

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE FIRST COUNCIL OF NICAEEA TRINITY, CHRISTOLOGY, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

Siby Kavattu[♦]

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru

Abstract

This paper explores the theological significance of the Trinitarian and Christological definitions of the first Council of Nicaea, which formally codified the doctrines of the Church for the first time in history. It examines the context and background of the council, its proceedings, key teachings, subsequent controversies, acceptance and rejection of its decisions, and the present understanding and interpretation of its lasting ecumenical impact.

Key Words: Council of Nicaea, Trinity, Christology, Orthodoxy, Arianism

Introduction

Ecumenical councils have consistently held a position of paramount significance in the theological, doctrinal, and historical evolution of the Catholic Church⁵¹. As articulated by Norman Tanner, a preeminent scholar in the study of ecumenical councils, 'these assemblies seem to have produced what may be regarded as among the most consequential texts in Christian tradition, second

[♦] Dr. Siby Kavattu is a Catholic priest belong to the Congregation of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). He holds a doctorate in Eastern Theology from Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome. At present, he is an assistant professor at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru. Email: kavattusiby@gmail.com.

⁵¹ James Puliurumbil, *Nicea I to Vatican II* (Malayalam), Kottayam: OIRSI Publications, 2013, 14.

only to the Bible itself⁵². Tanner's assertion underscores the profound impact of ecumenical councils in shaping the doctrinal and ecclesiastical foundations of Christianity, affirming their enduring legacy within the Church's intellectual and spiritual heritage.

The First Council of Nicaea, held in 325 AD, is a landmark event in Christian history. It was the first ecumenical council, convened to address the Arian controversy and to establish a unified Christian doctrine. The council's decisions, particularly the formulation of the Nicene Creed, have had a lasting impact on Christian theology, liturgy, and ecumenical relations⁵³.

1. Historical Context and Background

Late antiquity was a time of both profound unity and fragmentation, where the foundations of Christian theology, practice, and identity were solidified amidst intense debate and division. Its legacy continues to shape Christianity to this day, making it one of the most consequential eras in the history of the faith⁵⁴. Key events such as the Edict of Milan (313 AD), which legalized Christianity under Constantine, and the eventual establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius I (380 AD), were pivotal in shaping the path of faith.

The rise of Arianism, a theological movement spearheaded by Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, posed a significant challenge to the early Church. Arius's teachings, which denied the full divinity of Christ, threatened to undermine the unity of the Christian community. His assertion that "there was a time when the Son was not" sparked widespread controversy and necessitated a formal response from the Church⁵⁵.

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and subsequent ecumenical councils, such as Constantinople (381 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD), sought to resolve these disputes by defining core doctrines like the *homousios* (consubstantiality) of the Son with the Father and the dual nature of Christ as fully divine and fully human. Yet, these

⁵² Norman Tanner, *The Church in Council*, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011, vii.

⁵³ John A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 2004, 234.

⁵⁴ Christopher A Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition*, London: Yale University Press, 2012, ix.

⁵⁵ Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999, 45.

decisions often aggravated divisions, leading to lasting schisms, such as the split between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches.

The political context of the council cannot be overlooked. Emperor Constantine's involvement in convening the council was driven by a desire to maintain the unity of the Roman Empire. Constantine sought to prevent religious divisions from destabilizing his empire by addressing theological disputes. This intersection of theology and politics would have far-reaching implications for developing Christian doctrine and the relationship between Church and state⁵⁶.

