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# THE TRINITARIAN FAITH

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— T. F. TORRANCE —



## THE TRINITARIAN FAITH

To my sons  
Thomas Spear Torrance  
and  
Iain Richard Torrance

# THE TRINITARIAN FAITH

*The Evangelical Theology of the  
Ancient Catholic Church*

THOMAS F. TORRANCE



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## *Foreword*

When I was invited by Dr James I. McCord, then President of Princeton Theological Seminary, to deliver the Warfield Lectures for 1981, it seemed right to devote them to the theology of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed formulated sixteen hundred years earlier in 381 A.D. This Creed was developed in two stages, at the Council of Nicaea in 325 when the basic work was done, and at the Council of Constantinople in 381 when it was enlarged to cope with fuller understanding of evangelical issues clarified in the fifty years following Nicaea.

The principal themes I chose for these lectures were: the knowledge of God the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible, the Lord Jesus Christ his incarnate Son and his saving work for mankind, the Holy Spirit the Lord and Giver of Life who proceeds from the Father, and the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. My intention was to offer an interpretation of them in the light of the Church fathers who had been most deeply involved in the elucidation of 'the evangelical and apostolic faith' during the fourth century, in the hope that it might form a useful hand-book for students. In the course of preparing it for publication I re-read the works of the great fathers for each chapter, finding that the book had to be rather larger than I had planned, both in order to do justice to their theology and to provide ample evidence for my attempt to offer a full and consistent presentation of it. There is some overlap in the material content of different chapters, together with repetition of argument and citation, which I found to be convenient as well as inevitable in an integrated presentation of successive themes, for in the coherent character of Nicene theology each doctrine is implicated in and deeply affects the others. The first and last chapters have been added, to present the general perspective of faith and devotion within which all



Nicene and Constantinopolitan theology must surely be understood, and to give definite expression to the trinitarian convictions of the Church that had been implicit in its faith from the beginning but became more and more explicit with the clarification of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the course of theological debate preceding and during the Council of Constantinople. The first chapter on 'Faith and Godliness' has been adapted from my contribution to the *Festschrift* for Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain, edited by Dr George D. Dragas, and presented in 1985.

Throughout this volume I have tried to let the patristic theologians concerned, almost entirely from the Greek East, speak for themselves, without the intrusion of material derived from later sources. I have deliberately refrained from discussing the interpretation of modern authors, while such references to their works as I have made are mostly of an incidental kind. It has been a principal concern of mine in each chapter to bring to light the inner theological connections which gave coherent structure to the classical theology of the ancient Catholic Church, particularly as it was brought to formulation during the fourth century. Problems arose within this development which had to do with significant differences in emphasis between the Athanasian and the Cappadocian traditions, but the general consensus that was reached at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. has ever since provided the Church in East and West, Catholic and Evangelical alike, with its one authentically ecumenical Confession of Faith.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was essentially the fruit of Eastern Catholic theology. It represents the work of the Greek fathers in reaching careful expression of crucial points in the Gospel where it had been seriously misunderstood and distorted under the influence of dualist ways of thought deriving from Hellenism and Hellenised Judaism. The central place accorded to Jesus Christ in the faith of the Church called for a clear answer to the question as to whether he was himself Lord and God or only a created intermediary between God and man. Where was the line of demarcation between God and the creature to be drawn, between God the Father and Jesus Christ, or between Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God and the world?

That was the basic question faced by the Nicene fathers, and answered in their unqualified acknowledgment of the Deity of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. But the same question was raised again after Nicaea in respect of the Holy Spirit. Is the Holy Spirit to be worshipped along with the Father and the Son as himself God, and having his being with the Son on the divine side of that absolute distinction between the Creator and the creature, or is he to be thought of in terms of the immanent forms of rationality in the created universe? The Nicene declaration of belief in the Holy Spirit was strengthened to make clear that he is the Lord and Giver of life and in no sense a creature.

The basic decision taken at Nicaea made it clear that the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the Godhead was regarded in the Church as the supreme truth upon which everything else in the Gospel depends. Jesus Christ is himself the content of God's unique self-revelation to mankind. It is on the ground of what God has actually revealed of his own nature in him as his only begotten Son that everything else to be known of God and of his relation to the world and human beings is to be understood. It is only when we know God the Father in and through his Son who belongs to his own being as God that we may know him in any true and accurate way, that is, know God strictly in accordance with his divine nature. In order to know him in that way, however, we must enter into an intimate and saving relationship with him in Jesus Christ his incarnate Son, for it is only through reconciliation to God by the blood of Christ that we may draw near to him and have access to him. The Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God, is the Way, the Truth and the Life, apart from whom no one has access to the Father. His incarnate reality has been made the supreme Principle of all God's ways and works within the order of creation and redemption alike, and the controlling Principle of all our understanding of them. Thus the very essence of the Gospel and the whole of the Christian Faith depend on the centrality and primacy of the relation in being and agency between Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Following upon the Council of Nicaea, it became clear through further controversy that the reality of the full humanity

of Christ must be stressed as much as the reality of his Deity. If in Jesus Christ God did not really become one with us sinful men and women through taking our actual human nature upon himself, then all that Christ was and did on our behalf was finally empty of saving content. If in being made flesh the Son of God had not assumed a fully human soul and mind, as well as body, then we are unredeemed and unsaved in the rational essence and wholeness of our human being. However, if the incarnation did not mean that the Son of God came into man, in a dualist sort of way, but that he came among us *as man*, then it is as such in the integrity of his human as well as his divine nature that Jesus Christ is the one Mediator between God and man. In that event the historical human agency of Jesus belongs to the very heart of our salvation. Through identifying himself completely with us on our side of the relation between man and God, in order to act in our place, in our stead and on our behalf, Jesus Christ ministers not only the things of God to man but the things of man to God. The *vicarious humanity* of Christ thus became integral to the doctrine of the 'atoning exchange' effected by him and in him between God and man. Hence the Gospel of the reconciliation of man with God has to be understood not just in terms of God's mighty act of salvation upon our humanity, but in terms of its actualisation within the depths of our human existence in the perfecting and presenting in and through Jesus of our response in faith and obedience, in love and worship, to God the Father. For us to share in the worship of the Father through, with and in Jesus Christ, belongs to the essence of our reconciliation to God, and is of the very substance of the Gospel.

