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The Homoousion as Shield of the Son's Divinity

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A new, exciting story about Nicaea is in circulation, but though brilliantly argued it remains a tall tale, one that sends me back to the common understanding of the Nicene Creed and its significance. Against the new theories, I appeal to a close reading of the Creed itself, for it well explains its own purpose.

Building on P. F. Beatrice, Elizabeth Digeser, and his mentor Dale Tuggy, Kegan Chandler argues that Constantine's personal interpretation of the *homoousion* was derived from the *Poimandres*, quoted fourteen times by his counsellor Lactantius. Beatrice wrote:

As can be clearly seen in the *Poimandres*, and even more clearly in an inscription mentioned exclusively in the *Theosophia* [a Hermetic fragment in a sixth-century text], in the theological language of Egyptian paganism the word *homoousios* meant that the Nous-Father and the Logos-Son, who are two distinct beings, share the same perfection of the divine nature.¹

This is alleged to show the “real Egyptian, pre-Christian roots” of the “theological use of *homoousios*”.² The central and distinctive doctrine of the Christian creed was pre-programmed in ancient Egypt.³

1 Pier Franco Beatrice, “The Word »*Homoousios*« from Hellenism to Christianity”, in *Church History* 71 (2002), 243-72; 243.

2 Ibid., 263.

3 “The very concept in fact of a Trinity comes from Egypt, and was a permanent feature of Egyptian theology”, says Gerald Bostock, “Origen's Unique Doctrine of the Trinity: Its Jewish and Egyptian Sources”, *Origeniana Duodecima*, Peeters, Leuven 2019, 519-33; 530.

There are lots of problems with this proposal. For a start, the alleged resemblance of the *Poimandres* to the Nicene Creed is illusory. The Hermetic text does not present “the Egyptian and Hermetic theology of the »consubstantiality« of the Logos-Son with the Nous-Father”.⁴ *Poimandres* identifies himself as “Nous, your God” (or “the first God” in a textual variant) and identifies the shining Logos coming from Nous as the Son of God. “What in you sees and hears is the *logos* of the Lord, while the *nous* is the Father God” (*Poim.* 6).⁵ Before Nous comes the *proarchē* (*Poim.*, 8), which corresponds to what Valentinians, according to Irenaeus, call “*Proarchon kai Propatora kai Buthon*” (*haer.* 1.1.1). The Nous generates a second Nous who is the Demiurge. The divine Logos unites with this Demiurge-Nous, being *homoousios* with it (as is merely parenthetically remarked) (*Poim.*, 10). Do we really “already detect here in this pagan document the language of Nicaea?”⁶ Stead⁷ clarifies that the *homoousios* refers to the “common derivation” of the Logos and the Demiurge Mind “from the supreme God who is intelligence, light, and life”. The Logos is not said to be consubstantial with the supreme God, the first Nous, still less with the still more transcendent *proarchē*, as a Nicene parallel would require.

It is not clear that Gnostics took the word *homoousios* from Hermetic sources, or that *Poimandres* dates to the first century CE at the latest.⁸ The way the text refers to the *proarchē* suggests that it

4 Beatrice, *Homoousios*, 265.

5 *Nous* is introduced as a proper name, as in Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.3. See A.-J. Festugière (ed.), *Hermès Trismégiste, I, Poimandrès; Traités II-XII*, Belles Lettres, Paris 1991, 8.

6 Kegan A. Chandler, *Constantine and the Divine Mind: The Imperial Quest for Primitive Monotheism*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon 2019, 101.

7 Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977, 202.

8 Beatrice, 263. Stead (201) tentatively assigns the *Poimandres* to the second century and considers it merely conceivable that it is the earliest text to use *homoousios*.

comes later, and is influenced by rather than influencing Valentinus. Robert Grant classes the *Hermetica* with philosophical gnosticizing alongside Numenius and the *Chaldaean Oracles*.⁹

The word itself is a fairly ordinary one despite its late emergence in second century Valentinian and Hermetic texts and means “of the same substance or essence” in a generic sense, as in the *Letter to Flora* 7.8: “it is in the nature of the Good to engender and produce only beings similar and of the same nature (*homoousia*) as itself”.¹⁰ Plotinus and Porphyry, also use it unselfconsciously to refer to a generic kinship of human and animal souls or of the human soul with the divine.¹¹

Homoousios occurs only once in *Poimandres* and never in Lactantius. It had been controverted in older church debates (the two Dionysii, and the affair of Paul of Samosata in Antioch in 268 CE) but not because of its Gnostic provenance, which Irenaeus had taken in his stride, in fact using the term in a positive theological way.¹² Methodius used it in alleging that Origen saw the firmament

9 Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York 1959, 147-150.

