse was true: the emperor was crowned by the pope.¹¹

Signs of this centralization also affected theology. At the geographical centre was Constantinople, now the prime city of the Roman empire. Local religious traditions were under attack, and many of the local temples and cults were shut down, a process that began with Constantine and was virtually completed under Theodosius before the end of the 4th century. The Christian churches, which had their own distinct local

⁷ Drake also exposes the common misunderstanding that the alignment of church and state was simply a result of Constantine’s personal initiative, as if no other dynamics were at stake: *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 24.

⁸ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 62.

⁹ See chapter 1 of Rieger, *Christ and Empire*.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 54.

¹¹ Pelikan points out that the Western structure was falsely attributed to the emperor Constantine in a forged document of the 8th century, “The Donation of Constantine”: Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 56.

traditions, were pulled into the more centralized outlook of the Roman empire as well. As Brown has observed, Christianity supported “a new, empire-wide patriotism. This was centered on the person and mission of a God-given, universal ruler.”¹² In this process, dissenting churches declared “heretics” under Constantine were prevented from gathering and had their church buildings confiscated.¹³

At the same time, however, the Christian religion also made its claims on the empire: “As a result of the events of the fourth century, it was necessary, for the next thousand years and more, to accept Christ as the eternal King if one wanted to be a temporal King.”¹⁴ Thus, Jaroslav Pelikan describes the particular character of the entwining of church and state from the perspective of the state. Constantine required those who held political office to subscribe to the Nicene Creed (despite his own later personal conversion to Arian sympathies). This publicly mandated subscription to the Nicene Creed was still in effect 12 centuries later during the Protestant Reformation and was one of the reasons the Reformers emphasized their own loyalty to the creeds. The influence of the Christian churches on the Roman empire must not be underestimated. In the words of Brown: “In the last decades of the fourth century, bishops and monks showed that they could sway the will of the powerful as effectively as had any philosopher.”¹⁵

Early Christianity thus supplanted the formative role of Greek culture, which provided the glue for those who otherwise had little in common, by introducing what might be called a “Christian populism”¹⁶ that, in contradistinction to the more elitist character of Greek influence, created space for the cultural production of common people, including lower-class monks. This populism was often 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.¹⁷ In this way, popular movements and the interests of the elites converged in the church even before Constantine.

At a time of growing unrest and crisis in the cities, the bishops’ connections with the common people and the lower classes – who were not otherwise served and whose

¹² Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 17–19.

¹³ Observed by Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 53.

¹⁴ Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*.

¹⁵ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 4.

¹⁶ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 74.

¹⁷ See Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman, “Shifting the Focus of History: Introduction,” in *A People’s History of Christianity: Vol. 2, Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3, 4.

numbers increased in the 4th century – added to their influence. The bishops' support for the poor – usually requiring far less money than the traditional charitable contributions of the wealthy¹⁸ – resulted in the same kind of respect and deference that was paid to the civic leaders by their middle-class clients.¹⁹

But the newly gained influence came at a cost. When Constantine, promoting the expansion of support for the poor in the cities, put the administration of these funds exclusively in the hands of the bishops,²⁰ both the bishops and the poor were brought under control. The bishops, who were instructed to take care of the poor, were reminded that their place was closer to the poor than to the top of society. Canon 17 of the Council of Nicaea prohibits clergy to receive usury from loans of money, noting that “many enrolled among the Clergy, following covetousness and lust of gain, have forgotten the divine Scripture.”²¹ Gradually, the bishops became “controller of the crowds,”²² and in the eastern parts of the Roman empire, the bishops became responsible for the defense of law and order.²³

The economy helped to solidify these growing bonds between church and empire. In the words of Orthodox scholar John Meyendorff, “The new power of the Church was, first of all, economic.”²⁴ Beginning with Constantine, large endowments and other privileges were given to the church, and theological developments need to be seen in this light as well. While this entailed indebtedness to the empire, the church would also be able to use its wealth to influence the empire. No emperor could afford to ignore the bishops and Christianity anymore. Once they began collaborating with the emperors, the wealth of the bishops soon exceeded the wealth of the secular holders of office.²⁵

A closer look at the Council of Nicaea in 325 helps us draw some conclusions and points us toward the relevant theological connections. The council followed the style

¹⁸ Claudia Rapp points out that the public donations of the classical world were mostly directed at their peers. *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 223.