If this is the case, then the stress must also be laid on the teaching of the New Testament that it is in one Spirit as well as through the only begotten Son that we are given access to God the Father. It is only through the communion of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, that we may share in the saving, regenerating and sanctifying work in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus share in his eternal offering of himself, and of us as redeemed and consecrated in him, to God the Father. However, if the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ is no more than a creaturely being himself, and not

fully and perfectly divine, then our participation in Christ and all he has done and continues to do for us, has no divine efficacy and is empty of any saving reality. Moreover, if the Spirit of the Father and of the Son is not divine then even the Deity of the Father and of the Son is called in question, and with it the validity of baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and of our membership in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as the Body of Christ. Hence when movements of thought questioning the Deity of the Holy Spirit arose, the Church assembling once again in Ecumenical Council at Constantinople not only reinforced the Creed of Nicaea but wrote into it additional clauses in affirmation of belief in the Holy Spirit parallel to its declared belief in the Deity of Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God.

It became indubitably clear to the Church in the fourth century that it is only when the Gospel is understood in this fully trinitarian way that we can really appreciate the New Testament teaching about Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and appreciate the essential nature of salvation, prayer and worship. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was thus essentially trinitarian. The central hinge upon which the whole Confession of Faith turned was the declaration of the oneness in being between Jesus Christ and God the Father. In the Gospel God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but in such a way that we know that he is in himself what he is toward us in his saving acts in history, eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his one divine being, and that what he is eternally in himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he is in his activity toward us through the Son and in the Spirit. The general formula which the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers employed to speak of the Triune God and his one activity was *from the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit*, in respect of God-manward relations; and *in the Spirit, through the Son and to the Father*, in respect of man-Godward relations. Since all this would fall to pieces in the faith of the Church if the divine nature of the Son and of the Spirit were brought into question, we can understand the determination of Church fathers at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople to clarify and secure the grounding of Christian belief in the indivisible relations of the Father, Son and Holy

Spirit in the Triunity of God.

It may be convenient for readers of this work if at this point some guide is offered to the contents of the chapters that follow.

In the first chapter an account is offered of the open-textured framework of faith and godliness which, together with the rule of truth inherited from the apostolic foundation of the Church, guided regular interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and fostered in its ministers and theologians a distinctive way of thinking and speaking about God in accordance with the nature of his revealing and saving acts in Jesus Christ. From the start the theology of the Church took the form, not of a set of abstract propositions, but of embodied truth in which the knowing and worshipping of God and the daily obedience of faith and life interpenetrated each other. The focus of attention is directed particularly to Irenaeus and Origen who in different ways left a decisive impact on the pre-Nicene Church. Irenaeus had made clear that it is only within the framework of the Faith entrusted to the Church and incorporated in the apostolic tradition as a rejuvenating deposit, that the Holy Scriptures may be faithfully interpreted and appropriated as the saving truth of the Gospel. Origen had laid great emphasis upon the need to think worthily and reverently of God, which required spiritual training in godliness in the ability to interpret the statements of the Old and New Testament Scriptures in the light of the truths to which they refer beyond themselves. That was the general matrix of faith and piety within which there took shape the theological intuition and godly judgment upon which the Nicene fathers relied in their epoch-making Confession of Faith.

The second and the third chapters are devoted to the doctrine of God, and to our knowledge of him as Father and Creator. The basic clue to the understanding of the Nicene approach is taken from Athanasius: 'It is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works and call him Unoriginate'. To know God in any precise way we must know him in accordance with his nature, as he has revealed himself – that is, in Jesus Christ his incarnate Son in whom he has communicated not just something about himself but his very Self. Jesus Christ does not reveal the Father by being Father but by being Son of the Father, and it is through

Christ in the one Spirit whom he mediates that we are given access to God as he really is in himself. In contrast with Judaism and its stress on the unnameability of God, the Christian Faith is concerned with God as he has named himself in Jesus Christ, and incarnated in him his own Word, so that in Christ we know God as he is in his own inner being, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the *arche* (ἀρχή), the Origin or Principle, of all our knowledge of God, and of what he has done and continues to do in the universe, so that it is in terms of the relation of Jesus the incarnate Son to the Father, that we have to work out a Christian understanding of the creation. It is the Fatherhood of God, revealed in the Son, that determines how we are to understand God as Almighty Creator, and not the other way round. It was through thinking out the inner relation of the incarnation to the creation that early Christian theology so transformed the foundations of Greek philosophy, science and culture, that it laid the original basis on which the great enterprise of empirico-theoretical science now rests.

The fourth and fifth chapters are devoted to Christology and Soteriology. If the Father-Son relationship occupies a place of primacy and centrality in the Christian understanding of God and the world, and of the Gospel itself, everything depends on precisely how we understand the relation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, to the Father. Is Jesus Christ 'of' God in the same way that the universe is 'of' God, as created by him and unceasingly dependent on him for its existence and continued being? Did the Son of God himself come into being through an act of the will of God or was he eternally in the being of God as Son of the Father, of the same being and nature as God, and therefore not like a creature which is of a different being and nature from God? The Nicene and Constantinopolitan fathers realised that if they allowed the dualist ways of thought in the prevailing culture to cut the bond of being between Christ and God the Father, then the whole substance and heart of the Christian Gospel would be lost. If what Christ does, for example, in forgiving our sins, is not what God does, then it is not finally valid. If God himself has not come to be one with us in the incarnation, then the love of God finally falls short of coming all the way to be one with us, and is not ultimately love.

If it was not God himself incarnate who suffered for us on the cross in making atonement, then the sacrifice of Christ has no ultimate and final validity, and we are still in our sins. If Jesus Christ and God are not of one and the same being, then we really do not know God, for he is some hidden inscrutable Deity behind the back of Jesus, of whom we can only be terrified – and then the final judgment of the world will be a judgment apart from and without respect to Jesus Christ and his forgiving love and atoning sacrifice. Cut the bond in being between Jesus Christ and God, and the Gospel message becomes an empty mockery. But if Jesus Christ is of one and the same being with God, then all that Jesus said and did on our behalf, has staggering significance for us and the whole creation. But in this case it is essential to realise that Jesus Christ the Son of God is also man, of one and the same being and nature as we are. If he is not really man, then the great bridge which God has thrown across the gulf between himself and us, has no foundation on our side of that gulf. Jesus Christ, to be Mediator in the proper sense, must be wholly and fully man as well as God. Hence the Creed stresses the stark reality and actuality of his humanity: it was for our sakes that God became man, for us and for our salvation, so that it is from a soteriological perspective that we must seek to understand the human agency and life of Jesus Christ. He came to take our place, in all our human, earthly life and activity, in order that we may have his place as God's beloved children, in all our human and earthly life and activity, sharing with Jesus in the communion of God's own life and love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The sixth and seventh chapters are devoted to the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and of the one Church as the Body of Christ. Since it was the Word or Son of God, not the Father or the Spirit, who became incarnate, it is only through the Son that we have knowledge of the Spirit as well as knowledge of the Father. Thus our knowledge of the Spirit like our knowledge of the Father is taken from and controlled by our knowledge of the Son. As such the doctrine of the Spirit qualifies and completes the doctrine of the Father and the Son, and deepens it in our knowledge of the Holy Trinity. Following upon the Council of Nicaea it became widely evident that denial of the Deity of the