10 Gilles Quispel (ed.), Ptolémée, *Lettre à Flora*, Sources Chrétiennes 24 bis Cerf, Paris 1966, 7. Quispel (103) queries Harnack's linkage of this to the Nicene formula (*Dogmengeschichte* 1.285). Valentinians did see the Son as consubstantial to the Father, since as a general rule what is born of God is God, but there is no special reference to Christ. Stead (192) sees Ptolomaeus as voicing a commonplace (citing Plato, *Rep.* 379bc, *Tim.* 29e, Philo, *Opif.* 140, *Aet. Mund.* 44, Athanasius, *c. Gent.* 6), which may indicate that the term *homoousios* would be familiar to his readers. Since the inquiring Flora is spared technical diction such as *psukhikos*, *homoousios* may have been a simpler word.

11 John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Longman, Harlow, Essex 1972, 244, referring to *Enn.* 4.7.10 and *De abstinentia* 1.19.

12 Jonatan Simons, “God and *eiusdem substantiae*, in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.17-8”, in *Studia Patristica* 109 (2021), 55-65. Simons takes issue with Stead's claim (*Divine Substance*, 201) that Irenaeus positively states “the inequality of consubstantials” and claims instead that the nine occurrences of *eiusdem substantiae* in *Haer.* 2.17-18 do entail “equality of status between the Father

as “consubstantial with the angels” (*De Resurrectione* 2.30). The term aroused unease only in Trinitarian contexts.

The decisive catchword of the Nicene confession, namely, *homoousios* (“of one substance”), comes from no less a person than the emperor himself. To the present day no one has cleared up the problem of where the emperor got the term.¹³

But the obscurity attaching to the term hardly obliges one to reach back to the *Poimandres*, for the term was a buzzword ever since Arius had used it in his provocative letter to Alexander around 318 CE. But the term circulated in Arian texts before the Council, probably in reaction to orthodox usage, for instance by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria:

A letter was publicly read and ignominiously torn, in which their patron, Eusebius of Nicomedia, ingenuously confessed that the admission of the HOMOOUSSION, or Consubstantial, a word already familiar to the Platonists, was incompatible with the principles of their theological system. The fortunate opportunity was eagerly embraced by the bishops, who governed the resolutions of the synod, and, according to the lively expressions of Ambrose [*De Fide* 3.15.125] they used the sword, which heresy itself had drawn from the scabbard, to cut off the head of the hated monster.¹⁴

and his creative powers” (p. 56). But while Irenaeus may unselfconsciously use *homoousios* in discussing theological topics (though the only text of those cited by Simons that lends substance to this is *Haer.* 4.9.1-2), in 2.17-18 he is expounding the Gnostic system, and certainly not making it his own.

- 13 Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1985, 5, quoted, Chandler (100), italicizing the last sentence. Lohse says that Constantine himself had only a rudimentary “theology” (52) and subscribes to the common view (promoted by Harnack and Friedrich Loofs) that Ossius was his source, and that the term translates Tertullian’s *una substantia*.
- 14 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter 21, 3. Against the tendency to dismiss Ambrose as coming too late, the account of Theodoret (*Hist. Eccl.* 1.8.1) refers to the witness of Eustathius, and another participant in the Council seems to refer to the incident in *De Decretis* 3. See Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, *El símbolo niceno* Consejo Superior de Investigaciones

Mark Edwards represents the standard understanding of the *homoousion*. He says that:

while the term [*homoousios*] is not employed in any surviving work from his [Alexander's] hand, there is some reason to believe that he sanctioned the use of it by his colleagues. There is no doubt that before the Council he had already declared the Son to be "from the Father's essence", and it is all but certain that when this phrase was challenged, together with the *homoousion* at Nicaea, it was he who produced a conciliatory exegesis of both innovations, relying on the theology that had already been expounded in his letters.¹⁵

Edwards credits Philostorgius's story that Alexander and Ossius of Cordoba had concerted a plan to introduce the *homoousion*: an anonymous life of Constantine corroborates it; as does Ambrose of Milan, who was acquainted both with documents and with witnesses of the council proceedings.

