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Many Nicaean Dialectics

NIKĖJOS SUSIRINKIMO DIALEKTIKOS

SUMMARY. The paper examines the Council of Nicaea as a decisive moment in the formation of Christian thought, interpreting it through both Aristotelian–Porphyrian and Hegelian dialectics. It argues that Nicene theology inaugurated a distinct Christian scholasticism rooted in the categories of commonality and particularity, which shaped Trinitarian and Christological formulations. It further shows how the reception of Nicaea followed a dialectical pattern: an initial thesis of enthusiastic acceptance, an antithesis involving attempts – political and ecclesiastical – to erase its memory, and finally a synthesis achieved by the neoNicene theologians, especially the Cappadocians, who clarified the relation between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. The essay highlights the paradox that Nicaea became more globally influential in the secular age than in Late Antiquity, functioning as a "mustard seed" that grew into a universal Christian reference point. It also critiques the reduction of Nicene faith to mere identity, noting how both supporters and opponents historically turned doctrine into ethnic or confessional markers. The study also addresses the tension between conciliarity and ecclesiastical structures: bishops, though essential to councils, often undermined conciliarity through selfinterest. Ultimately, the paper emphasises Nicaea's core theological legacy – the nonhierarchical equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as the foundation of Christian unity, metaphysics, and ecclesial life.

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje kalbama apie Nikėjos Susirinkimą kaip apie lemiamą įvykį krikščioniškosios minties formavimosi procese. Jis interpretuojamas tiek Aristotelio-Porfirijaus, tiek Hegelio dialektikos požiūriu. Teigiama, kad Nikėjos Susirinkimo teologija pradėjo savitą krikščionišką scholastiką, grindžiamą bendrumo ir ypatumo kategorijomis, kurios leido sukurti trinitarines ir kristologines formuluotes. Straipsnyje analizuojamas Nikėjos Susirinkimo nutarimų priėmimas, kuris vyko pagal dialektinį modelį: pradinę entuziastingo pritarimo tezę sekė antitezė, apėmusi politinius bei bažnytinius bandymus jį ignoruoti, ir galiausiai sintezė, kurią pasiekė neonikėjiškieji teologai (ypač Kapadokijos tėvai), paaiškinę santykį tarp *ousia* (esmės) ir *hypostasis* (hipostazės). Darbe nurodomas paradoksas, kad sekuliariaisiais laikais Nikėjos Susirinkimas tapo globaliai įtakingesnis nei vėlyvojoje Antikoje – jis veikė tarsi „garstyčios grūdelis", išaugęs į visuotinį krikščionybės atskaitos tašką. Straipsnyje taip pat kritikuojamas Nikėjos tikėjimo redukavimas į asmens identiteto lygmenį, pažymint, kad istoriškai tiek šalininkai, tiek oponentai doktrinai suteikė etninį ar konfesinį pobūdį. Vyskupai,

būdami pagrindiniai susirinkimų nariai ir užtikrintojai, dėl subjektyvių asmeninių priežasčių dažnai neatsižvelgdavo į sinodiškumo principus. Galiausiai straipsnyje pabrėžiamas pagrindinis Nikėjos teologinis palikimas – nehierarchinė Tėvo, Sūnaus ir Šventosios Dvasios lygybė kaip krikščioniškosios vienybės, metafizikos ir bažnytinio gyvenimo pagrindas.

KEYWORDS: dialectics, categories, commonality, particularity, conciliarity, neo-Nicaeanism.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: dialektika, kategorijos, bendrumas, ypatumas, sinodiškumas, neonikėjizmas.

Introduction

This paper argues that the Council of Nicaea triggered the development of a distinctly Christian dialectical logic, which drew on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic categories such as commonality and particularity. Understanding this early Christian scholasticism is key to better grasping Nicene theology. The paper also examines aspects of the evolution of Christian conciliarity, which can be better understood through Hegelian dialectics. Throughout this evolution, the nature and structures of the Church often conflicted, especially at Nicaea. Subsequently, some bishops involved in the council contributed to efforts to erase Nicaea from the annals of Church history. This paradox can be explained by the dialectical pair of the Church's nature and structures. Ecclesiastical structures sometimes contradict the Church's nature, leading to such policies that followed the Nicaea. The paper uses the case of the First Ecumenical Council to show how these dialectics follow and influence each other.

