

The upside-down map is a deliberate challenge to Western-centred ways of seeing the world - bringing overlooked people and places into clearer focus. It reminds us that God's kingdom turns assumptions upside down, calling us to see the world differently.

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RESTORYING NICAEA IN THE EMPIRE BUT NOT OF THE EMPIRE?

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INTRODUCTION

This is a reflective report from the gathering on ‘Reaffirming our Common Faith for Uncommon Times’ organised by United Society Partners in the Gospel (USPG) to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea.

How do we revisit the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 1700 years after the historic council took place, in a spirit of honesty, humility and hope? How do we re-affirm our common faith as expressed in the words of the Nicene Creed (381 AD) in times which can be described as ‘uncommon’ - when unprecedented changes and challenges mark our life together on the earth, our common home?

A global group of theologians convened by the Anglican mission agency United Society Partners in the Gospel (USPG) met in Istanbul (Constantinople) and İznik (Nicaea) in Türkiye from the 25th to 28th August 2025 to explore these questions and reflect on the influence of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Nicene Creed (381 AD) for Christian faith, mission and unity. The participants were theologians from India, Canada, the United Kingdom, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Brazil, Panama, Switzerland, Serbia, Greece, Aotearoa New Zealand, Germany and the United States and belonged to the Anglican, Baptist, Orthodox, Reformed, Methodist, and the United and Uniting Churches.

1 The term 'ReStorying' can be attributed to Tongan theologian Jione Havea.

Although our gathering commemorated the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, our reflections were not limited to the historical event itself. Rather, we sought to consider Nicaea in its broader dimensions: the Nicene faith, the Council of Nicaea, and the outcomes of the Council. By “Nicene faith,” we mean the affirmation of the trinitarian faith - confessing Jesus Christ as fully divine, worshipped together with the Father and the Holy Spirit - which remains the most solid common basis for all Christians. By “Council of Nicaea,” we recall the assembly of 325 AD, an event that was only fully received by the whole church in the complex process of reception across the following decades. And by “outcomes of the Council,” we recognize, most prominently, the Creed that originated in Nicaea but assumed its final form as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in 381 AD, together with other decisions such as the regulation

Therefore, while this report foregrounds our reflections on the Nicene Creed, we remain mindful that different church traditions may read, use, or relate to the Creed differently, and that views on the Council itself and its status also vary. Yet in all these differences, what unites us most firmly is the Nicene faith itself: the confession of Jesus Christ’s divinity within the life of the Trinity.

of the common date of Easter and the canons on church order.

Our revisiting the Nicene faith may be understood as ‘reweaving the theological mat of our common faith’ (to use a metaphor from the Pasifika). Prayer, pilgrimage, playfulness and praxis emerged as important strands for this reweaving as we acknowledged the liturgical nature of the Nicene Creed, undertook a pilgrimage to the ancient city of Nicaea (Iznik), embraced playfulness as a method for our theological imagination and sought to hold together orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right action) as integrally connected. What marked our time was a broad diversity of perspectives, but also deep and growing friendship, common life and a shared longing for a peaceable and just world.

OUR FOCUS: THE EMPIRE (PAST AND PRESENT)

We acknowledged that there have been many different initiatives in this important year to reflect theologically on Nicaea. We agreed that what might give this gathering a distinctive voice would be to reflect on Nicaea through the lens of empire, which might be defined as “large and ever-changing conglomerates of power that are aimed at controlling all aspects of our lives”².

The lens of empire becomes important given the well-known explicit entanglements between the Council of Nicaea



and the imperial interests of the emperor Constantine, but also because of the continuing entanglements between church and empire born out of the later European enslavement and colonisation of peoples and lands, and ways in which, even today, church and theology sometimes become tools of imperial ambition and control. Were there ways in which those who gathered in Nicaea managed to transcend imperial interests, and how do we do that today? Further, given that the council of Nicaea, and the Nicene Creed that eventually emerged, had a distinct focus on Jesus Christ - affirmed as one who suffers and is put to death by the Empire - what subversive potential might this focus, and this understanding of Jesus, hold in our current context?

There are many potential ways to read and re-read the Council of Nicaea and Nicene faith, but this reflection focuses on the lens of empire. It was this that, quite naturally among us, emerged from and framed our discussions.

IN THE EMPIRE: READING NICAIA ACROSS CONTEXT(S)

The Council of Nicaea was convened by the emperor Constantine to respond to challenges within Christian communities, with the aim that the unity of Christians would contribute to the stability of the *oikoumene* – (the whole inhabited world under the Roman empire).



Given its imperial patronage, the importance of exploring the relationship between the empire, the council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed was acknowledged.

Reflections on this relationship varied. We explored the creed in terms of the historic context of Nicaea. Why was it needed? What purposes did it serve?

We heard that in the aftermath of the recent persecution by the Roman empire, when Christian communities were fragmented and divided, the agreement on a common confession of faith was of decisive importance. The Council of Nicaea, convened by the Emperor Constantine, sought to establish peace and reconciliation among conflicting parties within the church. This pursuit of peace was significant not only for the Roman Empire

and its social cohesion—the *pax Romana* of the *oikoumene*—but, most importantly, for the unity of the church itself.

At Nicaea, the vision of the universal Church was articulated with new clarity: one and catholic, in the Pauline sense of being the body of Christ (holy), and grounded in the tradition of the faith professed by the apostles (apostolic). The conciliar process - the debate, decision-making, and the representation of the entire Christian *oikoumene* - was central to this vision. While the Council undeniably served imperial interests, its creed and decisions were first and foremost intended as a means to bind the church together in unity of faith and life.

We also acknowledged the complexity of the relationships between empire, council, and

creed. Nicaea marked a dramatic turning point: the church, only recently persecuted, was now finding its place at the very heart of imperial society. This shift, together with the long and contested process of reception of the Nicene faith, has continued to shape divergent views of Nicaea through history. For some, the Council remains a providential and holy event that established the true faith and ensured the church's unity. For others, it represents the moment when the church surrendered itself to the empire and became its instrument.

When considering its imperial setting, the Council of Nicaea cannot be simplistically reduced to an episode of imperial management of Christianity. While it took place within the wider Constantinian shift, the council itself bore witness to the church's own agency, theological integrity, and capacity to resist imperial co-optation. Convened on episcopal initiative, which was overtaken by the emperor Constantine, it made an effort to articulate doctrinal truth rather than imperial compromise, and its legacy was repeatedly opposed or ignored by emperors of the fourth century who sought harmony over orthodoxy. Constantine's pragmatism, his later rehabilitation of Arius, and Constantius II's coercive campaigns against Nicene faith demonstrate that it often stood at odds with

imperial strategies.

Further, the memory of Christ's suffering under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, preserved in the Creed, hints at the Church's enduring awareness of its vulnerability before—and resistance to—imperial power. Therefore, it could be argued, the idea of Nicaea, as established by the champions of Nicene faith in the second part of the fourth century, did not represent the triumph of empire over the Church but a moment in which the Church defined itself *against* imperial logic. Its confession, rooted in a search for truth rather than expedience, and promoted against imperial interests throughout the fourth century, challenged the empire's attempt to harness Christianity for unity, showing that the authority of faith rests not in the verdict of emperors but in the discernment of the Church.

While this view was shared, there were also those among us who wondered how successful the church really was in positioning itself and its faith in ways which could not be co-opted by the empire. We recognised that the temptations of collusion are strong, that the Nicene Creed itself can be read in different ways, and indeed that it has, in some circumstances, been interpreted to provide support for empires or imperial aims. If a text carries with it the history of its own

interpretation, then the Nicene Creed is not simply an innocent text, whatever some of its original or later readers suggest. This we sought to interrogate in a spirit of openness and oneness.

In considering the reception history of the Nicene Creed, though it might be possible to acknowledge that there was radical subversive inclusivity in the Nicene Creed itself (see further for detailed reflections on the theology of the Creed), we cannot help but see that over the centuries and millennia, the powerful managed to subvert the subversive. The faith that was crystallised in Nicaea was 'turned' into a colonial and colonizing statement that dehumanized God's people and dismembered God's creation over the years. This paved the way for according superiority and privileged status to select groups that almost succeeded in assigning to themselves a divine status, something that (arguably) was prophetically and in a non-violent way resisted and subverted at Nicaea.

From a Wahine Maori perspective we heard how the Nicene Creed is understood not just as a theological statement, but also a vehicle that once served to consolidate colonial power by replacing Maori understandings of the divine (*Wahine Maori atua*) and Wahine spirituality (*Wairua*) with western Christian doctrine

which rendered non-patriarchal ways of understanding God, and creation-affirming spiritualities as inferior and subordinate. This helped us to understand how the Nicene Creed has been engaged to progress and impose certain images and characteristics of God that have been damaging to many lives, cultures and spiritualities and mother earth herself.