Son entailed denial of the Deity of the Spirit, so that the Nicene doctrine of the *homoousion* or *consubstantiality* of the Son called for a corresponding formulation of the doctrine of the Spirit, and that is what was given succinct credal expression at the Council of Constantinople. The doctrine of the Spirit was developed, however, not only from biblical statements or from doxological formulae, but from the essential structure of knowledge of God grounded in his own self-communication through the Son and in the unity of the Spirit. The confession of faith in the Holy Spirit emphasises the divine nature of the Spirit, and the fact that the presence of the Spirit is the presence of God in his own eternal being and reality as God. At the same time the presence of God in his mode of being as Spirit confronts us with the ineffability and sublime majesty of God, yet not in such a way that God overwhelms us by the presence of his being, for this is a presence of God that creates and sustains being and life, and acts upon us in a quiet and gentle self-effacing way which does not direct attention to himself but which reveals the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. Through the incarnation and Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes to us from the inner communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creates union and communion between us and the Holy Trinity. In other words, the Spirit creates not only personal union but corporate communion between us and Christ and through Christ with the Holy Trinity, so that it is the Holy Spirit who creates and sustains the being and life of the Church, uniting the Church to Christ as his one Body. Regarded in this way, the doctrine of the Church is a function of the doctrine of the Spirit who proceeds from the Father through the Son, for it is in him and through the Son that we are brought near to God and are given to share in his divine life, light and love. Just as we have to regard the incarnation of the Son and Word of God as a movement of the saving love of God which penetrates into the ontological depths of our creaturely existence in order to redeem us, so we must regard the activity of the Holy Spirit as actualising our union and communion with God through Christ in the actual structure of our human, personal and social being. The Church as the Body of Christ is not to be regarded as merely a figurative expression, but as expressing an ontological



reality within humanity, which affects the whole of the human race. The Church is thus the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church which took its rise from the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and took its shape from the foundation laid by Christ once for all upon his apostles, and as such reaches throughout all peoples and all ages to the consummation of Christ's Kingdom.

In the final chapter an attempt is made to draw together the various emphases within the Church as they reached a general consensus on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as 'one Being, three Persons'. Attention is first given to Athanasius' conception of the Triunity of God as Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity. For him theology in its deepest sense as the knowledge and worship of God was identified with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The key to the Triunity of God he found in the Nicene *homoousion* (ὁμοούσιον) which pointed to eternal consubstantial relations within the Trinity and thus to the consubstantiality of the Trinity as a whole. It was he who developed the doctrine of completely interpenetrating or co-indwelling relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which was later called the doctrine of divine coinherence. This carried with it a revised conception of *ousia* (οὐσία) as being considered in its internal relations, and of *hypostasis* (ὑπόστασις) as being considered in its objective inter-relations. It was in that sense that he accepted the formula 'one Being, three Persons', which carried with it a doctrine of the *Monarchia* (Μοναρχία) as identical with the one indivisible being of the Holy Trinity. Attention is then given to the Cappadocian contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity, notably to the greater emphasis given by Basil to the distinguishing properties of the three divine Persons, and his attempt to preserve the unity of the Trinity by referring the particular modes of being of the Son and the Spirit to the Person of the Father, which operated with an abstract generic notion of God's being. The reservations of Gregory Nazianzen about the subordinationist implications of this approach led him to move back closer to Athanasius, but with a doctrine of eternally subsistent relations within the Holy Trinity which deepened and strengthened the Athanasian conception of the Triunity and Monarchy of God. While

Didymus, who stood closer to Basil, moved away from Nicene formulation, Epiphanius offered a powerful development of that Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity, or the consubstantial unity of three perfect co-equal enhypostatic Persons in the one indivisible being of the Godhead. It was this Athanasian and Epiphanian doctrine of God that provided the foundation on which the Nicene-Constantinopolitan understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity of God was brought to firm theological expression.

I am very conscious of the great tradition in Patristic scholarship which I have enjoyed for many years, and of my indebtedness to those who have made the original texts so readily available. I have in mind the immense work of J. P. Migne, *Patrologia, Series Graeca et Series Latina*; *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* of the Berlin Academy; and not least the new *Library of Greek Fathers and Ecclesiastical Writers* still in process of being published in Athens which is very helpful. I have gratefully availed myself of translations in the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, and C. R. B. Shapland, *The Letters of St Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, but have often revised or given a new rendering of passages cited.

I am more grateful than I can say for the friendship and hospitality of Dr James I. McCord extended to me and my wife over many years when he was President of Princeton Theological Seminary and more recently in his capacity as Chancellor of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. Once again I am happily indebted to my two sons, Dr Thomas S. Torrance of the University of Aberdeen, and the Rev Dr Iain R. Torrance, and his wife Morag, of The Queen's College, Birmingham, for generous help in the handling of computer software, and in the correction of proofs. I am also much indebted to my former student, the Very Rev Dr George D. Dragas of the University of Durham for additional assistance with the proofing of Greek citations.

*Trinity*, Edinburgh, 1987.

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# I

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## *Faith and Godliness*

Thus believes the Catholic Church: 'We believe ...'

The Council of Nicaea of 325 A.D. has a unique place in the history of the Christian Church as 'the Great and Holy Synod' or 'the Great Ecumenical Synod', to which all subsequent Ecumenical Councils looked back as their normative basis. The Creed framed by the fathers at Nicaea secured the apostolic and catholic faith against disrupting distortions of the Gospel in a decisive form that eventually commanded and unified the mind of the whole Church, grounding it unambiguously in the self-revelation of God the Father through Jesus Christ his Son and in one Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The essential connections of the Gospel and the inherent unity and structure of 'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints'<sup>2</sup> were brought to light in such a simple and succinct way that what had taken place at Nicaea was afterwards regarded with awe as a work of the Holy Spirit, all the more astonishing in view of the troublesome diversity of opinion and contradictory credal formulae current at the time. As the century wore on, and the Church survived fierce heretical attacks that threatened the very substance of the evangelical message with which it had been entrusted, tradition increasingly honoured the Nicene Creed as 'an unalterable determination (*imperturbata constitutio*) of the Church', or a great

<sup>1</sup>Eph. 2:18.