While it seems a stretch to say the term was a hallmark of orthodoxy before Nicaea,¹⁶ the term was well known in connection with Trinitarian theology, being sometimes suspected of Sabellianism, and original Gnostic senses were no longer operative.

The rejection of *homoousios* at Antioch [in 268 CE] is good evidence that before Nicaea the use of the term was not well-established among the Catholics, and was seen as foreign to the Catholic faith.¹⁷

Cientificas, Madrid 1947, 31; Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381*, T&T Clark, London 1988, 210.

15 Mark Edwards, "Alexander of Alexandria and the Homoousion", in *Vigiliae Christianae* 66 (2012), 482-502, 482. see also Mark Edwards, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine", in Simon Swain et al. (eds.), *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, 211-235.

16 Wolfgang Bienert, "Das vornicänische *homoousios* als Ausdruck der Rechtgläubigkeit", in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* (1979), Heft 2-3: 5-29.

17 Chandler, 105.

The threatening idea of two *ousiai* in God, about which Osius quizzed Eusebius of Caesarea at the Antiochene synod that preceded the Council, is doubtless the theological motive that prompted Alexander and Osius to rally to the term. There was no need for Constantine to re-introduce it on a quite other, Hermetic basis. *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*.

Chandler claims that the term was actually designed to accommodate Arians and their sympathisers:

In its original Hermetic-gnostic meaning (describing two beings of kindred substance) it appears surprisingly conducive to Eusebian theology. The modalist bishop Marcellus of Ancyra would write against Eusebius and the Arians, strongly arguing that they were in fact crypto-Hermeticists and gnostics, evidently because Eusebius's doctrine was akin to the Hermetic doctrine of two gods.¹⁸

The Hermetic usage of *homoousion* indeed accommodates perhaps as many as four gods, but its Nicene sense, even if blurry, clearly intends to exclude any such ditheistic reading of the preceding clause "God from God".

What Chandler goes on to say is supposititious. Marcellus:

stops short of directly criticizing the word *homoousios*, perhaps because of Constantine's authorship, and the fact that the emperor was the real crypto-Hermeticist actively infusing Christian confession with borrowed and alien elements. But Marcellus's critique of his opponents' alleged crypto-Hermeticizing may help us to explain why Constantine reacted so harshly towards Marcellus.¹⁹

That the close ally of Athanasius should wish to criticize Nicaea and should interpret it in a subordinationist sense strains credulity, as does the idea that Constantine was widely viewed as a Hermeticist secret agent. Nor can one imagine the emperor scanning abstruse

18 Chandler, 120.

19 Ibid.

theological literature ready to be piqued if his pet theories were slighted. The deposition of Marcellus by a council held in Constantinople in 336 CE, in connection with a book of his judged heretical that he refused to withdraw, is perhaps best explained in Eusebius's *Contra Marcellum*, composed immediately afterward. His overtly Sabellian interpretation of the *homoousion* must have been the chief issue.²⁰

Constantine, it is alleged, wanted to shore up the tradition of pagan monotheism,²¹ and Christianity was an instrument in this task. It is hard to see how the term *homoousios* would contribute to this. Rather than copper-fasten the Son's true divinity, as its place in a string of anti-Arian clauses indicates, the word would engineer a sudden swerve to a new topic, defending divine unity as if it might have been compromised by the previous clauses; there is no ancient warrant for this interpretation. The whole point of Constantine's initiative in planning and summoning the Council and then, when the need arose, insisting on the *homoousios* was to cement the unity of the Church, which obliged him to suppress the Arian threat, centred on the divine status of the eternal Son.