Questions were raised regarding ways in which creeds have the potential to plaster over fundamental differences in order to present a kind of superficial unity. One example of such plastering can be found in the context of apartheid South Africa, where both the apartheid state, and the black people who it was oppressing, detaining, and killing, claimed the same faith. The following words from the *Kairos Document* of 1985, whose 40th anniversary we commemorate this year, captures this dilemma, "Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church. They are both baptized in the same baptism and participate together in the breaking of the same bread, the same body and blood of Christ. There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace."³

If an acknowledgement of our shared faith does not lead to further interrogation of the violence that was carried out in the name of this faith through collusion and complicity, then it simply plays the role of masking over these injustices.

From an anti-imperial lens, we also questioned whether creeds in general, are a means to impose uniformity on an otherwise diverse faith in the name of unity, with the intention of domination and control. The poem below by one of the participants invites us to step back and consider some of the potentially harmful ways that creeds can function within faith traditions, in terms of closing down space for dialogue, questioning, and process.

On Creeds

I've always been suspicious of creeds

Calcified statements of belief

Locked, loaded and recited

Leaving little time or space to breathe

To question

To doubt

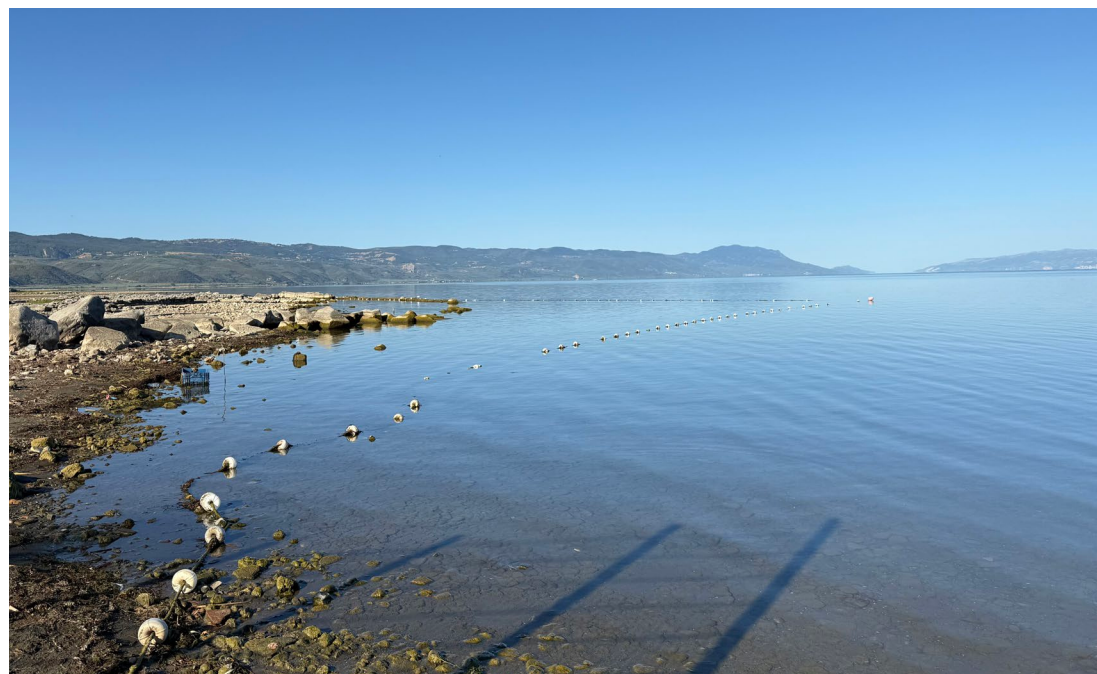
To wrestle

To touch the wound and determine whether or not it's real

It all just seems a little too clean and controlled

To claim to be in the name

Of the One who came for freedom.



In a context where empires tend to impose uniformity as a means of control and domination, such suspicions about creeds seem natural.

While acknowledging that a majority of Christian communities continue to pledge allegiance to the Nicene Creed, we recognize that the Nicene faith affirmed in the words of the Creed has often been held alongside increasing instances of inequalities and injustices, violent conflicts, and worrisome indifference to the plight of communities already experiencing the consequences of the climate emergency. In contrast to a positive reading of the Nicene Creed, our context is failing to affirm the equality of all people and continues to violate mother earth. Anger, sorrow and frustration were expressed about the ways in which faith can be distorted and instrumentalised by imperial forces, whether in the third century or in the twenty first. Amidst all this we asked – ‘how can we re-receive the Nicene Creed today?’

BUT NOT OF THE EMPIRE: RE-RECEIVING THE CREED TODAY

Our conversations led us to see that the Nicene faith may be lived in a way that is profoundly subversive of empire. And we opened the possibility of choosing to (re)read the Nicene Creed through this lens. From this perspective we point to the following as some ways in which the Nicene Creed might be re-received today.

Embracing Life:

Empires by nature are death-dealing. The creative potential of the Nicene Creed to address any imperial context and designs lies in its central focus on the Triune God, who is the God of Life. Paying attention to the Nicene Creed can reveal an intrinsic narrative of life. God is affirmed in the Creed as ‘maker of heaven and earth’ (maker of all things, visible and invisible in the Creed of Nicaea 325), Jesus is affirmed as the one through whom ‘all things were made’, and the Holy Spirit is affirmed as the ‘giver of life’. The Triune God that we affirm in trinitarian terms encompasses and embraces the wider web of creation beyond humans and safeguards us from a parochial anthropocentric way of imagining the divine. These faith affirmations attest and point to a view of salvation that is cosmic in scope, which directs our faith both towards life in this world as well as the ‘life of the world to come’.

In a world marked by a culture and “politics of death” (“necropolitics”), this life-centric thrust in the creed offers a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of capitalism and consumerism that exploits the poor and the marginalized and their environment. How we let our faith in this God of life shape our engagement with a world which continues to face the onslaught

of ‘empire’ – where religion is instrumentalised for usurping power, undermining plurality and consolidating privilege is a challenge for Christian discipleship today.

Enhancing Faith:

Empires thrive through the imposition of uniformity and domination. Affirming the trinitarian nature of God as expressed in the Nicene Creed safeguards us from imagining and relating to the divine in monolithic ways. Rather, it frees us to acknowledge and embrace multiplicity and plurality in our speaking with and about God, in ways which can challenge cultural, conceptual and linguistic bias.

From this perspective, deepening our Christian faith in conversation with Indigenous spirituality and wisdom, which have often been suppressed under colonialism, is important. Deepening our faith in a spirit of dialogue can (re) orient us to the Christian gospel in unexpected ways. In the course of our conversations in Türkiye, we learnt how indigenous wisdom opens up possibilities for understanding God as both Father and Mother, and as being in balance and interconnected with the whole of creation and of theologies that are liberating, lifegiving and prophetically challenging to any culture in which empire continues to flourish in any of its many forms.

We heard, how for the Guna people of Panama, for example, this divinity is manifested in the unity of *Nana* (God the Mother) and *Baba* (God the Father), whose *Nabgwana* (shared heart) is Mother Earth. The Nicene Creed’s assertion of one God, the almighty father and creator, is further illuminated by the Guna understanding of the Spirit’s role in creation. This divine duality reflects the complementarity and interdependence of all things in the universe, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, who resides in every corner of creation. The Spirit’s indwelling thus transforms creation into a sacred tapestry, revealing the inherent divine nature of all things. It opens a fresh way of understanding God and God’s creation pneumatologically – through the Holy Spirit. From this perspective one of our participants shared the following Guna affirmation of faith in a God of life whose very being is interwoven with creation:

Credo of Interwoven Life (English)

We believe in the Life that emanates from Mother Earth, *Nabgwana*, a source of ancestral wisdom that unites us. In community, communion, reciprocity, mutuality, and solidarity, we manifest the living fabric of our faith.

We believe that the Breath of the Spirit resides within every living being, the sacred breath of the Creator, revealing the inherent divinity that dwells in every corner of the cosmos.

We believe in the *Nega*, our sacred home, where the divine Presence persists, a beacon of hope and renewal, even in the shadow of sin.

We believe in the promise of a future where life flourishes in harmony, guided by *Nana* and *Baba*, where the wisdom of the Earth intertwines with the justice that emanates from the life and teachings of Jesus, a path toward fullness.



In a complementary manner, another participant highlighted how returning to the original Greek of the Creed (the then language of the common people) may also provide readings rather different from some dominant

imperial translations and therefore help us to re-read dominant images of God against the grain. One example is how the word ‘pantocrator’ may be understood as ‘the one who holds all things’ (as someone might hold a baby), which offers a vision of God not as an almighty emperor, but God as tender Mother/Father. To be open to such theological promptings, is one way of moving beyond long-entrenched ways of imagining the divine, which has often been used to reinforce and replicate existing inequalities and divisions.

Embodying Justice:

Another important way of re-receiving Nicaea today would be to seek to enact the praxis of Jesus – the justice of God – in our Christian witness. The Jesus who emerges in the Nicene Creed is one who holds subversive potential for overcoming empire.