¹⁹ See Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 97.

²⁰ 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: Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 223.

²¹ “The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nice, in Bithynia,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986–89), 36.

²² Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 148.

²³ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 125.

²⁴ Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 13. The building of huge basilicas is one example.

²⁵ See Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: NLB, 1974), 91.

of imperial government in that it produced decrees and pronouncements declared binding for all. Theological debates before Constantine had not produced such creedal expressions.

Constantine's victory over his co-emperor Licinius in 324, which made him the sole emperor of the Roman empire, marked the start of plans for the council. The war against Licinius was waged in terms of the liberation of Christianity, and the purpose of the council was a celebration of the unity of the empire and an effort to reaffirm it. The speech of the emperor at the council, in the version of Eusebius, recalled the victory over 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."²⁶ While there are no historical records of the synod, Eusebius credits the emperor with overcoming the considerable tensions among the bishops and judges the result of the council as a "second victory" over the enemies of the church, following the military victory over Licinius.²⁷

Constantine's basic concern thus had to do with the unification of the Roman empire. He 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."²⁸ In other words, the monarchy of the empire mirrored God's own monarchy. Another example of Constantine's concern for unification was his effort to institute a common date for Easter to create further cultural cohesion.²⁹ The political efforts of unification that undergirded the Council of Nicaea can be seen yet more clearly in the canons attached to the creed. Geographically corresponding to the provinces of the empire, provinces of the church were established, with the bishop in the capital of the province being the superior over the other bishops within the province.

At the council itself, it was the emperor who proposed the term *homoousios* to establish the equality of the first and second persons of the Trinity. Nevertheless, since it represented none of the theological parties involved, the Council of Nicaea dropped out of

²⁶ The speech is reported in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.12, 125–26.

²⁷ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.14, 127.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II.19, 102.

²⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.5, 123. Nevertheless, Alexandria and Rome could not agree on this. The significance of holidays for the unity of the empire can also be seen in the fact that in 321, Constantine declared Sundays to be holidays.

the theological discussion for some time to come. Over a century later, the importance of the Council of Nicaea was evident again when the Council of Chalcedon reaffirmed it in 451 (in the form given to it by the Council of Constantinople in 381). Averil Cameron's judgment sums up the situation for the moment: "The spread of Christianity follows the general history of the empire."³⁰ What are the implications of this judgment for theological interpretation?

The Emperor's Co-equality

A kind of theology that moves mostly in the realm of ideas has often made strong statements about these ancient theologies. In contemporary theology, it has become fashionable to claim, for instance, that the doctrine of the Trinity as developed in Nicaea has an anti-hierarchical bent. At the same time, others have claimed exactly the opposite.³¹ Indeed, the egalitarian implications of the relationship of the first and second persons of the Trinity – the Father and the Son, as the Nicene Creed calls them – are striking. If the first and the second person are truly *homoousios*,³² "of the same substance," as Nicaea claims – there can be no hierarchy between "first" and "second." "We believe in one God ... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten begotten from the Father, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial [*homoousios*] with the Father," proclaims the Nicene Creed.³³ The unity of the Father and the Son indeed implies a challenge of hierarchical relations in the Godhead, particularly as it is affirmed against those who locate the Son on a lower level.³⁴

Nicaea might thus present a certain challenge to the monarchical structure of the empire, but what is left open is how this challenge manifests itself in the context of the Roman empire. At the level of ideas, this formula resists the position of the Arian party, which claimed that there was indeed a qualitative distinction between the first and the second persons, with the Son taking a lower place than the Father. This qualitative

³⁰ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 13.

³¹ For an overview of both tendencies, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 14–15, 237. See also Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 28.