Nicaea the Scholastic

The Council of Nicaea is difficult to understand without dialectics, in both its Aristotelian and Hegelian senses. The Nicaean theology was formulated with the help of the categories introduced by Aristotle and later refined by the Neoplatonists, especially Porphyry of Tyre.[1] The Aristotelian-Porphyrian dialectics, based on the logical pair of commonality and particularity, was first used to explain the theology of Nicaea, and since then, this dialectic has become the universal language of Christian theology. The doctrine of the Incarnation was formulated in this language in a particular way. Technically speaking, this language was scholastic. If we ignore all the negative ideological connotations associated with the word "scholasticism,"[2] we can define it as a system of

[1] See Christos Evangeliou, *Aristotle's Categories and Porphyry* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), & Johannes Zachhuber, *The Rise of Christian Theology and the End of Ancient Metaphysics: Patristic Philosophy from the Cappadocian Fathers to John of Damascus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] See Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *Patristic and Scholastic Theology in Perspective. Based on the Spoken Teaching of Father John Romanides* (Pelagia: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2023).

analytical thinking that considers reality in a simple coordinate system, whose axes are the logical pair of commonality and particularity.[3]

In this sense, the Nicaean theology is scholastic; it has also determined the scholastic character of the subsequent theological tradition in Christianity. With the emergence of the age of secularisation, scholasticism was abandoned, primarily for ideological reasons, as a relic of the past. This does not mean, of course, that it was not to blame for such an attitude, since it had already lost the flexibility and creativity that were characteristic of its initial Nicene edition.

Instead of Aristotle's dialectic, the dialectic of Modernity emerged. What Aristotle did for the pre-modern dialectic, Hegel did for the modern one.[4] Although in both cases, of course, we are talking about a collective work, with a significant contribution from later commentators. Still, Nicaea can be interpreted through Hegel's dialectical triplet of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. After all, this council was initially received with enthusiasm as a positive thesis that was to put an end to theological disputes in Egypt.[5] But soon, enthusiasm gave way to disappointment and attempts to erase the very memory of this council. This was the antithesis in the history of the Nicaean reception, and it lasted for several decades. Until a group of theologians, now called the neo-Nicaeans,[6] proposed a synthesis. The neo-Nicaean synthesis was based on Aristotelian dialectic. The Council of Constantinople in 381 authorised it. This council can be considered the point of convergence of two dialectics: Aristotelian and Hegelian. It blessed the synthesis of Neoplatonic logic, based on Aristotle's categories, with Christian monotheistic metaphysics, and it itself became a synthesis of the Nicaean language, where the key word was "consubstantial" (ὁμοούσιος), and the post-Nicene antithesis, which tried to avoid the word "οὐσία" altogether. The neo-Nicaean synthesis manifested itself through the emergence of the dialectical pair *ousia*-hypostasis as corresponding to the Aristotelian pair of commonality-particularity. Thus, Nicaean theology, including its neo-Nicaean phase, became a paradoxical interweaving of both pre-secular and secular dialectics.

The Triumph of Nicaea in the Secular Age

It seems an anachronism, or even an oxymoron, to put together Nicaea and secularism. But this is only at first glance. The paradox of the secular age is that religion rebounds

[3] See Fraser MacBride, "The Particular–Universal Distinction: A Dogma of Metaphysics?," *Mind* 114, no. 455 (2005): 565–614.

[4] See Michael Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method," in Frederick C. Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 130–170.

[5] See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[6] See Anna Zhyrkova, "Neonicaeanism," in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online* (accessed on 16 December 2025), https://doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_040690.

to it from unexpected places, and the circles on the water this causes are sometimes wider than in the pre-secular age. This applies to the Council of Nicaea. When it was conceived, it had a narrow regional focus – on the eastern part of North Africa.[7] If it had been convened in Egypt, the controversy over Arius' teachings would probably not have spread far beyond Egypt. The fact that it was held near the new capital of the empire and that bishops from other regions were invited to attend gave this council an impetus that eventually took it beyond the borders of one region and beyond one era.