<sup>2</sup>Jude 3.

irreversible event in the life of the Church,<sup>3</sup> second only to the one foundation which Christ himself had laid in the apostles and prophets,<sup>4</sup> but serving it, building on it, and in some sense sharing in its unrepeatable character. Gregory Nazianzen, who as the resident Archbishop presided over the opening session of the Council of Constantinople in 381, wrote to Cledonius, a presbyter of Nazianzus: 'We for our part never esteemed and can never esteem any doctrine preferable to the faith of the holy fathers who assembled at Nicaea to destroy the Arian Heresy. We adhere with God's help, and shall adhere, to this faith, supplementing gaps which they left concerning the Holy Spirit.'<sup>5</sup>

Gregory Nazianzen was also expressing the prevailing tradition when in his 'Oration on Athanasius the Great' he spoke of 'the Holy Synod of Nicaea, the gathering of the three hundred and eighteen chosen men', as 'united by the Holy Spirit'.<sup>6</sup> But he was also representative of many others in according to Athanasius the crucial role in the deliberations of the Council: 'Though not yet ranked among the bishops, he held first rank among the members of the Council, for preference was given to excellence as much as to office. As 'man of God and a mighty trumpet of truth' Athanasius 'both happily preserved the unity which belongs to the Godhead, and devoutly taught the Trinity which consists in personal relations, neither confounding the three Persons in the Unity, nor dividing the being among the three Persons, but remaining within the bounds of piety by avoiding excessive inclination or opposition to either side.'<sup>7</sup>

As Athanasius himself regarded the Council of Nicaea, however, the fathers of Nicaea did nothing new, but breathing the spirit of Scripture confessed 'the divine and apostolic faith'

<sup>3</sup>Hilary, *Con. Const.*, 27. See also Athanasius, *De syn.*, 9; *Ad Ant.*, 15; *Ad Afr.*, 10; *Ep.*, 55, 56; Basil, *Ep.*, 125.1; 127.2; 140.2; 159.1; 204.6; 251.4; Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.*, 2.15, 18.

<sup>4</sup>1 Cor. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:20.

<sup>5</sup>Gregory Naz., *Ep. ad Cled.*, 102.

<sup>6</sup>Gregory Naz., *Or.*, 21.14; *Ep. ad Cled.*, 102.1; Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.*, 2.15; Socrates, *Hist. eccl.*, 1.9; Eusebius, *Vita Const.*, 3.20.

<sup>7</sup>Gregory Naz., *Or.*, 21.13, 14; cf. also 19.33-35.

so accurately that many years later he could write to the bishops of Africa: 'The Word of the Lord which came through the Ecumenical Synod at Nicaea, abides for ever.'<sup>8</sup> By that he did not mean that any new revelation from God had been given to the bishops in Council at Nicaea, but only that they had been instrumental under God, in handing on in a true and faithful way the very Word of God which they themselves had received from the apostles' teaching in Holy Scripture regarding God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In fact for Athanasius apostolic tradition and the teaching given by the apostles in Holy Scripture were one and the same – there were no other written or unwritten traditions of truth, but only the one tradition comprised in the canonical Scriptures, and it was from those Scriptures and upon the truth they mediated that the true Faith of the Church was derived and was as such to be guarded and handed on again.<sup>9</sup> That was how he understood the work of the fathers at the Ecumenical Council. Thus, in his Synodical Letter to the Bishops of Africa he wrote 'concerning the sound faith which Christ gave us, the apostles proclaimed, and the fathers, who assembled at Nicaea from all over this world of ours, have handed down.'<sup>10</sup> When the traditional apostolic doctrine of the Holy Spirit had been questioned, he insisted that they must 'consider the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the apostles proclaimed and the fathers kept'; and speaking for himself he could say: 'In accordance with the apostolic faith delivered to us by tradition from the fathers, I have delivered the tradition, without inventing anything extraneous to it. What I learned, that I have inscribed in conformity with the Holy Scriptures.'<sup>11</sup> What was important was a devout, exact rendering of the Holy Scriptures and a faithful handling of the tradition.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *Ad Afr.*, 1f; cf. 4–6, 9–11; *De syn.*, 5f, 9, 43; *Ad Adel.*, 6; *Ad Ser.*, 1.28, 33; *Ep.* 55 & 56.

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius, *Ad Adel.*, 6; cf. *Ep.*, 2.6f; 39.1–7.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *Ad Afr.*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Athanasius, *Ad Ser.*, 1.28, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Athanasius, *De decr.*, 4f, 18ff, 31ff; *Con. Ar.*, 1.8, 10; 2.33f, 40; *De syn.*, 3, 6, 7, 33f, 39ff, 45f; *Ad Afr.*, 4ff; *Ep.*, 2.4–7, 59; *Ad Epict.*, 3; cf. also *Con. gent.*, 1; *De inc.*, 5.

Athanasius referred to the Nicene Creed fairly regularly as *The Faith Confessed by the Fathers at Nicaea*, according to the divine Scriptures and in the unimpaired tradition of the Church, which he claimed to be identical with 'the faith received from our Saviour through his apostles'. The drawing up of the Creed was essentially a *godly* or *devout* act of *faith* made by the whole Ecumenical Council 'as in the presence of God'.<sup>13</sup> There had been two reasons for convening the Council: to reach universal agreement regarding the day for celebrating Easter, and to pronounce on the Arian heresy which had been disturbing the harmony of the Church. However, as Athanasius pointed out, the kind of decision which the Council took in each case was very different. 'Concerning Easter they wrote: "It seemed good as follows", for it did then seem good that there should be general compliance; but about the faith they did not write, "It seemed good", but "Thus believes the Catholic Church"; and thereupon they confessed how they believed, in order to show that their own views were not novel, but apostolical; and what they wrote was no discovery of their own, but is the same as was taught by the apostles.'<sup>14</sup> Moreover, 'they expressed this teaching so exactly that people reading their words honestly cannot but be directed by them back to the devotion towards Christ (εἰς Χριστὸν εὐσέβειαν) announced in divine Scripture.'<sup>15</sup> That is to say, the Nicene Creed has to be understood as a *kerygmatic* formulation of the faith in the simple first principles of the Gospel, for the faith once for all delivered to the Church can be handed on only *by faith*, from faith to faith.<sup>16</sup> Athanasius evidently thought of the Nicene Council as fulfilling through its confession of faith, but in a very concise and ecumenically authoritative way, the kind of function which he had envisaged for his own pre-Nicene account of 'the capital point of the faith' (κεφάλαιον τῆς πίστεως), namely, the saving

<sup>13</sup> Athanasius, *Ap. con. Ar.*, 23f; *Ad Ep. Aeg.*, 5, 18, 20, 21; *De syn.*, 5; *Ad Ant.*, 3-5; *Ad Afr.*, 10f; *Ep.*, 51; 55; 56.1-4; 59.1; 61.5; 62.