The Nicene Creed affirmed that it is Jesus who is “of the very being of God” and, in so doing, challenged the image of the Emperor as a deity. Defining the relationship of the first and second person of the Trinity (God and Jesus Christ) as “being of the same substance” (*homoousios*) deserves special attention. While imperial interests would conceive of the second person (Jesus) in terms of dominant images of the first (the Father/Creator), a closer look at the second person can challenge and reshape dominant images of God.

Read from an anti-imperial lens one can reread the Creed in the following manner:

The simple but powerful phrase “one Lord” transfers ultimate allegiance from Caesar to the crucified and risen *Kyrios*;

homoousios abolishes any ladder of lesser divinities modelled on imperial hierarchy;

“came down...was incarnate... was crucified under Pontius Pilate” inscribes vulnerability and state violence at the Creed’s core;

the “endless kingdom” relativizes every regime;

the Spirit “who spoke through the prophets” installs within the Creed a perpetual criterion for critiquing idolatrous power, including ecclesial forms.

What matters in the Nicene Creed is that it is *Jesus* who is of the same being as God, and that in him, in his living, dying and rising to life, we see the very nature of God. Jesus lived among us in solidarity with the multitudes as someone exploited by the empire, reclaiming the subversive power of washing feet as an enslaved woman might, proclaiming good news to the poor rather than charity, challenging the wealthy

and calling them to repentance, and dying the tortured death of those who dared to contradict the Roman Empire. Risen and ascended, he still bears wounds of his suffering that symbolize his resistance, taking all human life into the deepest presence of God, in joyful hope.

The one who saves us, by assuming *all* humanity, engages and ends the power of empire and draws the majority of humanity, those longing for alternatives from the margins to a renewed and redeemed realm. This understanding of Nicene faith has never been the dominant one, but there have always been those among the faithful, from Nicaea onwards, who have recognised the very subversive, and indeed anti-imperial, and therefore life-giving potential of the statement of faith as it began to take shape at Nicaea.

Understanding the life and witness of Christ and the solidarity of the incarnation as something that deconstructs imperial conceptualizations of God as almighty, immutable, and impassible is even more critical today. The ‘original’ story of the incarnation, the story of a vulnerable God crucified by a brutal empire calls us to take sides with the oppressed and colonised people. It shows that solidarity with the marginalized is not an option for the Christian

community but a call to proclaim and embody the hope of resurrection and life in solidarity with all those who are exploited and silenced today. The challenge perhaps is to embrace Christian witness as 'with-ness' in a spirit of solidarity following the example of Jesus Christ.

IN CONCLUSION:

As we commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea this year, our gathering helped us to acknowledge that the invitation to reaffirm our common faith for these uncommon times is one which cannot bypass the question of empire – both past and present. Reflecting on the Council of Nicaea, the Nicene Creed and the Nicene faith through the lens of empire, we cannot but lament that aspects of our Christian faith have sometimes been co-opted by the powerful to serve their interests. Our current world order might be one such moment, where it might seem that we live in a context where:

affirmation of faith in God as creator seems to go hand in hand with the temptation to play God in plundering the planet and its peoples,

affirmation that Jesus was crucified by the empire does not prevent us from resisting enough those empires that crucify the innocent, and

affirmation that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets does in no way turn us to pay heed to the prophetic voices of protest in our midst.

Nevertheless, times such as these invite us to re-discover and re-receive the promise that the Nicene Creed offers in fresh ways – the promise of life, that is interwoven into the very being of God, whose nature is solidarity.

As we reflect on re-receiving the Nicene Creed, it may be helpful to remember that often the Nicene Creed is heard within the liturgy as the people's work, as a moment when it is the voices of the baptised that are heard, and not the church leaders alone, nor the rulers of this world. When faith is truly shared among the whole community, the saying of it together may become an inspiring expression of confident, courageous and common faith – which has the potential to bind us in solidarity and free us for justice. Such solidarity can enable us to dream and work towards a world where steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, and justice and peace will kiss each other. (cf. Psalm 85:10) Confident in this hope we all can truly affirm that though the Nicene Creed (and we ourselves), may be caught in the empire, yet we are not of the empire.



REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 1

THE EMPEROR'S TRUTH

The Revd Dr Susan Durber, an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church, is President of the Europe Region of the World Council of Churches.

I wish now I hadn't bothered.

I paid out all that money, gave them a great banquet and one of my finest speeches...

I wanted unity, one religion for my one empire. But I didn't think their unity would look like this.

It seemed OK to me at first; I was glad they had, at last, found agreement about what words to use to talk about Jesus. I had no patience with all those discussions about whether there was a time when he was not, whether he was begotten or made, or how scriptural the words had to be. I was happy to let them say 'homooousios' and have done with it. Just give me a faith for my empire, something we can all get behind.

But then, someone took me to one side and, rather bravely, told me what it all really meant, what was behind it. I see now what this faith is really about. And I wish I hadn't wasted my money and my time on something

that undermines absolutely everything I am and have fought for.

You see, they believe that Jesus Christ is 'of one being with the Father' – not me, not their Emperor, not anyone high or powerful in this world - but someone who came as low as anyone could, a peasant preacher from Palestine who died on a cross, like a common slave. It makes no sense at all. In fact, it's outrageous! To suggest that someone so low could be the only one to show us what God is really like. To say that God is not mighty, imperial, powerful and grand, but more like someone who suffers or serves... I have heard that Jesus even washed his followers' feet, that he had compassion on the poor, that he talked to women like equals. He was no warrior, no king, nothing mighty about him.

He didn't seize power, but suffered it in place of others. How is it even imaginable that such a person could be 'of one being with the Father',

the one true God? How can I build an empire, an imperial religion, on that?

I was fooled. This statement from Nicaea can only undermine my empire, undermine any empire. It is a religion for the enslaved, for women, for the poor, not for the mighty and powerful. It worships a God who suffers, a God who has always, from the very beginning, been a God of love, a God who has always only ever wanted for all people, and all creation, to be at peace. I can't believe I didn't see that straightaway.

But then, perhaps others will fail to spot it too. Maybe we can still spin this my way, make Jesus look more like an emperor than a slave, paint halos on the important and powerful, and amuse the common people with promises of a different life in the next world. Now we've come this far, we might as well give it a go.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 2

PARTIAL INCLUSION IN PROCESS,
RADICAL INCLUSION IN OUTPUT

Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda is Programme Executive for the World Council of Churches (WCC), leading initiatives on overcoming racism, xenophobia, and related discrimination.

A dual-pronged look at Nicaea 325 (and revisions and updates from later Councils) focusing on the process that saw in excess of 250 Bishops gathering to resolve a Christian conflict that threatened pax-Romana, as well as the flagship output from such a gathering creates an impression of radical inclusivity.

Judged on the basis of our present-day sensitivities, it is safer to speak of partial inclusivity in the process because “women” were missing on the table, even though they were present as indirect participants, as deaconesses, wives, servants, and companions. According to Susan Durber, “women may have been, in some ways, present at Nicaea. I have imagined, for example, that the bishops, deacons, and presbyters who came may have had women, even enslaved women, among their entourage, either to do the work of care that people at conferences always need (laundry, food provision,

medical care, bathing) or even to act as scribes or secretaries” (Durber, 2025, pp. 9-10).

This thinking was already expressed a century ago when A. E. Burn noted how, while acting as the benefactor of the church, the emperor made sure that “[t]he bishops travelled at public expense, in carriages, or on horses, asses and mules, with attendant priests, deacons, and servants, so that the number of the emperor’s guests was large”⁴. From their perceived exclusion, women could still have impacted the conversations at Nicaea, yet even this partial inclusivity and patriarchal dominance at the council could not totally overwhelm the radical inclusivity of the major output from the council. The creed became a radical affirmation of the humanity of all, not just the superiority of men.

The participants at the Council of Nicaea were drawn mainly from North Africa and the Middle East, suggesting ethnic discrimination had

no room in determining who qualified to be a participant in the council. Other than a perceived anti-Jewish sentiment in the decision that led to barring Jewish bishops, there is no trace of anti-Black racism in the convening of the council.

A historical analysis of the participating bishops suggests a significant number of them carried the scars and man-made disabilities that were a constant reminder of the excesses of empire. Indeed, “many of them bore the outward marks of persecution, such as Paul of Neo-Caesarea, whose hands had been paralysed with hot irons. Two Egyptian bishops had each lost an eye. One of them, Paphnuttus, who had also been hamstrung, was singled out by the emperor, who kissed his mutilated face. Hosius himself had suffered under Maximin, Kustathius also”⁵. While there were several outputs from the Council of Nicaea, its flagship output was and remains the Creed that is widely shared and embraced by Christian communities.

At the core of this Creed, inclusive of the revisions that it went through, post-Nicaea, is a radical and subversive embrace of a classless human family that is equally reduced to beneficiaries of divine grace, able-bodied or with disability. The Nicene Creed can effectively be an instrument for radical inclusion, subversive non-violent resistance, and radical prophetic action in our quest for racial, caste,

and gender justice in the present and future. “The God proclaimed at Nicaea does not value men above women, rulers above people, or one ethnic group more than another, but all. And God does not value only people but all that is created”⁶. What better foundation exists for radical inclusion in our work as vessels in God’s mission than this 1700 years old Christian statement of faith?