But this did not happen overnight. First, the affirmative thesis of convening the council was followed by an antithesis. The antithetical attitude ranged from indifference to hatred. The majority of the church, which was rapidly expanding across the empire and even beyond its borders, was by and large indifferent to what was being argued in Nicaea. Even a significant part of the bishops who had taken part in the Council of Nicaea wanted to forget about it. Forgetting about the Council of Nicaea soon became an imperial policy. Constantius II, who came to power after Constantine, effectively applied to the council the Roman punishment of *damnatio memoriae*.[8] This is when a person or event was erased from the annals of history. First, they had been immortalised, usually in stone, and then the stone was destroyed or the inscriptions and images on it were chiselled out if the political climate changed radically. This was the cruellest form of execution in the Roman world, because it annihilated memory. It was this form of execution that both civil and ecclesiastical authorities tried to apply to Nicaea during most of the fourth century.

Just as some victims of such executions sometimes resurrected from historical oblivion, so it happened with Nicaea. Its resurrection at the end of the fourth century was not given, but rather a miracle. But even then, Nicaea did not resurrect in the glory in which we know it now. It was more a rehabilitation than a glorification. Large parts of the Christianised Greco-Roman world remained either indifferent or hostile to Nicaea. Moreover, while inside this world, Nicaea was at least somewhat known, outside it, it remained almost unknown.

In contrast to the Late Antiquity, now, in a seemingly secular age, many more people have heard of Nicaea than in all pre-secular ages combined. The geography of the reception of this council is much wider as well. If during the fourth century, even in Europe, attitudes towards it were ambiguous, nowadays Nicaea is a common denominator for almost all Christian traditions and confessions around the world. Their diversity has increased, but so has the reception of Nicaea. Thus, in order to become a member of the World Council of Churches, the largest ecumenical platform of our time, a necessary criterion for candidates is the recognition of the Nicene Creed.[9] This

[7] See Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 1987).

[8] See Øivind Fuglerud, Kjersti Larsen, and Marina Prusac-Lindhagen, *Negotiating Memory from the Romans to the Twenty-First Century: Damnatio Memoriae* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[9] See World Council of Churches' Central Committee, "Follow-up on Recommendations on Membership" (Geneva, Switzerland, 26 August – 2 September 2003), https://www.oikoumene.org/

was something the supporters of Nicaea could only dream of in the fourth century. Also, unlike in the fourth century, Nicaea is now being talked about everywhere. This brings us back to the paradox of secularism that we mentioned earlier: the post-secular Nicaea enjoys more prominence than the pre-secular Nicaea.

Nicaea as a Seed

If we look at the history of the reception of the Council of Nicaea from the beginning of the fourth to the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can see how the dynamics of this reception resemble the dynamics of the growth of the Gospel's mustard seed:

> The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches (Mt 13:31–32, NIV).

Of course, any interpretation of historical events based on the Gospel parables is always speculation. Still, it is applicable to the Council of Nicaea. Indeed, Nicaea was originally like a tiny seed. Planted in the ground, it could easily die there, and in fact, almost did. Then a tree began to grow from the seed. It grew among other trees and plants in the garden – that is, other conciliar events, when the Church tried to solve its problems in a synodal way. But the tree of Nicaea grew taller than the other trees. This has an analogy with historical reality, because all subsequent ecumenical councils were gathered in the image and likeness of Nicaea. The council of Nicaea was like *primus inter pares* among the rest of the ecumenical councils. Those stayed as if in its shadow, never reaching its height. Folks from all over the world, like birds, flock to the branches of the tree of Nicaea. They may sing in different voices and have different colours, but they recognise the common denominator of their faith – the Nicaean Creed.

All Christ's parables with references to seed are surprisingly suitable for explaining the circumstances around and after the Council of Nicaea. Here is another one:

> A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up

resources/documents/follow-up-on-recommendations-on-membership (accessed on 16 December 2025): "Applicant churches should give an account of how their faith and witness relate to these norms and practices: a. Theological: 1. In its life and witness, the church professes faith in the Triune God as expressed in the scriptures and reflected in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed."