<sup>14</sup> Athanasius, *De syn.*, 5; cf. 3f.

<sup>15</sup> Athanasius, *De syn.*, 6; cf. *De decr.*, 18-22; 31f.

<sup>16</sup> Athanasius, *Ad Ser.*, 1.17, 20; *De vita Ant.*, 16, 77-80, etc.

work of the incarnate Son of God,<sup>17</sup> in connection with the study of the Holy Scriptures and a deeper understanding of its message.<sup>18</sup>

An outstanding mark of the Nicene approach was its association of faith with 'piety' or 'godliness' (εὐσέβεια or θεοσέβεια), that is, with a mode of worship, behaviour and thought that was devout and worthy of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This was a distinctively Christian way of life in which the seal of the Holy Trinity was indelibly stamped upon the mind (διάνοια or φρόνημα) of the Church. Godliness and theology, worship and faith, went inseparably together, with constant attention given to reverent interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, reverent use of the reason, and reverent ways of argument, in which there was no intrusion into the mystery of God or irreverent teaching about him. Even when theology was concerned with the inner trinitarian relations in God himself, the Church insisted on maintaining reserve and humility in its approach, conceptual formulation and language. All must be done before the face of divine majesty and glory, like the cherubim who cover their faces before the throne of God, in a holy way, appropriate to the transcendent holiness of God.

The Nicene interpretation of the apostolic message and the evangelical godliness of its confession of faith gave rise to a characteristic idiom which left an enduring mark upon the understanding of the Church. This became very evident at the Council of Constantinople in 381 at which the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed and finalised in the definitive form which made it the supreme Ecumenical Creed of Christendom. Nicene theology had not only gained an inner force and momentum of its own but had established itself in the evangelical foundations of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church in such a way that it provided the basis on which Council after Council took its stand and completed its work in the centuries that followed, always with reference back 'to the Council of the three hundred and eighteen'.

<sup>17</sup>Athanasius, *De inc.*, 19.3; cf. *Exp. fidei*; *Con. Ar.*, 4.21; and Socrates, *Hist. eccl.*, 2.30.

<sup>18</sup>Athanasius, *De inc.*, 56.1.



Thus the Nicene Creed was regarded as a central and controlling factor in the on-going mission of the Church, to be treated both as an evangelical proclamation leading to faith in Christ and as an instructive formulation of the capital truths of the Gospel which could serve as an authoritative guide in reading and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. In other words, in and through the Nicene Creed the Church was determined to defend and preserve the essential substance of the Faith committed to it as a sacred trust so that it could be transmitted in its evangelical integrity to others, and was thereby rendering an account to God of its stewardship in the mysteries of God.<sup>19</sup> That was the intention of the Church reflected in Athanasius' Letter to the Bishops of Africa: 'Let the Faith confessed by the fathers at Nicaea alone hold good among you . . . in order that of us too the apostle may say: Now I praise you for remembering me in all things, and as I handed the traditions on to you, so do you hold them fast'.<sup>20</sup>

Under the rubric **We believe** the Catholic Church, meeting for the first time in Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325 A.D., made it clear that it was concerned to confess the fundamental truths of the Gospel calling for the commitment of faith, rather than laying down decrees (δόγματα) requiring compliance either like apostolic decisions<sup>21</sup> or like imperial edicts.<sup>22</sup> The Nicene fathers certainly offered some indication of how the terms they used were to be understood by referring to the 'boundaries' (ὀρισθέντα) of their confession of faith which could not be transgressed without lapses into heretical perversity or serious contradiction.<sup>23</sup> They also drew up a number of 'canons' or 'rules' to be observed in maintaining unity throughout the Church in its regular instruction and ministerial order.<sup>24</sup> However, these negative determinations

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor. 4.1; Athanasius, *Ep. Enc.* 1.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor. 11.12; Athanasius, *Ad Afr.*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Acts 15.28f; 16.4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Luke. 2.1; Acts 17.7.

<sup>23</sup> Athanasius, *De decretis* – the traditional Latin title is a mistaken translation of ὀρισθέντα. Cf. *De syn.*, 5, and Hilary, *De Trin.*, 4.1–7.

<sup>24</sup> After the Council of Nicaea the term 'canon' tended to be used mainly with reference to ecclesiastical enactments or disciplinary decisions. Cf.

and formal rules were only appended to the credal statement and were not incorporated into the expression of the substance of the faith itself. Thus care was taken to preserve the character of the Nicene Creed as an evangelical declaration of saving faith which the Church found itself obliged to make under the constraint of divine truth mediated to it through the Holy Scriptures.

The primacy which the Nicene Council accorded to faith in this way is of immense significance. It represents the radical shift in people's understanding in the Church as they were grasped by the enlightening reality of the living God and were freed from imprisonment in the darkness of their own prejudices, baseless conjectures and fantasies, that is, a shift away from a centre of thinking in the in-turned human reason (ἐπίνοια) alienated from its intelligible ground in God, to a centre in God's revealing and reconciling activity in the incarnation of his Mind and Word (*Logos*) in Jesus Christ within the temporal and spatial structures of our creaturely world. That was the reason for the unshakeable confidence of the Church's faith in God, for it was caught up in the unswerving faithfulness and reliability of the love of God, which had laid hold upon it through 'the word of the truth of the Gospel',<sup>25</sup> and was steadfastly undergirded and supported by God himself. This primacy in the Nicene Creed accorded to faith reflects the settled patristic view of faith, not as a subjectively grounded but as an objectively grounded persuasion of the mind, supported beyond itself by the objective reality or ὑπόστασις of God's own being as he has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ. As Hilary expressed it, 'in faith a person takes his stand on the ground of God's own being (*in substantia dei*).'<sup>26</sup> That is how the Greek fathers regularly thought of scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), as the standing or the establishment of the mind (διάνοια) upon objective reality and as certain or assured understanding. In biblical justification

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Athanasius, *Ep. Enc.*, 1.6; *Ap. con. Ar.*, 25, 29, 31f; *Hist. Ar.*, 36, 51, where he refers to 'canons' derived from the apostles.

<sup>25</sup>Col. 1.5.