While there was radical subversive inclusivity in the Nicene creed, we cannot help but see that over the centuries and millennia, the powerful managed to subvert the subversive into a colonial and colonizing statement that dehumanized God’s people, dismembered God’s creation while according superiority and privileged status to a select group that almost succeeded in assigning to itself a divine status, something that was prophetically and in a non-violent way resisted and subverted at Nicaea in 325 AD.

Our challenge today is to rediscover the prophetic calling that acknowledges that “[s]ystems of oppression are difficult to identify if we are the beneficiaries of them. Yet, Jesus requires us to recognize, resist, and make restitution if we are to follow him, standing not with the wealthy man but with the poor. Standing with the poor will enable us to see interlocking systems of oppression more clearly”⁷.

⁴ Burn, 1925, p. 22

⁵ Burn, 1925, p. 24 | ⁶ Durber, 2025, p. 12 | ⁷ West, 2024, p. 310

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 3

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE? HOW DO WE BELIEVE?

Jocabed R. Solano Miselis is an Indigenous leader from the Guandule Nation in Panama and Director of Indigenous Memory and a missionary at Unidos en Misión.

The Divine Breath in the Tapestry of Existence:

We believe in the life that flows from the Earth, which teaches us that the tapestry of faith is manifested in community, communion, reciprocity, mutuality, and solidarity.

We believe that the Spirit of Life resides in every living being, and that the Spirit of the Creator blows to illuminate its presence, revealing the inherent divinity in every corner of the cosmos.

We believe in the Nega, our sacred home, where the divine presence persists even amidst the shadows of sin, offering a beacon of hope and renewal.

In these times of crisis and searching, the Nicene Creed, with its historical legacy, offers us an anchor in common faith. However, for this faith to resonate in the 21st century, we must open ourselves to intercultural dialogue and recognize the ancestral wisdom of indigenous peoples, whose knowledge reveals the divine presence in every aspect of creation.

From the Gunadule perspective, the Nicene Creed can be enriched and revitalized through the Nan an Bab Igala, the oral chants that safeguard the collective memory of the places where Baba and Nana (God the Father and Mother) have walked with us. These chants, living theological treatises, transmitted from generation to generation, encapsulate our understanding of the universe and our deep connection with the divine.

In this perspective, intertwined with Gunadule Christian theology, Nabgwana (Heart of Mom and Dad), the living Earth, emerges as the primordial theological space where divinity unfolds. Nabgwana is not merely creation; it is the very body of the divine presence, the vital pulse that connects everything in the cosmos. It is here, in the heart of creation, that the Great Spirit manifests, granting the Earth its unique character: she is the first theologian, teacher, and ancestor of all living beings, including humanity. In her, we learn the reciprocity, balance, and harmony that sustain life.

The Pneumatological Breath of Creation:

The Creed affirms our belief in one God, Almighty Father, creator of heaven and earth. For the Guna people, this divinity is manifested in the unity of Nana (God the Mother) and Baba (God the Father), whose Nabgwana (shared heart) is Mother Earth. This divine duality reflects the complementarity and interdependence of all things in the universe, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, who resides in every corner of creation.

The Holy Spirit permeates all creation, inviting us to recognize the divine presence in every element of nature, in every whisper of the wind, and in every beat of the heart. This pneumatological understanding challenges us to live in harmony with the cosmos, recognizing that we are an integral part of the cosmic dance of life.

The Creed unites us in the belief in the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life. For the Guna people, the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Life, the Great Spirit - is manifested in the life force of the Earth, in the wisdom of the elders, and in the capacity for healing. Recognizing the presence of the Spirit in all things compels us to care for creation, to promote social justice, and to protect the integrity of Nabgwana. This Spirit is the force that encourages us to re-exist, to resist, and to reimagine a world where life flourishes in fullness.

Cosmic Salvation and the Preservation of Identities:

The Creed proclaims Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. In the Gunadule worldview, this Son can be seen as the ordering principle of the universe, who maintains the balance and harmony between all things. His incarnation, death, and resurrection remind us of the importance of sacrifice, solidarity, and hope for a better future, rooted in the care of Nabgwana. He is the bridge between the divine and the human, the mediator who invites us to live in harmony with creation, and the agent of cosmic salvation, which is not limited to the redemption of humanity but encompasses the healing and restoration of all creation.

From this perspective, salvation is not only personal but cosmic, encompassing the healing of the body, mind, and spirit, as well as the restoration of harmonious relationships between all living beings. In the context of eschatology, we envision a future where cultural diversity and the richness of identities are preserved, recognizing that indigenous peoples, with their ancestral knowledge, are before the Lamb, offering their unique testimony of divinity.

A Counter-Imperialist and Decolonising Perspective:

The Creed unites us in the belief in the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life. For the Guna people, the Holy Spirit —

the Spirit of Life, the Great Spirit — is manifested in the life force of nature, in the wisdom of the elders, and in the capacity for healing. Recognizing the presence of the Spirit in all things compels us to care for creation, to promote social justice, and to protect the integrity of Nabgwana. This Spirit is the force that encourages us to re-exist, to resist, and to reimagine a world where life flourishes in fullness, challenging the structures of power that oppress indigenous peoples and destroy ecological balance.

From this counter-imperialist perspective, we reject the imposition of a hegemonic God that marginalizes and excludes other expressions of divinity. Instead, we embrace an Emanuel God, who resides in the midst of his creation, walking with us every step of the way, and who is manifested in the diversity of faces and voices that make up the mosaic of humanity. We recognize that we are an integral part of creation, and that, therefore, the Creator is the Creator of all, without distinction or exclusion.

Through this proposal, as a follower of Jesus and as a defender of the ancestral wisdom of my people, I invite a deep and transformative dialogue about the Nicene Creed and the fecundation of Abyayalan theologies, such as the theology of the Gunadule people. This dialogue is essential to build a world where faith is a path of justice, love, and communion for all, where cosmic pneumatology guides us towards the healing and restoration of creation, and where eschatology inspires us to preserve the richness of our identities and cultures.



REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 4

Dr Paulo Ueti is Theological Advisor and Regional Manager for the Americas with the United Society Partners in the Gospel.

In a very fragmented world and divided church, the pursuit of unity and reconciliation is paramount. Unity is regarded as a divine calling; however, it is often mistaken for uniformity, whether intentionally or unintentionally. An analysis of the first four centuries of Christian debate reveals a dynamic, contested landscape shaped by diverse religious, cultural, political, and philosophical influences and discourses. It is generally accepted that during this period, Christianity evolved from a marginal movement into an imperial religion, a process culminating in the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

Any engagement with Nicaea must therefore interpret its theology within its historical context and the ecclesiastical struggles that took place both within and beyond the church. Additionally, it is vital to read between the lines and identify dissenting and prophetic voices, considering the council's evident heterogeneity. This highlights the importance of synodality and mutual consultation.

A decolonial - indeed, anti-colonial - approach to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Faith and Creed interrogates the theological, ecclesiological, political, and cultural assumptions embedded in its emergence, while foregrounding theologies that unsettle dominant narratives. The conference at Nicaea, convened by Constantine, was as much a political event as it was a theological one. The scriptural grammar of confession was mobilised in a moment when imperial cohesion and ecclesial communion were both under threat. The price of peace was the inaugural conciliar creed.

The main debate centred on Christ's relationship with the Father. A key question is which voices were excluded by this synthesis, and what was the subliminal intention of the bishops gathered under the imperial arena.

Decoloniality is a concept that challenges Eurocentric framings of early Christianity, seeking to recover the plurality of sites where Christian thought was forged. Although the Nicene Creed gained universal status,

it did not transparently express the theological sensibilities of many non-Western churches and theologies. The process of imperialization in Christianity resulted in the integration of theological principles with the concept of empire, thereby emphasising unity, hierarchical structure, and the maintenance of control.

The foregrounding of marginalised perspectives, such as the Beloved Community (Johannine Community), has the effect of unsettling triumphalist Nicene narratives and widening our sense of early Christian diversity. The Creed has been employed to enforce conformity and stifle creativity, prompting introspection on its deployment.

Emergent theologies request constructive re-readings of the Nicene faith and Creed. It is important to set out to examine the potential impact of

the confession of the fully divine and fully human Christ on the energisation of struggles for dignity among oppressed and silenced communities. I argue that such a confession has the capacity to locate salvation in concrete histories of domination and resistance.