The First Council of Nicaea, convened by Emperor Constantine I, was in response to the Arian controversy, which questioned the divinity of Jesus Christ⁵⁷. The Arian controversy addressed by the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople exerted significant political and theological influence⁵⁸ on the Church then and continues to impact today's Church and theology. The Arian controversy rolled on from Nicaea to Constantinople and greatly impacted the Church at large, especially regarding its theological and political implications⁵⁹. From the point of view of theology and Church order, the council aimed to address the Arian heresy and to foster theological unity within the Christian community. The immediate context of the council was the rise of Arianism, led by Arius, which posited that 'the Son is not of one substance with the Father', 'is not equal with the Father', 'is not co-eternal with the Father', 'but is a created being hence not God'⁶⁰. This controversy necessitated the clarification and codification of an orthodox Christian doctrine and the affirmation of its belief in the triune God, with three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit⁶¹. From a political point of view, Emperor Constantine convened the council to maintain the unity and integrity of the Roman Empire because he understood that division among Christians may cause division in the empire, since Christianity was becoming a prominent religion in the Roman world.

⁵⁶ Charles Freeman, *A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State*, New York: Overlook Press, 2008, 67.

⁵⁷ Thomas, P.C., *General Councils of the Church*, Bombay: St Pauls, 1993, 11.

⁵⁸ Frances M. Young, *From Nicea to Chalcedon*, London: SCM Press, 1983, 57.

⁵⁹ James Puliurumbil, *Nicaea I to Vatican II*, 43.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *General Councils of the Church*, 12.

⁶¹ James Puliurumbil, *Nicaea I to Vatican II*, 60.

2. Proceedings of the Council

The council brought together over 300 bishops from across the Christian world, and the key figures included Athanasius of Alexandria, Arius, and Eusebius of Caesarea. Its primary purpose was to address theological disputes, particularly the Arian controversy, which questioned the nature of Christ and His relationship to God the Father. The decisions made included the condemnation of Arianism, the affirmation of the consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the Son with the Father, and the excommunication of Arius and his followers⁶².

2.1 Condemnation of Arianism

The council excommunicated Arius and his supporters, reinforcing the authority of the orthodox position. This decision condemned Arianism and established the Church's ability to define and enforce doctrinal boundaries. The most significant theological issue addressed at the council was the teaching of Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria. Arius argued that the Son of God was a created being who was distinct from and subordinate to the Father, claiming that 'there was a time when the Son was not'. This view challenged the unity and co-eternity of the Father and the Son, leading to widespread controversy. The council firmly rejected Arianism, declaring it heretical and affirming the eternal divinity of Christ.

2.2 Affirmation of Consubstantiality (*Homoousios*)

The council's primary and most important theological contribution was the affirmation of the Trinitarian doctrine, emphasizing the co-substantiality [*Consubstantialis Partis* (Latin) and *Homo-ousion toi Patri* (Greek)], co-equality and co-eternality of the Father and Son. The Nicene Creed provided a foundational Christological statement, affirming the full divinity of Christ and His incarnation. The council articulated the orthodox position by adopting the term *homoousios* (Greek for 'of the same substance') to describe the relationship between the Son and the Father. This term emphasized that the Son is fully divine, co-eternal, and consubstantial with the Father, rejecting any notion of subordination. This formulation was a critical step in defining the doctrine of the Trinity, as it established the Son's equal divinity with the Father.

⁶² Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and conflict in Patristic Tradition*, London: Yale University Press, 2012, 100.

2.3 Formulation of the Nicene Creed

To codify the orthodox position, the council produced the Nicene Creed, a definitive statement of Christian belief. The Creed explicitly affirmed the divinity of Christ, stating that He is 'true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father'. This Creed became a foundational text for Christian theology, serving as a benchmark for orthodoxy and a tool for combating heresies like Arianism.

2.4 Broader Implications for Trinitarian Theology

While the council primarily addressed the relationship between the Father and the Son, its decisions laid the groundwork for later developments in Trinitarian theology. The emphasis on *homoousios* provided a theological framework that would later be expanded to include the Holy Spirit, culminating in the fully articulated doctrine of the Trinity. The last part of the Creed, as it is used in the liturgy, was added to the Nicæan Creed by the Council of Constantinople in 381, which affirmed the divine nature of the Holy Spirit, the same as that of the Father and the Son, in very clear biblical terms. The establishment of the Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan Creed as a central statement of faith had a significant canonical and liturgical impact, influencing subsequent ecumenical councils and theological developments.