<sup>26</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 1.18 – *in substantia* evidently refers to the ἐν τῇ ὑποστάσει of LXX Jer. 23.22; cf. 23.18.

for this view they frequently cited from the Septuagint, 'If you will not believe, you will not understand', or 'be established.'<sup>27</sup> They were thereby making the point that it is through faith that our minds are put in direct touch with reality independent of ourselves, for it is through faith that our minds assent to the inherent intelligibility of things, yield to their self-evidencing power, and are adapted to know them in their own nature (κατὰ φύσιν).<sup>28</sup> It is upon that kind of basic contact with reality that all sure knowledge rests and all genuine understanding is established, and upon it that we continue to rely in all further inquiry and all deepening of our understanding. While such a relation between faith and understanding applies to all scientific knowledge, it applies no less but all the more strictly to our knowledge of God who is the ultimate ground and source of all intelligibility and truth.<sup>29</sup> We do not seek to understand what we believe, Augustine used to say, but we believe that we may understand.<sup>30</sup>

It should now be evident that faith was not regarded in Nicene theology as some form of non-cognitive or non-conceptual relation to God, but was held to involve acts of recognition, apprehension and conception, of a very basic intuitive kind, in the responsible assent of the mind to truth inherent in God's self-revelation to mankind. Faith arises in us

<sup>27</sup>Is 7.9. Thus Irenaeus, *Dem.*, 3: 'And faith is produced by the truth; for faith rests on things that really are. For in things that are, as they are, we believe, and believing in things that are as they are, we keep firm confidence in them.' The translation, from the Armenian, is by J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus, The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 1920, p. 72. Cf. also Clement of Alex., *Strom.*, 1.1; 2.2, 4; 4.21; Cyril of Jer., *Cat.*, 5.4, etc. The interpretation of Is. 9.9 in Greek plays upon the connection between ἐπιστήμη = standing on, and ὑπόστασις = being under, i.e. what is stood upon. See the explanation by Clement, *Strom.*, 4.21; and my discussion in *Oikonomia*, edit. by F. Christ, 1967, p. 224.

<sup>28</sup>See my *Theology in Reconciliation*, 1975, pp. 241f, 247ff, for an assessment of the use of *physis* (φύσις) in Alexandrian thought; and consult Archbishop Methodios Fouyas, *The Person of Jesus Christ in the Decisions of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1976, pp. 65ff.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Hilary, *De Trin.*, especially books 1-4, for a remarkably perceptive account of theological epistemology.

<sup>30</sup>Augustine, *De Trin.*, 7.5; *In Jn. Ev.*, 27.9; 29.6; 40.9; *De lib. arb.*, 2.2.6; *De div. quaest.*, 48; *In Ps.*, 118, 18.3; *Ep.*, 120.1, 3, etc.

under the creative impact of the self-witness and self-interpretation of God in his Word, and in response to the claims of his divine reality upon us which we cannot reasonably or in good conscience resist.<sup>31</sup> It takes the form of listening obedience (ὕπακοή τῆς πίστεως)<sup>32</sup> to the address and call of God's Word, and the specific beliefs that are called forth from us like this entail at their heart a conceptual or epistemic consent (ἐπιστημονικὴ συγκατάθεσις) to divine truth and become interiorly locked into it.<sup>33</sup> It was indeed in just this way, Hilary pointed out, that faith and understanding were interlocked in the case of the apostles themselves when 'the truth which they heard for the first time clenched their certainty'.<sup>34</sup> When Hilary spoke of the apostles' confession that Christ is the Son of God as *the rock of faith* on which the Church was built,<sup>35</sup> he clearly understood it in an objective sense, for it is upon the truth of God confessed by the apostles, not upon their confession as such, that the Church is founded and on which it continues to rely in its own faith. It is to be granted, of course, that the apostolic confession of faith and their understanding of the truth are enshrined in the Holy Scriptures handed down to us from the apostles, so that in one sense it must be said that 'faith, and every part of it, is impressed on us by the evidence of the Gospels and the teaching of the apostles'.<sup>36</sup> In the ultimate analysis, however, we must learn from God himself what we are to think of him, for 'God cannot be apprehended except through himself'.<sup>37</sup> Our faith must repose upon the same truth which evoked the faith and understanding of the original apostles. This means that in our recourse to biblical statements we need to yield our minds to the direct constraint of the truth to which the

<sup>31</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 1.18; 2.6f; 3.9f, 23; 4.14, 36; 5.20f; 6.13-16; 8.52.

<sup>32</sup>Rom. 1.5; 16.26.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Clement Alex., *Strom.*, 2.2ff, 6, 11f; 8.3; and Augustine, *De spir. et litt.*, 21.54; 34.60.

<sup>34</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 6.34; see also 4.6.14.

<sup>35</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 6.36f; cf. 2.22f; 6.20f; and 'The Liturgy of St James', F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies of Eastern and Western Churches*, 1896, p. 54, where 'the catholic and apostolic Church' is likewise said to be founded upon 'the rock of faith'.

<sup>36</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 2.22.

<sup>37</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 5.20f.

Holy Scriptures bear witness independent of themselves. Biblical statements (*dicta*) are for their part to be interpreted in the light of the matters or realities (*res*) to which they refer and under the control of which they were made, and not the other way round, for they fulfil their divinely intended function when they mediate God's own self-witness and thus enable us to believe in God and think of him in the only way possible, in accordance with the way in which he actually presents himself to us.<sup>38</sup> Thus it becomes apparent that the primacy accorded to faith in our knowledge of God reflects the absolute priority of God over all human thought of him, and even over the human media which he has brought into the service of his self-revelation.<sup>39</sup>

Faith that arises in cognitive commitment to the compelling claims of God in Jesus Christ and is linked to the absolute priority of God over all our conceiving and speaking of him, is bound to manifest a two-fold character. On the one hand, faith appears determinate and bounded, under the control of the precise form God's truth has taken in the incarnation of his Word, but on the other hand, faith appears indeterminate and unbounded, through its correlation to the unbounded and immeasurable reality of God which transcends all finite comprehension. On the one hand, then, faith is characterised by a certainty of conviction which derives its force from the truth of God himself thrust upon it, but on the other hand, faith is characterised by an open, ever-expanding semantic focus which answers to the unfathomable mystery and inexhaustible nature of God.<sup>40</sup> That is evidently the double force of the **We believe** (*πιστεύομεν*) of the Nicene confession of faith in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which governs the way in which all its clauses are to be understood, namely, the *exclusiveness* and *open range* of belief.

In its commitment to one God the Father Almighty, the Nicene Creed is necessarily exclusive of belief in any other god

<sup>38</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 4.14; 5.4, 7; 8.52.