> and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop–a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown (Mt 13:3-8, NIV).

The councils that have tried to repeat Nicaea or replace it are like those grains that fell on different kinds of soil. All of them were best intended by those who gathered them and participated in them, but the fruits of these intentions were different. In Christ's parables about the grain in the field, there is also the figure of the "enemy" who comes to sow weeds:

> The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?" "An enemy did this," he replied. The servants asked him, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?" "No," he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn" (Mt 13:24–30, NIV).

Bishops Against Councils

Who are these enemies when it comes to church councils? These can be representatives of civil authorities. But they most often initiated or at least supported the councils, and usually took care of their logistics. Bishops were more often the enemies of councils and conciliarity. How can this be, since conciliarity is impossible without bishops and bishops are impossible without conciliarity? In order to answer this question, I need to summarise my ecclesiological studies on the distinction between the nature and structures of the Church.[10]

When we speak of the Church's nature, we mean what does not change in the Church, what was put into it by Christ himself and what can be considered its raison d'être. Ecclesial structures should serve this raison, not allowing it to be replaced by something extraneous or secondary. But sometimes it happens that the structures themselves replace the nature. The Eucharist, for example, belongs to the ecclesiastical nature because it was instituted by Christ himself and aims to unite people with God. The hierourgical service is therefore also essential to the Church. The same is pastoral ministry that cares for the growth of the faithful in Christ. All of these ministries are

[10] See Cyril Hovorun, *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

embodied in the bishop's office to the fullest extent possible. But the fact that a bishop is to serve the nature of the Church does not make him a part of that nature. Moreover, he can harm this nature. This happens when a bishop, instead of serving the Church, by identifying himself with the Church, demands to be served himself. Instead of helping his flock grow in their relationship with God, he redirects this relationship to himself. Finally, bishops can turn the Eucharist itself into a weapon, as happens when synods or councils of bishops decide to break Eucharistic communion in order to protect their own corporate interests.

The same can be said about conciliarity, which is embedded in the nature of the Church.[11] On the one hand, the figure of the bishop is central to conciliarity. A bishop represents his flock at a council, and councils are impossible without bishops. But bishops can also harm conciliarity. For example, by replacing it with themselves. This is especially common among church primates, who, while remaining the same bishops as others, usurp power above and beyond the councils. They create simulations of conciliarity without real conciliarity.

The bishops also harmed the Council of Nicaea. Including some bishops who had participated in it. They first voted for its decisions and then joined anti-Nicaean campaigns. These bishops could have had different motives. Some did not understand what this council was about. Some understood and disagreed. But some simply adjusted their positions to the positions of the authorities towards this council. Thus, it can be argued that the miracle of the survival of the seed of the Council of Nicaea and its germination through the stony soil happened not thanks to, but in spite of, the actions of many bishops. Some of them tried to trample on the sprout of Nicaea as soon as it began to break out of the ground. It is to such bishops that we can relate the words of Christ when he speaks of the enemy trying to sow weeds among the wheat.

But Christ also says that the owner of the field leaves the weeds unweeded, even though they harm the good crops. In the case of conciliarism and its crises, including those caused by bishops, this means that there is a certain meaning to such crises. Because they are always testing the strength of the conciliarity. This helps to get rid of the illusion that conciliarity can be preserved as a sort of identity, without making efforts to maintain it. This is how modern Orthodoxy perceives itself. Many Orthodox say nowadays that the West is either about the centralised papacy or chaotic Protestantism. And we, they say, automatically avoid both extremes thanks to conciliarity.

In reality, however, conciliarity does not work automatically. Therefore, when it turns into an identity, as it did in the Christian East, it is no longer taken care of. As a result, it stagnates and stops working, as the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete demonstrated.[12] It has proven that modern Orthodoxy is only partially capable of convening

[11] See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[12] See Cyril Hovorun, "Critique of the Church through the Prism of the Panorthodox Council," *Θεολογία* 87, no. 1 (2016): 63–71.

pan-Orthodox councils and making decisions that would be at least relatively relevant. Our identity as a conciliar Christianity has not been supported by the cases of real conciliarity as a living church reality. In fact, the crises of conciliarity, like the weeds in the field, force us not to rest on our identity but to work on filling it with conciliar content. That is why the owner of the field does not allow the weeds to be plucked.