Already in autumn 324 his around 70 year old theological counsellor Ossius of Cordoba traveled to Alexandria at the emperor's behest with a personal letter from the emperor to Bishop Alexander and Arius.²²

Constantine hoped to clear up this minor dogmatic squabble so as to celebrate untroubled a *megalē kai hieratikē sunodos* celebrating

20 Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 229-230.

21 Discussed in Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, and Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010.

22 Hans Christoph Brennecke, "Nicæa I", *TRE* 24, 429-441; 430. The Antiochene synod held that winter 'belongs in the imperial pacification politics, of which Ossius travelled as the exponent' (ibid.).

church unity.²³ Clearly he delegated the direction of the synod, especially in the dogmatic debates, to his theological advisor Ossius.²⁴ If Constantine had aimed to propagate Hermetic ideas he would have made a bigger effort to defend the *homoousios* in the years after Nicaea when that word was in disfavour. It is hard to explain “why the man who imposed the term *homoousion* on 250 bishops should have been ready to waive it, less than a decade later, in his dealings with the two friendless presbyters Arius and Euzoios”.²⁵

One writer surmises that Ossius “probably mentioned to the emperor that the Platonic concept of a first and second Deity was somewhat similar to the Christian belief in God the Father and his Son the Word”.²⁶ Chandler says: “That such things were mentioned to the emperor is certain. However, as we will see, we can more confidently pin such conversations on Lactantius”.²⁷ But Lactantius had died around 320, and the imagined conversation is in any case no more than the pretty picture of a popular historian.

Constantine, it is argued, “believed that Christianity could be expressed through the conceptual and terminological forms of paganism and Gnosticism”.²⁸ Hanson undercuts such exalted images

23 Communiqué of 56 bishops at Antioch (quoted, Brennecke, p. 430); the three other bishops there were placed under a temporary ban, including Eusebius of Caesarea and Narcissus of Neronias (he spoke of three *ousiai* in God). See Hanson, 146-151; Kelly, 208-210.

24 Brennecke, 432.

25 Edwards, “Alexander”, 494.

26 Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire: Roman Imperial Biographies*, Routledge, London and New York 2004, 112–113. Odahl exaggerates the depth and speed of Constantine’s Christian conversion (Chandler, 140).

27 Chandler, 100.

28 Chandler, citing Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, “Platonism in the Palace: The Character of Constantine’s Theology”, in M. Shane Bjornlie (ed.) *The Life and Legacy of Constantine: Traditions Through the Ages*, Routledge, New York 2017, 49-61; 51.

of Constantine's theological competence by quoting his letters, one "written in the usual blustering imperial style" to Arius and Alexander in 324 dismissing "a controversy of futile irrelevance", and another to the rehabilitated Arius in 333, which is incoherent and full of blustering abuse.²⁹ His theologically more respectable public utterances may have drawn on clerical advisers and ghostwriters. On his role at Nicaea, Edwards remarks on how hard it is "to credit the Emperor with the dialectical aptitude or even the command of Greek that would have been required of an interlocutor at this conference". Ossius, too, had a summary Latin theology and was at sea in dealing with Greek subtleties such as the talk of two or three divine *ousiai* that shocked him at the Council of Antioch.³⁰ So we keep being thrown back on the proximate context, namely the quarrel between Alexander and the Arians.

Even if Constantine's Christianity may have been "deeply entangled with ideas that came from contemporary philosophical circles, specifically late Platonist groups which also valued Hermetic wisdom",³¹ this did not necessarily affect his promotion of *homoousios* at Nicaea. Indeed Chandler admits as much when he writes: "It seems obvious that the value the council members found in this foggy language was in its ability to oust the trouble-maker Arius". He adds that "Dale Tuggy has catalogued at least nine possible interpretations of the word which would have been available to the bishops at Nicaea".³² But these do not capture the impact of the term as expressing the unity in being of the Son with the Father. Tully's senses "1. Same individual entity; 2. Same universal essence" may be in the same ballpark as this but do not quite hit the mark. "Same individual entity" is excluded by the designation of the Son as "God from God" and "Same universal essence" is nebulous.

29 Hanson, 9, 137, 189.

30 Ibid., 188.

31 Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, "Platonism in the Palace", 49.

