

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion--all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.

From *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, ed. H. Percival, in the *Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series (New York: Charles Scribners, 1990), *Vol XIV*, 3

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Here is another translation. recently done by the ecumenical English Language Liturgical Commission (ELLC). It is said to is truer to Greek original than the second translation below. The words, "and the Son" (filioque in Latin), later added in the West, are included in brackets.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Some Internet Sites:

- <http://www.kencollins.com/why-07.htm>
<http://www.kencollins.com/bible-c1.htm>
- <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/history/creed.nicene.txt>
- <http://www.humanities.cuny.edu/history/reader/nicreed.htm>
- <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11049a.htm>

- <http://encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/51/05187000.htm?z=1&pg=2&br=1>
- <http://www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm>
- <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/creeds.htm>
- <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-history.html>

Suggested Reading:

- *The Rise of Christianity*, by W.H.C. Frend, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 492-508.
- *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 56-59.
- *Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, J.B. Bury Ed., Chapter XXI, Vol. 3, pp. 350-419.
- *The Nicene Creed, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, The Book of Confessions*, 1991, p. 1.1-3.

Of all the materials described above, I found the chapter taken from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to be by far the most comprehensive, though it was written over 200 years ago.

One of the minor accomplishments of my life was to read all seven volumes of Gibbon shortly after I graduated from law school 25 years ago. I remember well reading Gibbon's discussion of the synod at Nice (or Nicaea), but I did not recall the specific nature of the problem, other than that the issue struck me at the time as being esoteric in the extreme. I wondered then, and still do, how the bishops could be so sure of themselves (over a point of doctrine this obscure and abstruse) that they would be willing to anathematize each other over it.

The discussion in Gibbon, Ch. XXI of Vol. 3 is approximately 70 pages long. My other sources¹ do not treat the subject nearly as thoroughly as Gibbon, but they do tend to support him as being essentially accurate in his report of the event. Taking all of these sources together, my understanding of the Creed and the Council that promulgated it is as follows.

The Nicene Creed was adopted in 325 C.E., at the partial instigation of the emperor Constantine, who acted as self appointed mediator at the synod. Until Constantine's conversion, the early Christians had suffered much persecution, and recently, under the anti-Christian laws of the emperor Diocletian, many Christians had been forced to renounce their faith. The advent of Constantine, and the Edict of Milan, were supposed to ensure universal toleration, but in fact, the early Christians turned out to be as intolerant of others as others had been of them, and in the end they proved to be even more intolerant of each other.

¹*The Rise of Christianity*, by W.H.C. Frend, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984; and *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.

Under the reign of Diocletian, Constantine's not so distant predecessor, the Church had been legally proscribed. As a result, at the conclusion of the civil war that placed Constantine at the head of the Roman Empire, there were many unsettled controversies surrounding who was orthodox and who was not. Before Constantine, these issues were not subject to final adjudication, at least not in this world. Would that it had remained so.

With the ascension of Constantine, Christianity became the state religion overnight, and when this happened, theological problems became political problems. The marriage between church and state was not, in my opinion, made in heaven. However the church now had the power of the state, and it quickly used it as a means of enforcing orthodoxy and quelling dissent, not always with success, but not for want of trying.

Regarding the question at hand, Constantine wanted peace and harmony in the Church, more than anything else, and he called the Council of Nice in the hope of settling some of the problems of doctrine that were vexing the Church. Peace and harmony, however, would have required toleration of opposing views, and that particularly Christian attribute has been absent from the Church for much of its history, alas.

A primary concern at the Council was how to exclude the followers of Arius from communion with what has come to be called the "Catholic" or "Orthodox" Church. (As it turned out, the Arian heresy was not put to rest at Nicaea, and in fact plagued both the Church and the Empire for hundreds of years to come.²)

At the heart of the controversy was a dispute over the nature of the Trinity. Now the mystery of the Trinity, as interpreted by the early Church fathers at the time of the Council of Nice, cannot possibly be placed in its proper context without an understanding of the influence that Platonism (and to some extent, Middle Platonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism) had on the Church at the time. Certain aspects of Plato's philosophy were very well known and well respected among the early Christian fathers.

One particular tradition of Platonism, largely oral, but adumbrated in written form in the *Timaeus*, was held by many, including Augustine and Boethius, to have anticipated the Trinity. The *Wisdom of Solomon*, which is part of our Apocrypha, and which received the approval of the Church at the Council of Trent, is said to be very much in the Platonic spirit. Origen and Eusebius, two of the most famous and well respected of the leaders of the early Church, lived at the time of the Council of Nice, both were in some sympathy with the Arians, and both were manifestly of the Platonic school of Christianity. (The most well known of the pagan neo-Platonic philosophers was Plotinus and his disciple Porphyrus, who wrote in the third century C.E..)