The decolonisation of Nicaea entails a reimagining that does not entail an abandonment of the Creed; rather, it entails a decentrement from imperial captivity. The text calls for a polyphonic orthodoxy – that is, a doctrine that is faithful to the story of Jesus and is expressed through many languages. It serves communities that are currently seeking justice, liberation and inclusion.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 5

Dr Joerg Rieger is distinguished Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

The affirmation of the *homoousia* of Father and Son in Nicene Creed, as I have argued variously, can be read in two opposing directions.⁸ One direction starts with the first person of the Trinity, which is perhaps the most common approach. In this case, the first person is typically defined in terms of dominant images of God, either as omnipotent, immutable, and impassible, or as sitting on a throne like the Roman emperors. It is likely that this was the approach favoured by the emperor Constantine, who not only called and funded the Council of Nicaea but also presided over it and proposed the term “homoousios.”

The second direction, which tends to challenge the first approach, starts with the second person of the Trinity. In this case, the second person is defined in terms of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, including his death and resurrection. This approach was more problematic to ancient minds because it introduced a certain messiness into the Godhead that did not match monarchical ideas of a single ruler at the top

or a God who was immutable and impassible. Both the Nicene and the Arian theologians would have found such an approach troublesome, and perhaps the possibility of reading the second person in this way (and therefore Nicene Creed against the grain), is behind Constantine’s otherwise inexplicable reversion back to Arianism at the end of his life.

Digging deeper into the two approaches the following theological conversations emerge.

1. Reading the *homoousia* from the first to the second person, the second person is subsumed under the first. In this case, Jesus Christ is inserted into dominant definitions of the divine. The result is the domestication of Jesus who from now on is envisioned in imperial terms.
2. Reading the *homoousia* from the first to the second person eclipses the life and ministry of Christ, as it does not match imperial definitions of divinity. That the “last shall be the first” (Matt. 20:16, the reversal of power), that the poor are blessed and

the rich are cursed (Luke 6:20,26), and that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt 5:5) has no room in understandings of God. It is hardly an accident that the Nicene Creed (like most other ancient creeds) do not mention Christ’s life and ministry.

3. Reading the *homoousia* from the second to the first person helps reenvision Christian images of God. This opportunity is missed by those who reject the notion of the *homoousia*, today these are not primarily Arians but liberals who talk about Jesus as a very special human being, perhaps a sage or a prophet, etc., but not God. Reenvisioning the divine in terms of the life and ministry of Jesus introduces questions of the reversal of power (Jesus rejecting the offer of the devil to rule from the top Matt. 4:8-10), and questions of divine compassion (that are ruled out by the classical attributes of God).

4. Reading the *homoousia* from the second person to the first directly confronts imperial images of God that are in vogue today in the budding views of Christian Nationalism that emphasise dominionism but that are also latent in many other images of God. Mainline and liberal views of God as “higher power,” for instance, often mirror dominant views of religion and power and might also be challenged by reading the *homoousia* from the second person to the first.

8 [1] For the following argument see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), chapter 2, and Joerg Rieger, “On the *Homoousia*: The Liberative Potential of the Nicene Creed.” *International Review of Missions* 113:2 (January 2025). Pp. 261-279. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/irrom.12510>

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 6

The Revd Tamsyn Kereopa, of Te Arawa & Tuwharetoa descent, is a Deacon in the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.

Respect for Creation must be our starting point for theological reflection” - Tink Tinker

The times we live in show that we are not relating to the Earth as a gift from our Creator, but rather as a resource to be used. (Season of Creation 2024)

The argument I will make today is not new, in fact it has been made by numerous scholars, including Indigenous theologians, for decades. Yet as the progress of time has yet to see Christian theology take this indigenous challenge seriously, it is in my view appropriate, and although potentially repetitive, crucial in the progression of a theological system that is in balance not only with Indigenous wisdom but with the wider cosmos and creation herself.

Of course, the Creed came out of a concern for an understanding of the nature of the person of Jesus Christ, and this concern is overwhelmingly represented in the body of the creed in which discussion of the person of Jesus is strongly accentuated. While Jesus Christ is the second article of faith in the creed, Christology overwhelmingly dominates, and this

domination has influenced a kind of Christo centrism in Christian theology that should be considered 1700 years after the fact.

Of course, the question is not whether Christian churches will affirm such an affirmation about Jesus Christ as significant to our understanding of the faith. The question is whether it is the appropriate starting point for theology.

The principle of asymmetrical interdependence describes a relationship where at least two parties rely on each other, but with a significant imbalance in their priority and dependence, meaning one party needs the other more than the reverse. This imbalance grants the less dependent party greater power to influence outcomes, while the more dependent party has less leverage. There are natural power imbalances in such relationships, and systems that operate with some kind of asymmetrical interdependence so that, for example, in the creed, an over focus on the person of Jesus Christ not only privileges him as being the dominant focus of

theological discussion but also in that he now dominates and frames the theological system.

The creed we must remember is a statement of Trinitarian faith first and foremost. An over focus on the second article, is in effect an aberration of the trinitarian nature of the Christian faith. The restoration of trinitarian balance in our theological reflections and in the theological project is crucial, and the argument here is that in order to take seriously the creeds and the trinitarian nature of Christian theology, theological reflection must begin and be framed around the first article, God the Creator and Creation.

Very little words are dedicated to this first article, and in this historic year, intentional reprioritizing the doctrine of Creation would be an important step not only in interpreting Christianity's own core beliefs, but in progressing a program or system of theology that takes seriously the long-time critique of indigenous peoples and mother earth herself, who so desperately needs the church's care and attention.

However, the doctrine of Creation itself must be reinterpreted and exorcised from its Eurocentric biases. Even the word Creation itself presents problems insofar as it assumes either the Judeo-Christian creation story or something like it. Perhaps more problematically, when the word creation is used in dominant theological discussion and scholarship, it seems to be objectified

as something that is quite apart from human beings and to which humans relate from the outside. The trajectory of this way of thinking always leads humans to relate to creation as end-users, free to use creation, that is all of living creation and its creatures and even use it up. Even some modern eco theologies, in their concern for an ethics of ecology, still end up, despite admirable intentions, reducing creation to the status of being a ward of humans; that is, humans as the pinnacle of the created realm.

Often this is talked about as Christian stewardship of creation. Hierarchy remains unchallenged.

So, the idea of human privilege needs careful deconstruction.

In many Indigenous cultures, including tikanga Māori, there is no similar or relatable privileging of human beings in the scheme of the cosmos or the world. And now I turn to my second reflection of my contribution, that is a Wahine Maori, or Mana Wahine understanding of Creation and the creed interpreted from that perspective.

Mana Wahine theory, rooted in kaupapa Maori and Maori feminism, centers the voices, experiences, and authority of wahine Maori. It critiques colonial and patriarchal structures, including religious institutions, that have historically marginalized or silenced Maori women. Through this lens, the Nicene Creed is not just a theological statement, it is

also a vehicle that once served to consolidate colonial power by replacing Maori understandings of whakapapa, atua (deities), and Wairua (spirituality) with western Christian doctrine. So, for wahine Maori, engaging with the Nicene creed can raise tensions. Yet Wahine Maori have also found ways to navigate and reconcile tension – reclaiming and interpreting Christian doctrine and creeds through a Mana Wahine lens using whakapapa (genealogy), purakau (stories and narratives), songs and tikanga (practices).

The first article in Mana Wahine reflection:

A. “We believe in one God, the Father the Almighty: The problems of singular male godhood.”

Mana Wahine theory resists the gendered hierarchy embedded in the phrase, “God the Father, the Almighty”. It represents divine patriarchy, singular truth, and a colonial replacement of a foreign cosmology imposed on Maori people by the church. By contrast, in te ao Maori, creation is not governed by a single, male deity, but emerges through relational dynamics between multiple atua, both male and female, each with their own domains, attributes, and interconnected responsibilities. Understanding God as primarily male silences Mana wahine understanding of Wahine Maori atua, or divine characteristics and personalities, such as Papatuanuku

(earth mother), Hineahuone (the first woman shaped from the earth), Hine-nui-te-po, (goddess of death and transformation), and Hinemoana, (guardian of the ocean).

These wahine gendered understandings of the divine hold central, not peripheral, places in Maori cosmology. They are not subordinate to male atua but represent independent, generative sources of life, death and renewal.

Therefore, the creeds, singular, male “Father” God can be seen as symbolically displacing atua wahine and subordinating indigenous women and their ways of understanding the sacred.

B) The phrase “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen” implies a top-down, creator to created relationship. It aligns with the Christian idea of a transcendent God separate from creation.

In Mana wahine understanding, creation is not a one-time act by a distant being. It is a continuous unfolding of relationships among atua, whenua and tangata. The emphasis is not of dominion but on interdependence. From Mana Wahine perspective, this fosters:

- A relational theology rooted in whakapapa (genealogy, which goes back to mother earth)
- An understanding that human beings are not above or below creation, but of it

- Recognition that the divine is immanent, embedded in whenua, wai, maunga, ngahere, and people – not only located in a distant realm.

This reorientation calls into question the hierarchical worldview often taken to be implied in the creed and insists on a restoration of balance between masculine and feminine, spirit and earth, creator and creation.

C). “The seen and unseen: Wairua (Spirit, literally “Wai” = “Water”; “rua” = “two”) as Enduring Reality.