32 Chandler, 106.

The purpose of the term is clear: to affirm the divinity of the Son, and this purpose robes the term with sacral majesty as the Council comes to be fully accepted throughout the Church. “The reason why Nicaea’s so-called champion, Athanasius, deliberately avoided even speaking of *homoousios* for fifteen years after the council was because Athanasius knew that the term stood under an *evil odor*”.³³ This is overdrawn. Theologians seem never to have revelled in the term, since it was felt to be clunky and opaque as well as unscriptural (a sentiment now relived by millions obliged to use the word “consubstantial” in the current translation of the Roman Missal instead of the previous “of one being with” or “one in being with”).

Sieben’s nuanced study of Athanasius’s attitudes to the Council of Nicaea shows that he first envisaged the Council in its negative function as a judgement against the Arians.³⁴ This is not surprising given the number of clauses consciously directed at Arianism in both Creed and anathemas. Later Athanasius highlights the Creed’s positive teaching as a remembering of the apostolic paradosis (both passive and active), not a new “definition of dogma” warranted by “automatic” conditions of infallible authority.³⁵ Athanasius never mentions the Holy Spirit or the idea that a council gathered in the name of Christ (Mt 18:20).³⁶ The backbone of the Creed is of course the traditional kerygma, and the anti-Arian notes merely defend and clarify this.

Nicaea’s creed, however, clearly anathematizes anyone who says that the Son was not eternal (in other words, that there was a time when God was not a Father). Given the emperor’s Christology, how could he endorse such a creed? Through Eusebius’s letter, we see that even Constantine

33 Chandler, 107.

34 Hermann Josef Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der alten Kirche*, Schöningh, Paderborn 1979, 25-67; 38.

35 *Ibid.*, 47-48.

36 *Ibid.*, 66-67.

appears to have read the language of the creed in his own way for the sake of unity. During the proceedings, he could see that the majority of the bishops wanted to say that the Son existed eternally and that God was eternally a Father, so he, like Eusebius and others, interpreted the language to accommodate his views.³⁷

But at this point in the argument there seems to be no effective presence of Constantine's alleged personal theology in the *homoousion* at all, and no evidence that he read this theology into the term or used it as a Trojan horse for foisting it on the Council.

Whatever *homoousios* had originally meant, or even what it meant to Constantine personally, for the sake of unity (which we must not forget was always Constantine's chief prize), the emperor appears to have allowed the word to be interpreted in new ways at Nicaea, as evidenced by his stripping the term of its usual material sense. This might even be said to represent Constantine's (and Nicaea's) great theological achievement—the shift in the meaning of *homoousios* away from its typical materialistic connotations towards immateriality. And it is right to say that Constantine, in addition to enabling this shift in meaning, also enabled other interpretations of this language by encouraging the bishops to think of it in a “divine” and “ineffable” way.³⁸

Again, nothing is left of any particularly Gnostic or hermetic or pagan connotation. “What it meant to Constantine personally” is postulated on the basis of supposing that he was versed in Hermetic texts. Others would claim that a simple “theology of victory” was the unvarying backbone of Constantine's religious thought, which is reflected in Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, composed in Trier when Constantine was resident there in 313-15.³⁹

37 Chandler, 113.

38 Chandler, 118-119.

39 See François Heim, *La théologie de la victoire, de Constantin à Théodose*, Beauchesne, Paris 1992.

Moreover, the material connotations of *homoousios* were perhaps exaggerated in Arius's captious objections. We do not hear of such material associations in the reports of how *homoousios* was interpreted by the two Dionysii or Paul of Samosata. "The orthodox supporters of the Nicene Creed are against all expectations strikingly reticent about *homoousios* in a way that reminds us of Dionysius of Rome."⁴⁰ But the term aroused unease back in the third century because it was unbiblical, or because it suggested Sabellianism, not because it sounded materialistic. At Nicaea "it could still be given different meanings, and we know this at least by its aforementioned limited appearance in Sabellian circles in the third century as a term of identification."⁴¹ People did not call it Valentinian or Hermetic and the Arian talking point was to link it with Manicheanism.