Plato was an Athenian philosopher who was born in the 5th century B.C. and died not long before Alexander the Great first conquered, and then Hellenized, North Africa and the

²The German Barbarians, particularly the Goths, who, many years after Nicaea, eventually overran the Western Roman Empire and sacked Rome, were largely followers of Arius, which put them at odds with the Catholic Church.

Mediterranean World, in the fourth century B.C.E. As a result of Alexander's success, Greek became the *lingua franca* of a large part of the Western world, including Alexandria, Egypt and Antioch in Syria. Not surprisingly, Plato's ideas were common currency in the Greco-Roman world at the time of the Council of Nice, as well as before and since.

The Platonic doctrine that held so much appeal to the early Christian fathers was one that recognized three aspects of God: (1) the unmoved mover or first cause (a principal idea in the philosophy by Aristotle³), (2) the mysterious *Logos*, which is variously translated, often as the intellectual principal or sometimes simply as "the Word," and (3) the soul or animating spirit of the universe. It was easy for the early Christians to identify God with the first cause, and to equate the soul of the universe with the Holy Spirit. The *Logos* was more difficult, being the most ineffable of the three Platonic ideas. As best I can tell, the Greeks thought of the *Logos* as something akin to God the workman, though it really defies succinct definition. The idea was that the unmoved mover, or first cause, did not interact directly with the world, and so some *intermediate* force was required to perform this office. Even before Christ, the *Logos* was described as the Son of an Eternal Father, creator and governor of the world.

The popularity of this particular Platonic Trinitarian world view owed much, ironically, to the great Hellenized Jewish philosopher Philo, a resident of Alexandria Egypt, who was a contemporary of Paul. And it is probably not an accident that the controversy that led to the Nicene Creed arose from Alexandria. In any event, the early Church quickly and readily applied this Philo-Platonic notion to the Trinity. Jehovah, or God the Father, was identified with the unmoved mover, Jesus with the *Logos*, and the Holy Spirit with the animating world soul, or something like it.

The Philo-Platonic world view is frequently associated with the author of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning there was the Word." This, the first sentence of John's Gospel, is undoubtedly Platonic in origin. The Gospel of John, as has been frequently observed, differs considerably from the first three (Synoptic) gospels in many respects, one of which is its notable philosophical strain and its Platonic association of the Christ with the *Logos* —translated as "the Word" in many English translations of the Bible. (It is my understanding that John's Gospel had a slightly harder time making the canon than did the others. It represents a distinct tradition of the early Church, but one which differs markedly from Matthew, Mark and Luke, in this and other regards.)

The problem, as I see it, is that although the early Christians, with their Platonic heritage, were well situated to adopt a Trinitarian outlook as a fundamental part of their new theology, they were unable to deny their Jewish heritage, which was just as strong, if not more so, than the Greek; and the Jewish Old Testament tradition stands for nothing if not strict monotheism. Now it has always been difficult to reconcile strict monotheism with the deification of a "created" thing, much less a person.⁴ It was thought by some to be somewhat easier to square this circle if that person were identical with God, and this was the viewpoint of the Sabellian heresy.

³As time went on, the Catholic church tended to elevate Aristotle above Plato.

⁴This is why the Nicene Creed emphasizes that Christ was "begotten not made."

At the time of the Council of Nice, the Sabellians were alive and well, but as they were not thought to be a threat, little attention was paid to them. However, Sabellianism, in its strictest form—like Gnosticism—tended to deny Christ his humanity. The orthodox Church, at the Council of Nice, adopted a middle, if certainly a controversial, ground on the whole issue. This stance, reflected in the Nicene Creed, is midway between (1) the views of the extreme Gnostics and Sabellians, on the one hand, and (2) those, like Arius and Paul of Samosata (one time Bishop of Antioch), on the other hand, who emphasized the differences between God and Christ. The result of this compromise is the mystery of the Trinity, a doctrine which few theologians even pretend to fully comprehend—which may be its most edifying point.

(As between the Sabellians and the Arians, the former were less affected by the Council of Nice than the latter, for reasons which Gibbon explains and which I will treat later. The reason was mainly that the Sabellians were not presently thought to be a threat. The main thrust of the Nicene Creed was directed at the followers of Arius.)