The creed’s reference to “all that is, seen and unseen” could be read, within a Mana wahine lens, as an opportunity for dialogue.

In Te Ao Maori, the seen (te ao marama) and unseen (te ao wairua) coexist. Wairua is not abstract – it is embodied, ancestral, and everyday. It is present in the karanga of wahine, in ritual spaces, in the land, and in our relationships. Mana Wahine affirms:

- That Wairua is not male-owned or controlled
- That wahine are powerful spiritual conduits, especially as life givers and protectors of whakapapa.
- That the “unseen” includes ancestral presence, atua wahine, dreams, intuition, and intergenerational memory, all crucial to cultural survival and resurgence.
- The realms of seen and unseen are not disconnected or separated from each other.

In summary, we have focused on the first article of the creed, arguing that reorienting the theological project to the doctrine of creation is an essential step 1700 years after it’s articulation. We have engaged the first article from the perspective of Mana Wahine and argued in summary, that

- a) On “We believe in one God...” Mana Wahine challenges the singular male image of God; reclaims the divine feminine and multiple atua wahine.
- b) On “the Father, the Almighty” Mana Wahine resists divine patriarchy, critiques the gendering and hierarchizing of sacred power.
- c) On “...maker of heaven and earth...” Mana Wahine refuses the colonial notion of God as distant Creator; but rather affirms whakapapa-based and relational creation narratives
- d) On “...seen and unseen” Mana Wahine reclaims wairua (spirit) as embodied, ancestral and relational, recognizes wahine as spiritual authorities.

Through Mana Wahine, the first article of the creed becomes a site of both critical resistance and cultural reclamation. It is deconstructed, renationalized, and reframed in ways that honour Maori cosmology, atua wahine and the enduring mana of Wahine Maori. Taking these challenges seriously is essential in the work of decolonization and epistemic justice.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 7

Metropolitan Geevarghese Mor Coorilos Nalunnakkal is Metropolitan of the ancient Niranam Diocese within the Malankara Jacobite Syriac Orthodox Church.

As the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) reflections on the Nicene Creed remind us, it is important for us to “re-engage with what was at stake at the time of its formulation and engage with what is at stake today”. The creed was a product of a council which was designed and convened by the then Roman empire for its own imperial interests; to keep the empire under a singular rule. To maintain the unity of the empire, the emperor had to settle the theological differences that had plagued the empire’s emerging and rapidly flourishing religion: Christianity.

Our reflections on the creed, 1700 years since its genesis, therefore, must not overlook the original empire context and the contemporary neo-colonial interests that appear to undergird the project of church unity, itself understood in terms of conciliarity and consensus- often at the expense of values such as justice; a project that is being envisaged and pursued by modern expressions of global ecumenical movement. Having said that, it must be acknowledged

that the Creed is indeed theologically profound and continues to have serious ethical and missional implications.

One of the strongest dimensions of the Creed is its overall focus on the Trinitarian God of Life. It begins with the affirmation of God as the Creator of life; both human and non-human life. Confronted by an all-pervasive culture and politics of death (necropolitics), itself manifested in myriad forms such as racism, casteism, sexism, xenophobia, capitalism, and persecution of minorities, we seem to be living in a “death world” (Mbembe) where the vast majority of the population are subject to conditions that render them ‘living dead’. These conditions expose the most vulnerable sections of society and their environment to mortal danger and death.

In this neo-imperial context where the forces of death appear to have enormous sway over life-both human and non-human- the focus on a trinitarian God of life who creates (para1), redeems (para 2),

and sustains (para 3) all life is highly pertinent.

The accent on the God of life also reminds us of our responsibility towards creation and for one another. In this context, it is important not to overlook the fact that the Creed starts with its narrative on God and creation (in line with the Biblical scheme). It is also in harmony with the indigenous world view where creation and human history are intrinsically intertwined, something that classical versions of liberation theology failed to recognise initially and corrected subsequently.

Given the contemporary context of climate crisis and its damaging impact on the lives of those on the margins of society, the credal thrust on the integrity of creation and fullness of life assumes enormous importance. The trinitarian view of life that finds articulation in the Creed offers a counter narrative to the dominant world view of capitalism and consumerism that exploit both humanity and nature in an indiscriminate manner.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 8

Dr Thandi Gamedze is a South African educator and poet based at the University of the Western Cape's Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice as a Senior Researcher.

On Creeds

I've always been suspicious of creeds
 Calcified statements of belief
 Locked, loaded and recited
 Leaving little time or space to breathe
 To question
 To doubt
 To wrestle
 To touch the wound and determine whether or not it's real
 It all just seems a little too clean and controlled
 To claim to be in the name
 Of the One who came for freedom

My Theology

My theology is a theology of weaving together
 That rejects the distinctions of class, race, gender
 That demolishes the dividing borders
 Gathering all together under one name
 Making siblings of those previously estranged
 My theology is a theology of lament
 That inhabits places of pain and suffering
 That bravely sees what some refuse to see
 A theology that is moved by tears
 And weeps with those who weep

My theology is a theology of destruction
 Of breaking down systems of power
 Of tearing down constructed narratives
 Of undoing harmful beliefs
 To create a foundation on which to build something new

My theology is a theology of justice
 Where systems of oppression are neither tolerated nor perpetuated
 Where there is no room for hierarchies of gender or race
 But the humanity of all
 Is fought for and embraced

My theology is a theology of responsiveness
 One affected by its surroundings
 And in constant dialogue with its context
 A theology that makes itself vulnerable to that which it touches
 And is perpetually becoming

My theology is a theology of upside down
 Where the last are made first
 Where the children are the teachers
 Where success is collective rather than competitive
 And humanity is the only qualification necessary
 My theology is a theology of mystery
 Where questions are honoured guests
 And doubt dances with faith
 Where the unknown is acknowledged and welcomed
 And room is always kept for magic

My theology is a theology of home
 A place of sanctuary for all who choose to enter
 Where no part of a person is left unloved
 Where overflowing grace knits together that which has been broken
 And space is made for all to become whole.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 9

Ms Katerina Pekridou is Programme Officer for Theology & Studies at the Conference of European Churches.

The context of the Council and our context

Beginning with the Synod of the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15), which set the precedent for later church councils, all ecumenical councils have sought, through joint consultation and spiritual discernment, to respond to the faith challenges of their time. These councils addressed theological, liturgical, pastoral, and canonical issues, always striving to remain faithful to the Word of God and the living tradition received from the apostles. At the same time, they listened attentively to the Holy Spirit and worked to reach consensus among the local churches on urgent matters. Their decisions reflect the ongoing tension between preserving the core of the Christian faith and adapting to new circumstances through the guidance of the Spirit.

The Council of Nicaea (325) grappled with the Church's understanding of the Trinity. At the heart of the debate was the question of salvation through the Son of God made flesh, and the ongoing presence of God in the life of the Church through the Holy Spirit. The outcome of the Council, the Nicene Creed, emerged as a foundational confession of

Christian faith, expressing the shared theological convictions of the global Church. Today, in the face of multiple crises, such as war, genocide, political instability, climate change, systemic inequality, racialised violence, forced migration, the erosion of democratic and ecological systems and more, revisiting this ancient creed through a critical and contextual lens may offer some valuable insight and inspiration.

I suggest a theological approach drawing from the model of Incarnation. Christ became human to save the whole world. He walked with the poor and the oppressed. He partook in their experiences. Returning to this practice and being rooted in the lived experiences of those who are pushed to the margins of society and even the church, is not only a bold declaration of faith, but a call for transformative engagement with the world and a sign of the Spirit's presence in the world. In our uncommon times, the Nicene creed stands both as a common profession of faith and a call to public expression and political action, as faith is not an abstract set of beliefs, but a radical affirmation and embodiment of God's commitment to human dignity, justice, and liberation.

Ecumenical significance

In a world increasingly defined by fragmentation, uncertainty, and upheaval which can be rightly described as 'uncommon times,' the Nicene creed remains the Church's unwavering confession of a common faith. It is not merely a relic of ecclesial history or a liturgical formula, but the living and unchanging proclamation of the Church's identity and hope. In our present age, marked by rapid technological change, social unrest, moral ambiguity, and even existential threat, the creed could be seen as bearing renewed relevance as a stabilising centre of theological truth and ecclesial unity.

The Nicene creed is a doxological and theological response to the divine revelation in Christ. Its very structure — trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesial — offers a vision of humanity and the cosmos rooted in divine mystery. 'I believe in one God...' is not merely a personal declaration, but the shared faith and conviction of the whole Church. In confessing the creed, handed down and received through the centuries, the Church proclaims a truth that transcends time.

In baptism, the public confession of faith through the creed unites the baptised with the faith of the whole Church, both past and present. This shared profession is a vital prerequisite for entering into the life of Christian discipleship. In its liturgical use during the eucharist — proclaimed after the gospel and before communion — the creed serves both a theological and communal purpose. It prepares the

faithful to enter into the mystery of the eucharist and affirms their shared belief. To participate fully in eucharistic communion, one must first publicly profess the faith. This underscores the creed's role as both the foundation and prerequisite for communion.