Eusebius makes much of Constantine's explanation that the term did not mean "of the same being as" according to what we experience in our bodies, as if the Son had come to be by dividing or breaking off from the Father.⁴² Eusebius may have given Constantine an easy target to correct, so as to be able to claim that his subscription was due to imperial insight. His real unease may have come from his subordinationism,⁴³ which could not be openly expressed at the Council. That Constantine stripped the *homoousion* of materialism even as he introduced it, in a brilliant theological innovation, is unlikely. Eusebius tells his faithful that he queried both the expressions

40 Beatrice, 255. Dionysius of Alexandria was ready to accept the term "in a general sense, meaning »of similar nature« (*homophuês*) or »of similar kind« (*homogenês*)" (Hanson, 192).

41 Chandler, 105.

42 *Ep. ad dioecesanos* 7 (in PG 20.1535-1544).

43 "He is, together with Lactantius, the last great non-heretical subordinationist", says Aloys Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche: Von der Apostolischen Zeit zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451)*, 3rd ed., Herder, Freiburg 1990, 300.

ek tēs ousias and *homoousios* and was assured that the former did not imply the Son was part of the Father.⁴⁴ The latter term might be more indigestible, but he subscribed for the sake of church unity and peace and because he identified a sense that expressed right understanding: “*oude tēn phōnēn tou homoousiou paraitoumenoi, tou tēs eirēnēs skopou pro ophthalmōn hēmin keimonou, kai tou mē tēs orthēs ekspesein dianoiās*”.⁴⁵ In contrast to the claim that Constantine invented a new sense for *homoousios*, Eusebius tells us: “some learned and eminent bishops and writers have used the term »of the same being as«, in their theological teaching concerning the Father and Son”.⁴⁶

To conclude, let us read the Creed:

Πιστεύομεν

εἰς ἓνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα
πάντων ὀρατῶν τε καὶ ἀορατῶν ποιητὴν·
καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν
τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ,
γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ
τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός
Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ,
Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός,
Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ,
γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα,
ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί,
δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο
τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῆ,...

Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας Ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν,
καὶ Πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν,
καὶ ὅτι Ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ἐγένετο,
ἢ Ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι

44 *Ep. ad dioecesanos* 5.

45 *Ibid.*, 10.

46 *Ep.* 13.

ἢ κτιστόν
ἢ τρεπτόν
ἢ ἀλλοιωτόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ,
τούτους ἀναθεματίζει ἡ ἀγία καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία.⁴⁷

The text of the Creed itself shows the motivation for adopting the term *homoousios*, and provides the immediate and necessary, or even sufficient context for understanding the term. It begins with “we believe” rather than the “I believe” of baptismal confessions, as one of the first of the declaratory creeds abounding in the years from 325 to 381, in which a group of bishops seek agreement and definition on their understanding of the faith. That declaratory intent is most apparent in the first half of the second article and the anathemas connected with it. At issue is the divinity of the Son, and there is no need to bring in extraneous concerns such as pagan monotheism or Hermetism.

“The Son of God, born of the Father only-begotten, that is, from the substance (*ek tēs ousias*) of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father.” “The Son of God” begins “the series of propositions in which there is struggle against Arianism”⁴⁸ as they explicate its fundamental sense and shield it from distortion. The title already implies an affirmation of what previous tradition, notably Origen, had clarified: “the divine, natural, and proper sonship in contraposition to the adoptive”.⁴⁹ Efforts to make the meaning of the first article depend on the second seem unconvincing, e.g. Heinrich Vogel: “Only under the sign of the second article, only in the light falling from this centre

47 The text here is as given in T. Herbert Bindley, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, Methuen, London 1906, 17-18.