<sup>39</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 1.6, 16; 2.2ff, 12, 24ff, 52ff.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Clement Alex., *Strom.*, 7.16: 'Knowledge of truth found among us Christians supplies, from what we already believe, faith for what has not yet been believed, faith which is, as it were, the substance of proof.'

than God the Father and of belief in any other revelation of this one God than his only begotten Son. This gives clear expression to the fundamental biblical asseveration that faith in the one God rules out the possibility of having any other gods and that faith in Jesus Christ as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' excludes access to the Father by any other way than that provided by God himself in the incarnation of his Word in Jesus Christ, that is, in what Jesus Christ is in his own personal being. This would hardly be the case if faith were only subjectively grounded in some inner persuasion of the human mind, and not objectively grounded, as it is, in the universally binding reality of God embodied in Christ as his unique *self-giving* and *self-communication* to mankind as Lord and Saviour. In unconditional obedience to that normative divine revelation, Christian faith adopts an approach to God which sets aside any alternative approach, entails a judgment which excludes divergent belief, and endorses an affirmation of truth which thereby rejects other affirmations as false. The objective pole of the Church's faith is the truth of God which has seized hold of it in Christ and his Gospel and will not let it go, truth over which it has no control but truth which makes it free and establishes it in the love of God. Hence the Church cannot but confess its faith in God, before God, with an unreserved endorsement of belief in the truth of Christ and his Gospel, as the truth with which its very existence is bound up as the Church, the one Body of Christ, and as the saving grace of God which constitutes the very essence of its message and mission. That is surely what took place at the Council of Nicaea in the Ecumenical Confession of Faith promulgated by the fathers in the face of heretical denial of any ultimate oneness between God and his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The Nicene Creed was a solemn corporate act of the Church in the presence of God, made with passionate commitment to the truth of divine revelation from the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, in the realisation that the very existence of the Christian Church and the validity of its evangelical message of divine salvation were at stake.

If there is no relation of oneness in being and agency between what God the Father is in himself and what he is toward us in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ his Son, then the *kerygma*

(κῆρυγμα) of the Gospel is empty of saving content and the διδασχῆ of the apostles has no divine validity. But if the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is the very grace of God himself, if in Jesus Christ the divine Gift and the Giver are one, then the Church has no option in fidelity to the Gospel but to commit itself to a positive affirmation of that grace which excludes any other possibility.<sup>41</sup> That was the critical issue which St Paul summoned the Galatian Church in the first century to face, namely, the threat to pervert the Gospel of Christ into 'another gospel' which was not a gospel, when he wrote: 'If anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be anathema.'<sup>42</sup> It was that apostolic example which the Nicene fathers followed in their own critical situation, when they appended a sentence to their confession anathematising those who taught that the Son of God was not eternally one with the Father but of 'a different hypostasis or being' from him, for the very substance of the catholic faith was thereby being denied.<sup>43</sup> Hence it came about that the Nicene Council expressed the fundamental beliefs which they found to be evangelically compelling in a Creed which has subsequently been universally acknowledged in the Church, and which by its intrinsic structure excludes alternative doctrine as arbitrary innovation in face of God's one self-revelation in Jesus Christ, i.e. as heretical deviation from the truth.<sup>44</sup>

There is another side to this picture, however, for while the Nicene Creed expresses what we are obliged to acknowledge within the general framework of the Church's commitment to the reality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, it is all prefaced by *We believe* (πιστεύομεν). That is to say, everything that is affirmed in the Creed falls within the compass of faith pivoting upon the objective reality of God who infinitely transcends all that we can think or say about him. Precisely

<sup>41</sup>Athanasius, *Con. Ar.*, 4.12: 'Through the Son is given what is given; and there is nothing but the Father operates it through the Son; for thus grace is secure to him who receives it.'

<sup>42</sup>Gal. 1.9.

<sup>43</sup>Athanasius, *Ap. con. Ar.*, 49; *De decr.*, 2.5; *Ad Ep. Aeg.*, 2; *Ep.*, 2.6; Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.*, 1.3; 2.6; 5.10.

<sup>44</sup>Hilary, *De syn.*, 61-64.

because faith derives from and is grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which is identical with what God is eternally in his own being, it is *open* to whatever may yet be known through the Spirit of Christ who has been sent by the Father in the name of the Son to lead us into ever deeper understanding of the truth. By its very nature, then, Christian faith is locked into an inexhaustible depth of truth in God which always exceeds what we may grasp of its disclosure to us; but faith that is stretched out in this way indefinitely beyond itself is necessarily characterised by an *open range* in its focus (σκοπός) which cannot be foreshortened without being turned into something different.

The open range of faith was stressed by Athanasius and Hilary, as well as by other leading exponents of Nicene theology. Athanasius claimed that the more he pressed forward in seeking to apprehend God, the more he found knowledge of him outreaching his apprehension. He was unable to express in writing what he seemed to understand, and what he wrote fell far short even of the fleeting shadow of the truth in his mind.<sup>45</sup> The one fixed point, the object of faith, the scope of Holy Scripture, or of the truth in which we believe, is Jesus Christ himself. It is in and through God's unique self-revelation in him, that faith becomes firmly grounded in the truth of God's own being and provided with the normative control it needs in its correlation with what transcends the capacity of human comprehension.<sup>46</sup> It is faith of this kind that precedes and guides all theological inquiry and explanation, for it constitutes the sound cognitive base which gives force to all right argument.<sup>47</sup>

Hilary was no less emphatic about the fact that in faith we have to do with a way of apprehending God which does not confine him to the narrow limits of what we can conceive or express, but is constantly being expanded under the power of God to make himself known.<sup>48</sup> By its very nature, therefore, faith in God is characterised by a kind of 'infinity', for while

<sup>45</sup>Athanasius, *Ad mon.*, 1.1-3.

<sup>46</sup>Athanasius, *Con. Ar.*, 2.15; 3.28, 35, 58; cf. also my discussion of this in *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 1982, pp. 106ff.

<sup>47</sup>Athanasius, *De vit. Ant.*, 77-80.

<sup>48</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 1.7-16; 2.5-11; 3.1-6, 18-26.



God as a 'whole' eludes our comprehension, what he does allow us to apprehend of himself is inseparable from what he is as a 'whole' so that it breaks through the narrow confines of our grasp. This explains why in the very act of *apprehending* something of God, faith is bound to confess that it is incapable of *comprehending* him. Thus while God infinitely transcends the human mind he may nevertheless be known through a movement of faith in which it is opened toward the infinity and ineffability of God.<sup>49</sup> This means that through faith we are brought into contact with God in such a way that we are enabled to know more than we can bring into explicit forms of thought or speech, and that in and through faith theology is engaged in a fathomless inquiry, for the truth which we seek to know is so deep that we can never probe it to its end, let alone reduce our knowledge of it to adequate formulation.<sup>50</sup>

The epistemological implications of this open boundless range of faith were not lost to the Nicene theologians in their realisation that through faith theological inquiry is carried beyond the restricted scope of the ordinary reason defined by visible, tangible objects in created reality, and even beyond the explicit statements of Holy Scripture to the truth of God which they indicate independent of themselves. Thus the open range of faith gave rise to a perilous state of affairs in which the door appeared to be open to all manner of irrational and irreverent theorising.<sup>51</sup> For that very reason, however, the theologians of the Church cannot keep silence. With fear and trembling and in prayer to God, they must seek to express, as far as the slender resources of human language allow, the truth of God to which they are directed by Holy Scripture, if only to counter the damaging effect of an arbitrary and irreligious intrusion of creaturely modes of thought into the knowledge of God. That was precisely the situation in which the fathers of Nicaea found themselves when they felt forced to use the non-biblical term *ὁμοούσιος* in order to give clear and unambiguous expression to biblical and evangelical truth. Hilary had that critical event in mind in the following complaint. 'We are compelled by the

<sup>49</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 1.8, 12; 2.5ff, 11.