Contemplating the articles of faith

To affirm together that 'We believe in one God' is to reject all idols, not just old and newer deities, but also the idols which have replaced God with systems of domination. It means to reject any force or structure that ravages life. This is a task requiring discernment of the needs of each context. Rejecting power in all its forms, resisting a mentality of gaining profit at the expense of others, standing up to the idols of nation, racism, patriarchy, ecological destruction. To confess the one triune God in each context is to affirm God's singular authority over against the totalising claims of empire, excessive wealth, and exploitation. To confess the one triune God together is to jointly stand against systems that perpetuate death by dehumanising people and destroying the earth itself.

To profess God as 'maker of heaven and earth' is a testimony to the unity of the spiritual and material world, as well as the origins and the sacredness of creation. Human beings are but a part of God's good creation that extends beyond what is visible. They are not meant to dominate over other created beings, but to be 'priests' and stewards of creation (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15). While creation is groaning (Rom. 8:18–30) and effects of ecological degradation become apparent, the interdependence of humanity and the earth come to

the fore. Ecological injustice is deeply interwoven with socio-economic oppression. The creed points believers to ecological conversion and solidarity with the natural environment and its vulnerable peoples.

When we recite the creed, we profess our understanding of reality through the Incarnate Word: 'one Lord, Jesus Christ... begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father.' The Word of God is the source and goal of all creation (St Maximos the Confessor). In Christ, the world finds its coherence and purpose. Faith, then, is not about abstract ideas, but about the living Christ —incarnate, crucified, and risen— who reveals the fullness of all things. The creed, and especially its Christological core, is not a philosophical theory but a confession of God's saving work in history, fulfilled in the Resurrection. To affirm that Christ is 'of one essence with the Father' is a 'guidepost' into the mystery of Christ (John Behr) — one that calls for personal, ecclesial, and social transformation. The Creed is not just recited; it is lived —through repentance, communion, worship, and justice.

Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human, came not only to save individual souls but to inaugurate a reign of justice and peace. His Incarnation identifies God with the poor, the sick, and the excluded. His cross was not merely a spiritual event, but a political one —an execution by empire. And his resurrection is a sign that death-dealing powers do not have the last word. The Christological centre of the creed ('I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... For us and for

our salvation he came down from heaven') takes on radical significance. The incarnation is not a neutral metaphysical event; it is a divine act of solidarity with the poor and 'the crucified peoples of history' (Jon Sobrino). The cross is emblematic not merely of personal redemption, but of political execution by imperial powers. The downtrodden, the oppressed and persecuted find hope in the crucified and risen Christ, who subverts the logic of domination and inaugurates a new order marked by justice, mercy, and liberation.

Salvation is not only about the afterlife. It is about the here and now. It is about freedom from all that dehumanises: poverty, racism, sexism, violence, and despair. To believe in salvation is to commit ourselves to social transformation in the image of God's justice. The creed's reference to salvation must be critically reinterpreted in light of socio-political contexts, including liberation from all forms of oppression: economic, political, cultural, and spiritual. This holistic vision of salvation challenges the privatisation of faith and calls the Church to go beyond the boundaries of its own community and participate actively in the struggle for social transformation.

To affirm our faith in the Holy Spirit ('We believe in the Holy Spirit') is to trust in the dynamic presence of God in history and join in the ongoing work of liberation and reconciliation (Together Towards Life, WCC 2013 36-54). The Spirit is not confined to institutional boundaries but is alive in the cries for justice and the acts of resistance by marginalised peoples

empowering communities of life and hope. 'To experience life in the Spirit is to taste life in its fullness' (TTL 34). The Spirit calls us into righteousness, solidarity, radical hospitality (TTL 47), healing and wholeness (TTL 50). This requires a turning away (metanoia) from the world's narrative toward the truth revealed in Christ. Every word of the creed calls for transformation not only of the mind, but of life. To believe in 'the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life' is to live as those who have received the Spirit, bearing fruit in holiness, mercy, and love.

To confess belief in 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church' is to affirm a Church that is unified in Christ, sanctified by grace, global in scope, and grounded in the apostolic gospel. These attributes are not mere ideals but living realities the Church must embody and continually strive toward in its doctrine, spirituality and mission. This article of faith is not a defence of hierarchical structures, but a call to be united in Christ, and grounded in the revelation of the Scripture (cf. Ephesians 4:1–6). It is an affirmation that the Spirit dwells in the Church calling everyone to live in righteousness. Holiness, therefore, is both attributed by grace and progressive (2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Pet. 1:15–16). This statement of faith is a proclamation of the catholicity of the Church, where all barriers of race, class, language, and nation are overcome, as all are gathered into one body through faith in Christ, united by the Spirit across time and place. It is both an affirmation of the continuity of the Church with the Church of the apostles and a call to transforming discipleship.

To believe in 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church' is to belong in a community of disciples standing with those who suffer. In a fragmented world, oneness in Christ calls us to break down barriers of class, race, gender, and nation, to move from words to prophetic witness against systems of death, from confession to commitment, solidarity and resistance.

With the final article ('I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come'), the creed asserts that death does not have the last word and that Christ's resurrection inaugurates history's redemption. Contemplating on the end of times (eschatology) is not escapist, but transformational. In confessing the resurrection, the Church affirms that history is not closed and death is not final. God is the redeemer of all creation. Our hope, therefore, lies in the unshakable proclamation of the Resurrection.

Conclusion

Creed and life are inseparable. The Nicene creed remains a shared confession of the enduring presence of the Triune God who is 'the same yesterday, today, and forever' (Heb. 13:8). As we continue to navigate the challenges of our fractured, fast changing, disoriented world, the timeless truth of the creed can help us make sense, heal, and bring hope to our time. The Nicene creed serves as a dynamic expression of faith lived in history. It calls Christians not only to believe in the triune God, but to live out that belief through concrete acts of solidarity, standing up for justice, and trusting in the transforming power of the gospel.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 10

WHAT DOES OUR COMMON FAITH, AS AFFIRMED IN THE NICENE CREED, MEAN FOR OUR UNCOMMON TIMES?

The Revd Dr Joshua Samuel is the Huron-Lawson Chair in Contextual Theology at Huron University.

The Nicene creed continues to serve as the common denominator for the global Church even if it is not always acknowledged explicitly. While this historic statement of faith serves as a theological guide for Christian communities, we are compelled to ask what this affirmation of (common) faith means to the Church today.

To begin with, the idea of having a common faith for the Church does not mean having the same interpretation or expression of faith. Rather, the language of commonness of faith is built on many ways of believing in and being saved by God as revealed in Jesus Christ. That is, the catholic nature of the Church is not despite but because of its diversity. As Christopher Duraisingh points out, the word 'catholic' (*kata'holon*) implies the communion of the many that are different which together make up the whole. Common faith is not forced upon the many but draws from the many Spirit(ual) experiences of the faithful.

In other words, the Nicene creed does not police uniformity or sameness of the global Church but rather includes and encourages different ways of relating to the divine.

Secondly, this ecumenical common faith stresses the sacramental nature of the Church. One of the key issues at the council of Nicaea was on the divine nature of Jesus in relation to the Father. The council agreed that the God incarnate in and as Jesus of Nazareth was of the same substance (*homoousios*) as God the Father. It is this wholly divine Jesus who reveals, redeems, and reconciles the world to God. The only way we know and can relate to God, according to the New Testament and Nicaea, is in this fleshy and earthly nature of the incarnate God. Common faith envisioned in the Nicene creed is rooted in the story of God creating, redeeming, and working (with) in the chaos of the world. This means that the Church, as the body of Christ, continues to be the enfleshed presence of God in the world. As the visible embodiment

of God, the Church cannot but get its hands and feet dirty and witness in the muddy and messy realities of life.

Finally, our faith in the story of the incarnation also directs us to be mindful of eco-human suffering. Of course, the creed does not talk about injustice or oppression. But it does note that the incarnation involved the unjust state murder of Jesus, implying the willful brokenness of God in solidarity with the colonised and marginalised people. As we continue to see the rise of discriminatory and dehumanising forces across the world,

ironically, some even in the name of Jesus, the Church is challenged to bear in mind the 'original' story of the incarnation. The image of the vulnerable God wounded but undefeated by forces of mammon will have to be the inspiration for the global Christian community. Our common faith challenges us to stand and walk with and proclaim and embody the hope of resurrection and life to those who are bullied and silenced today.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 11

ANTI-IMPERIAL READING OF NICAIA?

Dr Andrej Jeftić is the Director of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

"For if a judgement is made by bishops, what interest does the emperor have in it? [...] When has a judgement of the church received its authority from the emperor or, actually, when was his verdict recognised [by the Church]?"
Athanasius of Alexandria, *Historia Arrianorum*, 52.3

I would like to challenge the usual depiction of Nicaea as the historical moment which represented the surrendering of the Church to the Empire. To do so, I highlight that the Council of Nicaea was initially convened by bishops rather than by Constantine himself, that its methods of decision-making centered on doctrinal truth rather than political unity, and that the aftermath of the Council reveals a neglect of its doctrinal conclusions in imperial policy. Finally, I will argue that this suggests that the Nicene Council can be interpreted as not advancing imperial aims, but acting in ways that challenged the empire's attempts at religious harmony.