48 Ortiz de Urbina, *El símbolo niceno*, 105.

49 *Ibid.*, 119.

were the utterances of faith of the first article possible and realizable”⁵⁰ a claim backed by an inapposite citation of the Augustinian axiom, “*opera sanctae trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisae*”. Barthian Christocentrism lies in the back-ground of such claims. According to Barth “the clause »the one« Lord moves Jesus Christ immediately to the Father, of whom the confession emphatically said in the first article: he is *one* God”, and thus already says that “Jesus Christ is himself this being, not merely his legate or plenipotentiary, but identical with him”.⁵¹

As the lawyerly “that is” (*toutestin*) indicates, the aim is to affirm the true divinity of the Logos, his generation from the very being of God. The phrase to which it is attached, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ, must already have defining dogmatic purpose which *ek tēs ousias* explicates. One writer sees the *toutestin* as governing all the clauses down to *homoousion τῷ πατρὶ*.⁵² It cannot govern the clauses *Theon ek theou*, etc., which are doxological in style. “Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ, Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός” were in the creed Eusebius of Caesarea presented at Nicaea,⁵³ but Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ is added with defining dogmatic purpose. Canon John N. D. Kelly writes: “the absolute

50 Heinrich Vogel, *Das nicaenische Glaubensbekenntnis*, Lettner, Berlin 1963.

51 Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/1, Zollikon: Evangelische Buchhandlung 1939, 445-446. But the correlation of “one God” and “one Lord” is found in 1 Cor 8:6, as noted in Reinhart Staats, *Das Glaubensbekenntnis von Nikäa-Konstantinopel: Historische und theologische Grundlagen*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1996, 227, and the Creed may not be making any new dogmatic observation here. The same pairing of “one God” and “one Lord” occurs in the Creed of Caesarea (read by Eusebius at Nicaea) and the Creed of the Council of Antioch (texts in Kelly, 182, 209-210).

52 Fran O'Rourke, *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville 2022, 116.

53 “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, Only-begotten Son, first-born of every creature, begotten from the Father before all the ages, by whom also all things were made” (Eusebius, *Ep. ad dioecesanos* 4).

uniqueness of the divine Father was one of the staple Arian articles” and Eusebius of Caesarea had read from John 17:3 “not that the Father alone is God but that He alone is true God”.⁵⁴ Note that the second part of the second article dealing with the Incarnation does not have defining dogmatic purpose; it is kerygma, homology, doxology; for a defining of the dogma of the Incarnation we must await Ephesus and Chalcedon.⁵⁵

The text doubles back to make again a quasi-legal clarification, sharply underlining the contrast between begotten and made, with a sharp argumentative negation, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα. It is the same mode of lawyerly argumentative precision that ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ is then added. It must be in the same line of thinking as all the marked dogmatic emphases so far. We cannot imagine Constantine getting worried about (pagan) monotheism at this juncture and adding the *homoousion* with this new concern in mind. But the word might be meant to ward off a possible misunderstanding, as if the second *theos alethinos*, though of the essence of the Father, constituted a second essence. “That is, of the essence of the Father”, “begotten, not made”, and now “homoousion” all have in common a perceptible aim to forestall heresy by a decisive thrust, in a manner that smacks of dogmatic reflection rather than kerygma or doxology.

54 Kelly, 237. The phrase was ineffectual against the slippery Arians (Athanasius, *Ep. ad Afros* 5). The words “God from God” were omitted from the Constantinopolitan Creed, but the result of this trimming is aesthetically and theologically displeasing and the words are restored in the familiar Latin version, which as Barth remarks consciously enacts the sharpening of thought from lesser to more heightened definition, against Calvin’s view of the passage as a *battologia*, more suited to a song than a creed (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, 451). For the texts see Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer (eds.), *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Herder, Freiburg 1976, 52-53, 66-67.

55 As Barth says, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, 448. The third article of the Constantinopolitan creed has defining dogmatic purpose, though it looks like pure doxology and only the Pneumatomachian context reveals the purpose.

These dry specifications are clumsily inserted “technical catchwords”:

If they are detached from the body of the creed to which they adhere so loosely, they leave behind a complete and, to all appearances, independent formulary... a complete creed of the familiar Eastern type with the anti-Arian clauses added, to all seeming, almost as an afterthought. They have been interpolated with a gaucherie and disregard for stylistic grace which are hard to reconcile with Harnack's picture of a new formula.... The very variety of competing claims conduced inevitably to clumsy workmanship.⁵⁶

This aesthetic burden is another aspect of the brokenness and inadequacy of the Nicene witness. Yet the clumsy but hallowed phrases become joyful when chanted. Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* makes the words “*consubstantialem Patri per quem omnia facta sunt*” a single triumphant phrase, as if the *quem* referred to the Father.