³² For the history of the term, which may have initially been coined by the Gnostics, see Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 269.

³³ Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition, Vol. 1* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 159. The exact phrase in Greek is *homoousion to patri*.

³⁴ Ayres summarizes the main thrust of Nicene theology, which includes later developments on the basis of the Nicene Creed, in terms of unity. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 301.

distinction was expressed both temporally (“there was once when he was not”) and tologically (the second person was “an immutable and unchangeable perfect creature of God,” higher than creation, but lower than the Creator).³⁵ To protect the monotheistic faith and the absolute holiness of God, Arius and his followers claimed a hierarchy where Nicaea claimed equality. That this hierarchy had both theological and political aspects is confirmed, for instance, by the Arian theologian Eunomius, who made it clear that he wanted to preserve both the superiority of God and the monarchy.³⁶ 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.

But even if the emphasis was on the co-equality (*homoousios*) of the first and the second persons of the Trinity, a strict separation of divinity and the rest of creation was assumed – rather than the more gradual differentiation that would have been customary in Roman religions and certain pre-Nicene Christian theologies that pursued subordinationist understandings of Christ. This separation of divinity and creation had its consequences. Virginia Burrus gives an example when she observes how the separation of divinity and humanity plays itself out in terms of the dualism of culture, put on the level of the divine, and nature, put at the level of the merely human: “Divine Sonship became the site for the articulation of culture’s triumphant subsuming of nature. Henceforth, men were ‘begotten, not made,’ and the observable arts of male self-fashioning ... came to be read as signs encoding the mysteries of a purely transcendent procreation.”³⁷

What is the sociopolitical context of this particular distinction between God and the rest of the world? Between the 2nd and the 5th centuries, at a time when social differentiations between those in power and the rest were becoming more aggravated, divine power came to be identified ever more clearly in opposition to all other forms of power. This power was located in a realm that was removed, as Brown has argued, “to a quite exceptional degree – ideally, removed totally – from the ambiguity, the criticism, the envy, and the resentment that were observed to attend the impingement on fellow

³⁵ Arius, as quoted by Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, Book I.5, in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 67. Since most of Arius’ texts have been destroyed, we have to go by the references given by Athanasius and others. The second phrase, talking about the “perfect creature,” is from a letter by Arius to Alexander of Alexandria: Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, 31. The phrase “there was once when he was not” is explicitly condemned in the anathema of the Nicene Creed.

³⁶ See Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als Politisches Problem: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Politischen Theologie im Imperium Romanum* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner, 1935), 94.

³⁷ Virginia Burrus, “*Begotten Not Made*”: *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 34.

human beings of mere human skill, human force, and human powers of persuasion.”³⁸ nevertheless, this divine power was not removed altogether but represented on earth by a small elite, headed by the emperor.³⁹ Church leaders and bishops played an important role in this regard; along with the emperor, they mediated the supernatural. These people were expected to ameliorate the tensions of the world through the stability of the changeless divine.⁴⁰

While Nicaea was the product of a collaborative effort of people with differing points of view, the theology and praxis of an individual theologian helps us take a closer look at what was at stake. Athanasius developed a keen interest in the Council of Nicaea 15 years after the council met, at a time when it did not seem to have had much of an impact on anything.⁴¹ Arius, whose theology had been one of the targets of the council, had already died in 335 or 336. The younger Athanasius only began making strong references to Arius and Nicaea in 338, after Gregory (who was to replace him as bishop) came to Alexandria. In 339, Athanasius called Gregory an “Arian,” reclaiming the usefulness of the old debate and effectively reinscribing Arianism.⁴² It took yet another decade until the term *homoousios* became prominent (after 350).⁴³ While the Council of Nicaea itself thus cannot be considered as the great turning point in the history of the church, its aftermath was significant. Athanasius was the one who constructed the idea of Nicaea as ecumenical and authoritative – and he only got to this after 350, in his *On the Council of Nicaea*. Athanasius came up with the novel idea of identifying the Nicene Creed with apostolic tradition, and he was the first to call the bishops “Fathers.”⁴⁴

Athanasius’ theological interests in *theosis* or “divinization” were related to his basic concern for the full divinity of Christ, which was emphasized in Nicaea’s identification of Christ as *homoousios* with the Father. Based on the assertion of Christ’s divinity, Athanasius summed up the key point of divinization: the divine Christ was made man so that we can be made God.⁴⁵ This approach has theological merits: the doctrine of

³⁸ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 12.