Convening of the Council

One of the key figures in this re-evaluation is Ossius of Cordoba, who played a significant role in the lead-up to the council. Ossius was sent by

Constantine to mediate between Arius and Bishop Alexander of Alexandria during the Arian controversy. His mission in Alexandria, along with plans for a council originally set to take place in Ancyra, laid the groundwork for what would ultimately become the Council of Nicaea. Acting with considerable autonomy, Ossius took steps to gather bishops and address the escalating theological disputes. The council planned for Ancyra, however, was relocated to Nicaea by Constantine, who recognized the growing significance of the Arian controversy and sought to lend imperial support to the proceedings. Thus, the First Council of Nicaea was not solely the result of Constantine's initiative. Rather, it was the culmination of efforts by Ossius of Cordoba, who had already set the process in motion through his mediation in Alexandria and his role in organizing the council initially planned for Ancyra. Constantine's involvement came later, when he recognized the need to broaden the council's scope and lend his imperial authority to its proceedings. This revisionist view challenges the traditional narrative and shifts some of the credit for convening Nicaea from Constantine to Ossius.

Political vs Theological Agenda

Constantine did not hold the theological disputes preceding the Council of Nicaea in high regard. In his Letter to Alexander of Alexandria and Arius, written in late 324, he described the cause of the conflict as "truly insignificant" and "unworthy of such fierce contention." He referred to the entire debate as "trifling and of little importance" and believed it had little to do with the law, which was his primary concern, viewing it instead as a series of vain arguments.

Constantine was not interested in high theological debates—not necessarily because he couldn't understand them (though he might have struggled)—but because he saw them as futile and dangerous to the unity of the empire. His priority was harmony, and he saw theological disputes as a threat to that goal.

The bishops' goal was to "seek truth," not merely to ensure "imperial peace." Although Constantine convened the council, the bishops took the lead in shaping its theological discussions. In this way, Constantine's and the bishops' agendas were similar but not identical. To use a metaphor inspired by the theological debate itself, their goals were *homoiousios* ("similar in substance") rather than *homoousios* ("of the same substance"). Just as the distinction between these terms was crucial in defining Christ's divine nature, it is equally significant in understanding the differing objectives of the emperor and the bishops at Nicaea.

The introduction of the term 'homoousios' also offers a testimony that supports the "anti-Constantinian"

position of the Council (despite the fact that he is often credited with introducing it). The term, along with the anathemas that accompanied it, was not intended to harmonize differing opinions. Instead, it was introduced to exclude those associated with Arius, for the sake of theological purity, not political unity.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Council, Constantine quickly distanced himself from the term and the Creed, even readmitting Arius. If Constantine had truly valued the term for its theological significance, he would not have abandoned it so easily. In contrast, the pro-Nicene factions in the years following the council continued to defend the term precisely because it safeguarded the true faith, not political stability. Far from merely enacting Constantine's vision for a unified church, the bishops pursued a course that often complicated, and at times antagonized, the Church's relationship with the empire.

Finally, the inclusion of Pontius Pilate's name in the Nicene Creed, formalized at the Council of Constantinople, prompts reflection. In my native Serbian, the phrase "fell in like Pilate into the Creed" refers to something unexpected and out of place. However, I wonder if this reference to the Roman governor, who presided over Jesus' trial, hints at the suffering of Christ under imperial authority. This detail may offer a subversive potential in interpreting the Church's relationship to political power, subtly acknowledging its resistance to imperial control.

REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

REFLECTION 12

IN THE EMPIRE, BUT NOT OF THE EMPIRE?

The Revd Canon Dr Peniel Rajkumar is Global Theologian and Director of Global Mission with United Society Partners in the Gospel.

Though convened for imperial purposes with the explicit intent of stabilising the pax-Romana of Constantine and its implicit imperial ambitions, the creed that emerged in Nicaea and its more mainstream re-iteration i.e. the Nicene Creed, have in them spores/sparks for a praxis that can be anti-imperial in nature. Can they be re-kindled with (re) imagination and purpose to resist the empires of our times?

What Nicaea 325 revealed:

Nicaea revealed the close relationship between empire and religion and the perception that the theological arc of religion can be 'bent' for political purposes – for the consolidation of power, and the 'rei(g)n-forcement' of imperial interests. We see the rehearsal of such perceptions today, when contemporary regimes see religion as being pivotal for political fortunes and conflate nation with religion. This is a phenomenon across faiths in the context of resurgent nationalisms. How the Christian

faith, in its interaction with political and economic power, can assume a shape and force that can facilitate the flourishing of all needs to be explored – through a decolonising lens.

Re-Reading Nicaea:

The starting point for such a decolonising lens probably can be found in the theological statements that emerged in 325 and 381. What the creed of Nicaea (325) as well as the Nicene Creed (that emerged after 381) reveal are that despite the seemingly complete nature of imperial power, what is also deeply intertwined within our Christian faith are elements of resistance and resilience – which cannot be fully coopted by the empire.

I say this because paying attention to the Nicene Creed can reveal an intrinsic narrative of life which can be used to contest the 'necropolitics' of the empire. This can be recognised in our affirmation of our trinitarian faith in God who is 'maker of heaven and earth' (maker of all things, visible and invisible in the Creed of Nicaea

325), in Jesus who is recognised as the one through whom 'all things were made', and in the Holy Spirit as the 'giver of life'. The God-head that we Christians affirm in trinitarian terms encompasses and embraces the wider web of creation beyond humans, and eschews a parochial anthropocentric dimension. All these faith affirmations attest and point to a view of salvation that is cosmic in scope. This directs our faith both towards life in this world as well as the 'life of the world to come'. How do we let our faith in this God of life shape our engagement with a world which continues to face the onslaught of 'empire' – where religion is instrumentalised for usurping power, undermining plurality and consolidating privilege?

Given the politics of 'texts', perhaps we need to 'sit' with the ambivalences and absences of Nicaea and seek to re-story the creed. We can perhaps ask whether this call to life can be in any way connected to the dismembered bodies (those church representatives with missing body parts) that gathered in Nicaea? Was the fact that the gathered community in Nicaea included people who had experienced the death-dealing force of Rome a contributory factor for the life-affirming nature of the creed? This provokes thinking about how dismembered bodies themselves can bring a different perspective to the faith we affirm. How do we re-member these forgotten and missing bodies in the re-storying of our histories and traditions?

What Nicaea also can teach us is the possibility of 'deconstructing' – God the almighty – through the lens of Jesus Christ, who was made (hu) man, crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death, and was buried and the Holy Spirit. The potential that Jesus Christ - the crucified one - has for the re-reading of God especially in contexts of discrimination and marginalisation, has been opened up by several liberation theologies. One example comes from the Dalit theologian A.P. Nirmal. In the context of the caste-system which is based on hierarchical notions of purity and pollution, Nirmal's theology grasped the political potential of theological symbolization and re-imagined God. He spoke of God as a servant God, a *bhanghi* (a manual scavenger) and a *dhobi* (a person who washes clothes) - all professions considered to be polluting. According to Nirmal:

"...the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He (sic) is a servant God - a God who serves. Services to others have always been the privilege of Dalit communities in India... Their servitude is even more pathetic than that of the Shudras (the lowest caste in the fourfold caste system). Against this background the amazing claim of a Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the *Svayambhu* does not create others

to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the *sva-dharma* of God; and since we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege. Let us be prepared for further shock. Are we prepared to say that my house-maid, my sweeper, my *bhanga* (scavenger) is my God? It is precisely in this sense that our God is a servant God. He (sic) is a waiter, a *dhobi* (washerman)."⁹

Such a radical re-identification of the divine set in motion a theology which broke the debilitating process of demonising the Dalits as the 'polluted' and 'polluting' ones under the caste-system. Theo-logical imagination became a process of furthering life for those whom life was denied in the name of God.

Drawing on examples such as this, Nicaea 1700 is an invitation to re-story our common faith. How we 'restory' our faith and reweave the theological mat of Christianity with particular attentiveness to the

voices and visions of those who have so far been rendered invisible, absent, marginalised and edged-out in our theologising is important as we seek to re-affirm our common faith for these un-common times. As Joerg Reiger reminds us, in the context of empire it is important to understand that 'we will continue to support empire by default unless we look for those particular and often repressed places where we encounter alternatives'¹⁰. The challenge for us at this moment is to embrace this historical moment as an opportunity not to be fettered to our past, but freed into a future marked by honesty, humility and hope for the healing of the earth.

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⁹Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology', in James Massey, (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), 1998), (pp.214-230), p.224.

¹⁰Joerg Reiger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times*, (Augsburg: Fortress, 2007), p. 315.