Homoousios is not just a stronger way of saying *ek tēs ousias*, but adds the note of unity or sameness of being. But like *ek tēs ousias* (and like “begotten not made”) it is a relational statement, focusing the Son in his relation to the Father, and not making a metaphysical statement about the divine *ousia per se*. *Ek tēs ousias* is found in Alexander of Alexandria and is hardly a Hermetic phrase. *Homoousion* is just as firmly grounded in the biblical relation first named, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ. Barth's decision for “the *tautotēs* of Athanasius or for the Augustinian-Western interpretation of the *homoousios*”⁵⁷ is not fully protected against modalism, as he admits (nor against monophysitism for that matter); more emphasis on the relational character of the term would have helped.

Space for Constantine's personal innovation is still more firmly excluded when we note the close links between the credal text and

⁵⁶ Kelly, 229.

⁵⁷ *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1/2, 462.

the anathemas, especially the reference to “Ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσιᾶς”. The *homoousion* could be seen as a direct riposte: the Son is *homos* not *heteros* in *ousia*. Concern with the unity of God, or with monotheism, is not found in the word *homoousios*. Rather it is the status of the Son that it in question. If he is *heteroousios tō Patri*, he cannot be “true God”. (The reference to creation in the first article ensures monotheism and might even have had Marcion in its sights in an early phase of the formation of the creed.)

Eusebius attributes to Constantine a personal Trinitarian theology, wherein the Son “even before he was actually generated, was in potency (*dunamei*) in the Father ungenerated”.⁵⁸ This theologoumenon is a foreign body in Nicene discussion, but recalls an old account of the generation of the Logos on the model of the *logos endiathetos/prophorikos* distinction (Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 2.10).⁵⁹ But Hanson sees a likeness with a fragment of Asterius the Sophist quoted by Athanasius, *De synodis* 19: “Before the production of the Son the Father had a pre-existent capacity (*epistēmēn*) to produce, just as before a physician cures he has a capacity to heal”.⁶⁰ The mental milieu from which the theologoumenon stems is not Hermeticism but probably Latin Trinitarian theology in the line of Tertullian, transmitted to Constantine by Lactantius or Ossius.

If the term *homoousios* still carried a Gnostic or Hermetic meaning, imposed on the Council by Constantine, this would embarrass all who recite the Creed today. But embarrassment has surrounded the Creed from the start, from its role as the trophy of an often brutal emperor and from the suspicion of imposing an increasingly unintelligible metaphysics on the simplicity of scriptural faith. “The triumph of the Nicene Creed was a triumph of the priests over the faith of

58 *Ep. ad dioecesanos* 10. Kelly (240) sees this as Eusebius’s “ingenious attempt to get around the Nicene teaching of the eternal sonship”.

59 See Ortiz de Urbina, *El Símbolo niceno*, 131.

60 Hanson, 33, 166.

the Christian people".⁶¹ Despite all this, the Creed itself commands minds and hearts after 1700 years. So often dismissed as archaic and inaccessible, its very brokenness and inadequacy, as Barth underlines, make its sturdy persistence all the more indicative of an underlying encounter with an irreducible revealed reality.

Abstract

A flurry of revisionist theses about the Nicene Creed, which foreground the alleged theological initiative of the Emperor Constantine, who allegedly saw Christianity as an instrument for boosting "pagan monotheism" and whose thought was allegedly nourished by Hermeticism, mediated by his tutor Lactantius seem rather to refer us back to standard accounts of the Creed, and to the roles of Alexander of Alexandria and Osius of Cordoba. Close study of the actual text of the Creed, including the anathemas, confirms that the homoousion fits perfectly into a string of clauses, all intended to defend the full divinity of the Son against the Arian claims. The texture of the Creed and the all too human circumstances of its composition deserve our close study, as illustrating how the brokenness and fragility of historical formations paradoxically testify to the reality they attest.

61 Adolf Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1980, vol. II, p. 283. For more devastating comment, see Jacob Burkhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, Doubleday, New York 1956 [1852], 295-307.



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