³⁹ 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 Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 29.

⁴⁰ See Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, 17.

⁴¹ See Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 15.

⁴² See Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 60–61. Athanasius was reinstated as bishop in 346.

⁴³ See Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 112.

⁴⁴ Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 63.

⁴⁵ 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.

salvation, for instance, can break free of a narrow preoccupation with original sin, which had come to preoccupy the West after Augustine; divinization creates a real change in humanity and in the world (although not to the extent that humans actually become identical with God). Nevertheless, Athanasius' approach also carried with it a strictly hierarchical understanding – like Nicaea, Athanasius drew a strict line between Creator and creation⁴⁶ – that ultimately led to a devaluation of humanity. This problem is also manifest in other aspects of Athanasius' Christology. A quote from Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, is telling: "For ... the Logos disguised himself by appearing in a body, that he might, as a Man, transfer men to Himself and center their senses on Himself."⁴⁷ Christ's humanity is merely seen as a disguise here, with little consequence. The underlying assumption about divinity is that it is changeless and not to be infected by material things. Athanasius shares a strong suspicion of matter and its mutability.

Athanasius paid little attention to the particulars of the humanity of Christ or to Christ's life. When he talks about the human body of Christ, his main argument is that Christ assumed a human body so that we can be liberated from it.⁴⁸ Christ's divine nature, his *homoousia* with the Father, is what really matters, including his impassibility and omniscience. This particular unity of Son and Father might be interpreted in terms of a homogeneous relationship between the persons of the Trinity, especially if the human nature of Christ is not allowed to make any difference. Could this tendency toward homogeneity be a parallel to Athanasius' efforts to create unity in terms of producing an (imagined) unity of the "Fathers" at the Council of Nicaea?⁴⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, no radical in matters of doctrinal critique, puts it bluntly: "The consensus suggested by such an exposition of 'the Nicene faith' is an illusion."⁵⁰

Who benefits from this illusory unity? And what is the theological problem? Athanasius' Christology, building on Nicaea and the *homoousios*, seems to lead to an anthropological vacuum and a realm of abstractions. If humanity is left undefined, something will fill in the void. The same is true for divinity, the more important concern of Athanasius. Could it be that his image of divinity is defined unconsciously by some model empire

⁴⁶ "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.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 40–41.

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, there were no "acts" of the Council of Nicaea; it is fairly clear, however, that there was a high level of dissension that was later changed to a reputation for unity, claimed by Athanasius. See Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 59.

⁵⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 207.

and model emperor – perhaps the Emperor Constantine himself as described by Eusebius, who also strove for unity and for the homogeneity of the empire?⁵¹ Does the *homoousia* of Jesus and God aim at this kind of divinity? And would not this definition of divinity ultimately have to swallow up the definition of humanity as well?

Underlying theological issues here point us back to the theological separation of divinity and humanity. Burrus comments, from a feminist perspective:

This sustained dichotomy helps structure a subjectivity that paradoxically both inscribes a sharp cosmological opposition between the human and the divine and reassigns “divine” status to men—disowning the messes made on the earthly plane, which are swallowed up by the “great maw” of the salvific Word.⁵²

Put more broadly, a quasi “divine” status is being assigned to all those who are in positions of power. By the same token, whatever happens on the “human” plane is excused as “merely human” and “fallible,” and thus it can be neglected theologically. When seen from this perspective, the empire and its power can be embraced and used for divine purposes.