<sup>50</sup>Hilary, *De syn.*, 65; *De Trin.*, 3.18; 10.53; 11.44-47; 12.24-37.

<sup>51</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 2.1-5; 10.51-53.

error of heretics and blasphemers to do what is unlawful, to scale heights, to express things that are unutterable, to encroach on forbidden matters. And when we ought to fulfil the commandments through faith alone, adoring the Father, worshipping the Son together with him, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, we are forced to stretch the feeble capacity of our language to give expression to indescribable realities. We are constrained by the error of others to err ourselves in the dangerous attempt to set forth in human speech what ought to be kept in the religious awe of our minds . . . Their infidelity drags us into the dubious and dangerous position of having to make a definite statement beyond what heaven has prescribed about matters so sublime and so deeply hidden.<sup>52</sup>

Quite evidently, affirmations of belief which we are obliged to make before God under the pressure of his divine revelation and its inherent truth, must remain open to whatever may yet be learned of God through that revelation. In so far as they are locked into that revelation and are controlled by it, they are put forward as articulating fundamental truth, even though they indicate far more than can be expressed at the time. Affirmations of faith of this kind have heuristic properties in virtue of which they prompt and guide further inquiry and deeper understanding. However, in virtue of their semantic reference away from themselves to the transcendent reality of the Holy Trinity which may be grasped only very impartially, they must be regarded as incomplete and inadequate in themselves and therefore as subject to revision in the light of deeper and fuller understanding of God's self-revelation. That is the profoundly objective yet open-textured character of the doctrinal statements asserted by the Council of Nicaea under the rubric **We believe.**

It is highly significant that, as Athanasius reported, 'The bishops who assembled at the Great Synod of Nicaea agreed, not without the will of God, that the decisions taken in one synod should be examined in another.'<sup>53</sup> That is to say, the Nicene fathers thereby gave synodal recognition to the point that by their intrinsic nature the affirmations of Nicaea indicated

<sup>52</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.*, 2.2, 5.

<sup>53</sup>Athanasius, *Ap. con. Ar.*, 22.

more than could be grasped at the time and therefore more than could be fully expressed and justified at the time. Although the canon of Nicaea to which Athanasius referred is not extant, it was certainly in accordance with it that subsequent Ecumenical Councils acted. After more than fifty years during which the Nicene Creed was subjected to detailed analysis, against and in support of it, it became so deeply and firmly established in the convictions of the Church that it was revised and finalised at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. This in turn was reaffirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., when a canon was passed banning the use of any other Creed. However, it was evidently only at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. that complete ratification was formally given to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.<sup>54</sup>

Inextricably interwoven with faith, to which Nicene theology accorded primacy, there was another basic element which we must take into account, *godliness* (θεοσέβεια, εὐσεβεία), to which it also accorded primacy along with faith. Faith is itself an act of godliness in humble worship of God and adoring obedience to him, and godliness is a right relationship to God through faith which gives a distinctive slant to the mind and moulds life and thought in accordance with 'the word and truth of the Gospel'.<sup>55</sup> Godliness is thus an essential ingredient in the living tradition of the Church's believing commitment to God's incarnate self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and along with knowledge of the truth it belongs to the evangelical structure of 'the faith once for all delivered to the saints'. It is godliness of this kind that exercises a directive force in all 'sound doctrine', and that must be allowed to guide theological understanding particularly in the open range of faith where we are obliged to form concepts and make pronouncements about the truth beyond the explicit statements of Holy Scripture. It is right there, where the Scriptures bear upon the ineffable mystery of God which remains mystery even in the heart of his self-revelation, that we must be on our guard against irreverent and

<sup>54</sup>See Methodios Fouyas, *op. cit.*, pp. 45, 71f, 108f.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. G. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, 1972, on 'the scriptural mind' and 'the catholic mind', pp. 9ff, 57f.

impious intrusion into what God has kept secret in his own eternal being.

As found in Nicene theology εὐσέβεια referred to the orthodox understanding of truth embodied in the tradition of faith and worship that derived from the apostles. It is to be traced back to the Pastoral Epistles in the New Testament where 'godliness' was more or less a technical word for what had been called 'the Way' in the Acts of the Apostles,<sup>56</sup> the way of belief and worship characteristic of those who are committed to Christ and who have to suffer for it. The distinctive feature of godliness is that it is an embodiment of faith or a knowledge of the truth of the Gospel in a corresponding way of life and worship in the reverent service of God.<sup>57</sup> It is significant that considerable stress was laid upon the inherent interrelation between godliness, faith and truth, and thus upon 'teaching in accordance with godliness',<sup>58</sup> or upon 'sound doctrine',<sup>59</sup> in sharp reaction to the rise of rationalising and mythologising perversion of the Gospel.<sup>60</sup> Thus while godliness was held to be synonymous with belief and truth, ungodliness was held to be synonymous with unbelief and error. That was a contrast that set the pattern for the Church's struggle with heresy for the next three hundred years.

The passage that evidently governed the understanding of εὐσέβεια in the early Church was the Pauline correlation of the 'great mystery of godliness' with the incarnation. The apostle was writing to inform Timothy about 'how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness (τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον): who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the gentiles, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.'<sup>61</sup> There on the one hand, godliness was defined as penetrating into the inner mystery of

<sup>56</sup> Acts, 9.2; 19.9, 23; 22.4; 24.14, 22.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Tim. 2.2; 3.16; 4.7, 8; 6.3, 5f; 2 Tim. 3.5; Tit. 1.1; 2 Pet. 1.3, 6; 3.11.

<sup>58</sup> 1 Tim. 6.3; Tit. 1.1; cf. 2 Tim. 3.7.

<sup>59</sup> 1 Tim. 6.3; 2 Tim. 1.13; 4.3; Tit. 1.9, 13; 2.1f.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Tim. 1.4; 4.7; 6.3-6; 2 Tim. 4.4; Tit. 1.14; 2 Pet. 1.16.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Tim. 3.15-16; e.g., Hilary, *De Trin.*, 11.9.