Arius' view was certainly logical, but it also strayed too far from monotheism. Arius was of the same view that most children have: God the Father is naturally somewhat superior to God the Son. God the Father has existed always, but the Son was begotten, and therefore, would logically seem to lack that essential attribute of absolute divinity: being before all time, including, presumably, before being begot. Further, the Arians had the notion that Christ was somehow created by God and was therefore doubly distinct from and subordinate to him.

My description of the views of Arius, if not entirely accurate, is at least close enough to give an idea of the controversy. Arius frequently insisted that there must have been a time before the Son was begotten; this seems implicit in the notion of being born. He certainly did have logic on his side in this regard. Arius, in stressing the distinctions between the Father and the Son, thought he was combating the Sabellians; however, the church fathers thought Arianism more of a threat than Sabellianism, and so, Arius got all of the attention. As a result, a good Sabellian can say the Nicene Creed with less hesitation than can a follower of Arius.⁵ In the inimitable words of Gibbon:

But as the degrees of theological hatred depend on the spirit of the war rather than on the importance of the controversy, the heretics [i.e., the Arians] who degraded [Christ's divinity], were treated with more severity than those [i.e., the Sabellians] who annihilated, the person of the Son.⁶

Now there was no doubt that Christ was "begotten." And so this could not be left out of the Creed, but it could still be argued that he was "begotten before all worlds,"⁷ and furthermore, he was "begotten not made," to boot. Arius maintained that this still allowed room for his views,

⁵However, the Creed is mercifully ambiguous enough that even Arius was able to accommodate his views to that of the Creed of Nice, or at least the first part of it.

⁶Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter XXI, Vol. 3.

⁷In this Arius agreed, since it did not expressly negate the existence of a point of time before that when Christ did not exist.

and that may have been the intent of some of the bishops at the Council.

If the majority of the bishops at Nice could have had their way, the first part of the Creed would have been even stronger, and it is clear that the choice of words were specifically designed to combat the Arian heresy. However, Constantine thought this dispute ought to be among philosophers, and should not trouble the Church, and it was he, so it is maintained by some, that first suggested the use of the Greek word *homoousion* to describe the relationship between God the Son and God the Father.

The use of this word—which during a previous anti-Sabellian synod had been proscribed—certainly contributed to the abstruse, if not cryptic, nature of the Creed, and which altogether was not a bad thing. First, the word *homoousion* had the advantage of ambiguity. (The addition of a diphthong changes the meaning entirely, and the Latin speakers at the Council were reported to have been confused by this.) The translation commonly used for *homoousion* is consubstantial, and we interpret it to mean that the Son is of the same “substance” as the Father, which is neither the same as saying that they are identical or that they are different.

In any event, the word *homoousion* was sufficiently vague to satisfy most people at the time of the Council and since, even Arius himself. Further, the language about being “begotten before all worlds” was also acceptable to Arius (reluctantly) because it did not negate the idea that there was a time when Christ did not exist. These concessions by Arius were good enough for Constantine, who could occasionally be liberally minded, and he ordered Arius reinstated in the communion,⁸ without the necessity of subscribing to the second part of the Creed, which we have prudently discarded.

The original Nicene Creed went on to remove any element of doubt on the subject of closet Arianism by insisting that a subscriber to the Creed also recite:

And those that say, ‘There was when he was not,’ and ‘Before he was begotten he was not,’ and that, ‘He came into being from what-is-not,’ or those that allege, that the Son of God is ‘of another substance or essence’ or ‘created’ or ‘changeable’ or ‘alterable,’ these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

If you don’t think we pick-and-choose in these matters, then ask yourself why we conveniently don’t recite the entire Creed.

For many years to come, the Church, in various Councils, under Constantine and his immediate successors, successively repudiated Arianism *and then adopted it as an article of faith(!)*; however, in the end, thanks largely to the efforts of the Athanasius, the anti-Arians won out, and the Nicene Creed is a part of the Catholic as well as Protestant theologies to this day.

I agree with Arius that the Nicene Creed leaves room for more than one interpretation, and thus, I for one, can recite it in good conscience. Nevertheless, since I do not see Arianism as

⁸This was something Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who was at heart a fanatic, refused to do, knowing as he did Arius’ true sentiments; but that is another story.

a threat worthy of combating, and because I doubt whether anyone would get exercised over this issue any more even if they understood it, I see its religious relevance as marginal. (Actually — as on so many other things— I am of two minds on this subject, because I realize that if the Nicene Creed were not occasionally a part of the liturgy, many of us would never ask what it is all about.)