Here we must note another signature trait of empire: the middle road. In the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius justified his position by pointing to “so many bishops in unanimity” with him who could not possibly be wrong.⁵³ The problem with the heretics, according to this position, was that they were too extreme, unable to find a “middle road,” somehow not in touch with what the majority considered tradition and in opposition to the so-called Fathers. Of course, there is a problem with this middle road because it is ultimately determined by the powers that be. The middle is not the most balanced place, as is commonly assumed, but the place most attuned with the status quo. As Pelikan points out: “Not everyone had equal weight in the determination of what was believed by all; priests counted for more than laymen, bishops for more than priests, synods and councils for more than individual bishops.”⁵⁴

In sum, the logic of the empire is mirrored by the logic of certain theological moves of the Council of Nicaea and the theologians who pursued the insights of those councils.

⁵¹ Eusebius reported the pattern of a typical public speech by Constantine: *Life of Constantine*, IV.29. Beginning with a critique of polytheism, he would emphasize the sovereignty of the one God (after that, talk about Christ and divine judgment). Grillmeier tellingly describes Eusebius’ emphasis on the unifying force of the empire: polytheism is overcome by monotheism just as polyarchy is overcome by monarchy. *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 251. In this context, the Roman monarchy represents the heavenly monarchy.

⁵² Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 39.

⁵³ See Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 334.

⁵⁴ Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 338.

Not only the content, however, but also the 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 made possible the transmission of the gospel. Already Origen argued that Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus for a reason; with Augustus, the many kingdoms on earth were reduced to a single empire. “It would have hindered Jesus’ teaching from being spread through the whole world if there had been many kingdoms.”⁵⁵ Eusebius was Origen’s intellectual heir, arguing that God used the empire to prepare the way of the gospel; what God began with Augustus he completed with Constantine.⁵⁶ From this point of view, the *Pax Romana* was created not by the Romans but by Christ, and therefore it was to be promoted by the Christian churches. A divided church meant a divided empire, and unity in faith was to be achieved through 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.”⁵⁷ In a context that still had pluralistic traits, homogeneity did not come naturally but had to be produced. One strategy to achieve more theological homogeneity, demonstrated by Athanasius’ construction of Arianism, was to produce the illusion of a homogeneous heresy.⁵⁸

While our focus has been mostly on the eastern parts of the Roman empire, we should note that the church helped preserve Roman ideals and Roman universalism in the west as well, even after Rome was permanently occupied by the Goths in 476. The kinds of unity and universalism that are established here are connected to positions of power that leave little room for others.

The Resistance Factor of Co-equality

While the Roman empire had a significant impact on the formation of theology, the crucial question is in what sense creeds can exceed the perspective of the empire. Is

⁵⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* II.30; quoted in Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 89.

⁵⁶ Eusebius did not mention Augustus but summarized the great deeds of Constantine. Peterson points out that this idea of Eusebius had an enormous effect. It can be found almost everywhere in patristic writing (for instance, in Chrysostom, Diodor, Theodoret). *Der Monotheismus*, 82. Meyendorff mentions the agreement on this issue of Eusebius, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Prudentius, Ambrose, Jerome, and Orosius. Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 30.

⁵⁷ Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 33.

⁵⁸ Lewis Ayres mentions that one of the goals of Athanasius’ *Orations against the Arians* was to produce a unified heresiology that drew together a complex and wide-ranging controversy containing many tensions under the specter of “Arianism.” *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 117.

there some ambivalence in how they do theology that escapes being homogenized by the empire, some theological surplus that pushes in a different direction, providing different theological and political impulses? For all the influence of empires, there is something about Christianity that seems to challenge the status quo of empires. After all, the 2nd-century philosopher Celsus already perceived Christianity as a threat to the Roman empire and a voice of rebellion; Christian monotheism, he claimed, would lead to the rejection of the values and gods of the wider community.⁵⁹

Once again, the main problem is not that bishops and emperors were “political” when they developed the creeds. The question has to do with whose politics were played out and whose politics were repressed as the creeds were formulated. Early Christianity was a socially and theologically diverse group that included not only the powerful but also large groups of lower-class people. While these lower classes received more attention and care from Christianity than from anyone else in the Roman empire, it is not clear how much influence and how much of a voice they ultimately had. Their influence might be envisioned in various ways – and here is where we need to begin our search for the theological “surplus” of the creeds.