2.5 Other Activities of the Council

In addition to its theological contributions, the Council of Nicaea addressed practical issues, such as establishing a uniform date to celebrate Easter. This decision aimed to promote unity within the Church by resolving differences in liturgical practice.

The Council of Nicaea was a pivotal moment in the history of Christian theology. By condemning Arianism, affirming the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, and formulating the Nicene Creed, the council made enduring contributions to Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. Its decisions resolved immediate theological disputes and provided a foundation for subsequent ecumenical councils and the development of orthodox Christian doctrine. The council's emphasis on the unity and equality of the divine persons remains a cornerstone of Christian belief.

3. Controversies and Challenges

The immediate reactions to the council's decisions included widespread acceptance among the majority of bishops, but there was significant opposition from Arian sympathizers. In the long term, the persistence of Arianism and its variations in different regions posed challenges, and the political use of theological decisions to assert imperial control added to the complexity. The Nicene Creed saw broad adoption in the Eastern and Western Churches, with integration into the liturgical and catechetical practices of the Church. However, there was continued resistance from various Arian and semi-Arian groups, and the emergence of alternative theological interpretations led to further schisms.

4. From Nicaea to Chalcedon

The period spanning from the Council of Nicaea (325) to the Council of Chalcedon (451) represents a pivotal epoch in the theological and historical development of the Church's doctrinal identity⁶³. This era witnessed profound ecclesial engagement with Christological and Trinitarian controversies, culminating in the articulation of foundational dogmas that continue to shape the faith and life of the Church. Alexander of Alexandria and Athanasius of Alexandria were the key figurers who defended the truth of the faith with their preachings, teachings and writings.

Salvation in Christ, understood as both revelation and re-creation, was the central conviction that Athanasius tirelessly defended. A deep concern for the doctrine of salvation drove his unwavering opposition to Arianism. Athanasius argued that the Logos, as the divine Word, is not a created being but is of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. Only this understanding of the Logos' essential divinity ensures the fullness and certainty of human salvation, which was the cornerstone of Athanasius' theological defence⁶⁴.

5. Present Understanding and Interpretation

Modern theological reflection continues to engage with the Nicene formulation, exploring its implications for contemporary Christian faith and practice. Ongoing dialogues within and between Christian denominations address the nuances of Trinitarian theology. The Nicene Creed remains a cornerstone of Christological

⁶³ Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, London: SCM Press, 1983, vii.

⁶⁴ Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, London: SCM Press, 1983, 72.

doctrine, informing debates on the nature of Christ in various theological and cultural contexts. The council's decisions have impacted ecumenical relations, providing a common foundation for dialogue among different Christian traditions. The Nicene Creed serves as a unifying statement of faith in many ecumenical gatherings and efforts toward Christian unity.

Conclusion

The First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) marked a critical juncture in consolidating Christian orthodoxy by addressing the Arian controversy through theological and political frameworks. The council's adoption of *homoousios* (consubstantiality) established the Son's co-eternal divinity with the Father, formalized in the Nicene Creed, which became a doctrinal cornerstone. Emperor Constantine's orchestration underscored the interplay between imperial stability and doctrinal unity, reflecting the socio-political dynamics of late antiquity. While the council condemned Arianism, its decisions catalyzed prolonged theological debates, influencing subsequent ecumenical councils like Constantinople (381 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE). The Creed's articulation of Trinitarian theology provided a unifying framework, though resistance from dissenting groups highlighted doctrinal tensions. Modern scholarship recognizes Nicaea's dual legacy: it standardized Christological orthodoxy while illustrating the entanglement of religious authority and state power. The council's emphasis on doctrinal precision and unity remains foundational in ecumenical dialogues, underscoring its enduring impact on Christian theology, liturgy, and interdenominational relations.