Brown formulates one of the basic paradoxes: “In the name of a religion that claimed to challenge the values of the elite, upper-class Christians gained control of the lower classes of the cities.”⁶⁰ This means, first of all, that the lives of upper-class Christians and the lives of the lower classes were intertwined in a special way. In early Christianity, the classes were not as strictly separated as they customarily were elsewhere in the Roman empire. This connection between the classes might have been beneficial for all, but it had particular benefits for the rich because it supported their claim to power and justified their wealth. The churches themselves were major landowners and employers; the Great Church at Constantinople, for instance, had separate departments that would oversee land in different regional holdings.⁶¹ Nevertheless, these interconnections of rich and poor might also have had unexpected impacts on the formation of doctrine in the councils. As Brown has shown, the sense of solidarity with the poor that distinguished Christianity in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries from a more general Roman sense for the civic community “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 is the “early Christian sense of the joining of God and humanity in the person of Christ,

⁵⁹ Reference in Peterson, *Der Monotheismus*, 60–61.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 78.

⁶¹ See Averil Cameron, ed., *Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. XIV: Late Antiquity, Empire and Successors, 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 337.

and by mysterious extension, in the persons of the poor.”⁶² This joining of God and humanity had practical consequences that seem radical even today: the Theodosian Code included five laws (from 392 to 432) that supported church asylum and endorsed it as an existing ecclesial practice. Asylum seekers included not only people unable to pay their debts but also people accused of criminal charges.⁶³

One of the problems of Nicaea, as we have seen, is that the unity Athanasius constructed after the fact produced a kind of homogeneity that was not realized at the council itself. The notion of *homoousios*, for instance, is not a homogeneous concept, and it is commonly noted that this term, suggested by the Emperor Constantine, does not have much precision.⁶⁴ But this imprecision and the ambivalence that goes with it might turn out to be a good thing. Even a historical theologian like Grillmeier, who does not problematize Nicaean homogeneity, praises the open-endedness of the *homoousios*.⁶⁵ To him, this open-endedness signifies the faithfulness of the Nicene fathers, who did not take control by devising their own narrow concepts; instead, they took up an earlier baptismal creed “and inserted into it their clauses directed against Arius.”⁶⁶ In the indeterminacy of the *homoousios* and the fact that the council relied on older theological resources, Grillmeier even notes a certain independence from the empire. Going beyond Grillmeier’s fairly idealistic portrayal, we might find in this indeterminacy a mark of the multitude of the people who cannot easily be pressed into one form.

If the *lex credendi* is indeed the *lex orandi* – that is, if what is believed is rooted in common worship⁶⁷ – we need to allow for the possibility that some aspects of the indeterminacy and ambivalence of the term *homoousios* have to do with popular worship. In this case, the piety connected to the lives and struggles of the people cannot easily be pressed into Athanasius’ efforts to create homogeneity. Ambivalence and open-endedness might therefore be closely tied to the fact that the empire can never completely control the people. 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 that was suppressed in Athanasius’ later accounts. Orthodoxy itself, we must note, contains tensions and ambivalences. The mistaken assumption that orthodoxy is changeless (or at least that it

⁶² This is the summary of his book *Poverty and Leadership* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 111–12.

⁶³ See Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 254, 257.

⁶⁴ Grillmeier points out Constantine’s confusions in his understanding of the first and second persons of the Trinity and questions how much sense his *homoousios* would have made. *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 261–64.

⁶⁵ Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 270.

⁶⁶ Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 266.

⁶⁷ This is Prosper of Aquitaine’s principle: “The rule of prayer should lay down the rule of faith.”

develops in linear and controlled fashion) and that only heresy undergoes dramatic development has prevented closer investigations of orthodoxy and its own metamorphoses. 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.

Here we need to rethink the ways in which we usually judge theological concepts. In regard to the *homoousios*, for instance, we tend to assume that if the term is conceptually vague and indeterminate, it must be because it is politically rather than theologically motivated. But what if the opposite is true? In the Roman empire, the desire to give precise and unequivocal definitions seems to be pushed by those who seek control and who pursue the politics of top-down power. There may be good theological reasons to keep things open and indeterminate. Lewis Ayres talks about “the pluralistic nature of this original Nicene theology,” which was “a fluid and diverse phenomenon, and one that kept evolving.”⁶⁸ This does not necessarily mean that everything is relative. As Ayres, who is no relativist, has pointed out, while no one may have been able to say what the term *homoousios* included, the key point of the council was that everyone would have known what it excluded – in other words, the Arian position that somehow subordinated the Son to the Father: “The promulgation of *homoousios* involved a conscious lack of positive definition of the term.”⁶⁹ In the end, Athanasius’ own understanding may have been more open than is commonly realized; he later broadened his own horizons and accepted the theology of the *homoiousios* camp.⁷⁰ A position that develops limits rather than positive guidelines leaves some space for surplus and resistance. If orthodoxy itself is seen as a complex phenomenon that contains tensions and disagreements, it cannot be unilaterally claimed by the powers that be.

The diversity that was a fact of life in the Roman empire and particularly in the early church might therefore be seen as a place where resistance could ferment, even though, of course, not without ambivalence.⁷¹ Contrary to a common assumption, the history of the church is not that of initial unity that branched out into diversity later, but of a diverse and complex reality that did not easily conform to an empire seeking to inspire

⁶⁸ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 99.

⁶⁹ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 90–91, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ What matters to him is that there is a common opposition to those who see Christ as a creature. See Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 210.

⁷¹ There existed a certain amount of pluralism in the empire, more so in the east, but keep in mind that “the imperial government was tolerant of cultural diversity, as long as its political authority was not challenged,” Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 25.

and enforce uniformity.⁷² This diversity comprises both theological and social positions, and the open-endedness of such positions can help resist the grab for power by the few over the many. Expressed in terms of social diversity, Burrus and Lyman's reminder sums up the challenge to empire: "Perhaps the most notable characteristic of ancient Christian communities ... is the instability and flexibility of social hierarchies, rather than their absence."⁷³ What otherwise might look like "seemingly irrational zig-zags" can at times be marks of the resistance of the people to the homogeneity and universality of empire.

Another way in which the Council of Nicaea's affirmation of Jesus' co-equality with God challenged the Roman empire has to do with what most likely was one of the worries of Arius. Arius' resistance to the co-equality of God and Jesus appears to have had less to do with a "low Christology" (as liberal theologians have tried to understand him) 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 would challenge both the unity and the holiness of God. Such a God would no longer be absolutely separate from and above the messiness of the world. In addition, putting Jesus on the same level as God introduces the latent threat of challenging God's impassibility and immutability and 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 another understanding of God – although this was probably not yet recognized by most of the Nicene fathers or by Constantine: the Arians might have been clearer about this and were thus rightly worried. This move had long-term consequences, both theological and political. The Nicene connection of Jesus and God introduced not only equality but also a messiness into the divine itself that challenges homogeneity and deconstructs conformity and notions sameness. Once again, a homogeneous understanding of unity was questioned, and with it a homogeneous understanding of power. When the Nicene Creed introduced another person into the Godhead, difference became part of the divine heart of reality, and unilateral control was challenged.

Church historian Justo González has formulated another possible consequence, based on Jesus' life and ministry: "If a carpenter condemned to death as an outlaw, someone who had nowhere to lay his head, was declared to be 'very God of very God,' such a declaration would put in doubt the very view of God and of hierarchy on which

⁷² 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.

⁷³ Burrus says that ancient Christianity "may thus be seen as a broadly popular and democratizing movement." *A People's History of Christianity*, 2:22.

imperial power rested.” Gonzalez surmises that this challenge to the empire was the reason Constantine had second thoughts and why he ordered Arius readmitted into the church.⁷⁴ In an older contribution that appears to struggle against the empire politics of the German Third Reich, a somewhat similar argument is made. Erik Peterson argues that while the empire was supported by monotheism – assuming that monotheism and monarchy are closely related – the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity posed a threat to empire. The doctrine of the Trinity, as Gregory of Nazianzus had pointed out in the 4th century, established a peculiar sort of monarchy that is not governed by one ruler but by a triune ruler. Since this model cannot have a parallel in nature, Peterson concludes, it cannot be claimed and therefore misused by the powers that be.⁷⁵ But there might be more to this position than Peterson realizes.

Following a similar logic as González, theologian Rowan Williams (the former Archbishop of Canterbury) claims that Nicaea pushed toward the recognition that “God is not an individual”; this means that “God’s will cannot be adequately understood in the terms of self-assertion or contest for control in which so much of our usual discourse is cast.”⁷⁶ Seeing God in this way – as a nonindividualistic, nonhierarchical, and differentiated community of equals – would be a significant step beyond the logic of empire, although Williams does not address this issue.

By introducing Jesus into the Godhead, Nicaea also opened the way for future questions about the immutability and impassibility of Godself – although virtually everyone at the time, whether heretic or orthodox, from Arius to Athanasius, agreed that God is impassible. If Jesus did indeed suffer and die on the cross, God’s own immutability and impassibility would eventually need to be reassessed. Moreover, including Jesus in the Godhead as co-equal (*homoousios*) 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, which cannot be controlled by the homogeneity of empire. It is hardly an accident that the life of Christ is not mentioned in the creeds;

⁷⁴ Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 108.

⁷⁵ See Gregory of Nazianzen, “The Third Theological Oration: On the Son,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 301. Peterson argues against “political theology,” which, he states, can exist only in pagan or Jewish religions. See *Der Monotheismus*, 96–100.

⁷⁶ Williams identifies connections to the German church struggle in the 1930s, drawing a parallel between Barth and Athanasius; both rejected theological efforts to split up the existence of God and thus to control God. *Arius*, 267, 237–38. Of course, he also notes that such theologies are “capable of as much ideological distortion as [their] opposites” (*Arius*, 239). Athanasius’ faith can be both a resource of resistance and the justification of “unscrupulous tactics.”

such “accidents,” like Freudian slips of the tongue, always point to deeper repressions (and the surpluses that spring from them). The challenge to empire posed by the life of Christ would have just been too great. Yet, the subversive potential of the 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), even if only at the levels of the unconscious. Where the creeds without particular attention to the life of Christ are considered sufficient, on the other hand, this challenge is lost, which makes the “orthodox” position so convenient for the empire.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Nicaea, particularly in terms of potential resistance against empire, is in what the council did not do. Nicaea did not give a precise definition of the co-equality of God and Christ that would resolve paradox and tension. This results in promoting some open-endedness where we might least expect it and allowing those who are not served well by the status quo of dominant power to perceive that things are not set in stone. There is thus some room for hope that God might break in, surprise us, and change things. Nicaea also displayed some potential for resisting empire when it set limits. As we have seen, its confessions can limit hierarchical and subordinationist frameworks of divinity that tend to mirror the structures of top-down power. This does not mean that the council itself fleshed out and developed the alternatives, but it created space for them and thus left room for the production of a surplus that can never be quite captured by the powers that be.

A final note: when traditional and classical Christology today is often identified in terms of theories that deal with Christ’s “sacrifice,” the Christology that emerged in Nicaea can offer some relief, because it did not canonize theories of sacrifice and substitution.⁷⁷ Nicaea’s stubborn focus on the incarnation of Christ might push us in new directions that emphasize what is life giving rather than death dealing.

⁷⁷ When the Nicene Creed talks about salvation, it states, “for us humans and for our salvation [Christ] came down and became incarnate, became human, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead.” Pelikan, *Creeds*, 159.