The Downsides of the Nicaean Identity

The same problem of faith turning into identity, which, as a result, weakens faith, also applies to the Council of Nicaea. Soon after having been accepted as a common denominator for the entire Church, the Nicaean faith began to transform into an identity. The same thing, by the way, befell those who remained anti-Nicaean even after Nicaea and even the Council of Constantinople in 381. This applies primarily to the Goths, who converted to Christianity in its version promoted as the official imperial orthodoxy, which was anti-Nicaean.[13] The Goths did not understand the intricacies of subordinalism, but they accepted it as Christ himself. It became their identity, like the Gospel of Wulfila in the Gothic language.[14] That is why Gothic "Arianism" continued to exist for so long, and we can still see its architectural monuments across Europe.

Nicaeanism turned into something similar – an identity without understanding the essence. Even now, it is the most common form of the Nicaean faith. As we have already said, it has grown all over the world like a giant tree. But its leaves are mostly about self-identification, not understanding its teachings. Therefore, the celebrations of the 1700th anniversary of the council can and should be not only an occasion to assert Nicaea's identity, but also an opportunity to understand its faith.

Nicaean Egalitarianism

In a nutshell, the Nicaean faith is about the absolute equality of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is no equality greater than the divine equality. It is the source of all other equalities and surpasses them by far. At the same time, this equality does not contradict the oneness of God. Oneness is not the same as unity, although the Nicaean theology asserts both the oneness and unity of the divine Persons. Unity is in most cases when separate objects exist together. Oneness, on the other hand, does not imply separation, but may include distinction. Distinction

[13] See Erica Buchberger, *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700: From Romans to Goths and Franks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; 2017).

[14] See Carla Falluomini, *The Gothic Version of the Gospels and Pauline Epistles: Cultural Background, Transmission and Character* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

is when one thing may have inseparable aspects, between which there is no gap. Gaps in distinction can only be imaginary.

The difference between separateness and distinctness is precisely the presence of real, not imaginary, gaps which can be identified in the former but not in the latter. This differentiation is fundamental in the classical Aristotelian-Porphyrian dialectic, where it is known as the category of *differentiae* (διαφοραί). Christian theologians have used it to explain the one God and his incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, God is one, even though He is also the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, – precisely because they are only distinguished, not divided. Because of this, the oneness of God is as absolute as divine equality. There can be no greater oneness than this one, just as there can be no greater equality. All other onenesses, like other equalities, are derivative and weaker than their divine prototypes.

For those who opposed Nicaea, it was easier to explain the oneness of God. For them, it was based on the oneness of the Father, who is the cause of the Son and the Spirit. But this causal relationship undermined equality, creating a hierarchy within the Trinity. The Nicaean believers were categorically against any hierarchy in the Divine Being and therefore had to find a balance between causality and equality in it. In other words, if the Father is the cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit, how can they be equal? The Nicaean answer to this question was that in the Divine, unlike in the humanity, causality does not translate into a hierarchy. Although the Father is the cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit, he remains equal to them. This is the only acceptable idea of monarchy that can be applied to the Trinity from a Nicaean perspective.

Gregory of Nazianzus, the leading neo-Nicaean theologian, explained this paradox as follows. There are three basic ideas about God: anarchy, polyarchy and monarchy. The first two are pagan and unacceptable for Christians. Only monarchy is acceptable. However, this divine monarchy is not exclusive, but inclusive. It is the result of the full coherence of divine Persons who have the same will and activity:

> We most respect monarchy. However, this is not a monarchy, which is defined by one person, <...> but the [monarchy], which is set together (συνίστησι) by the single honour of the nature, coherence of knowledge, identical movement, and the convergence towards one of those who are from [this one].[15]

Gregory applied the verb συνίστησι to the divine monarchy. With the prefix *syn-*, it implies something synergetic, not unilateral and monopolistic. As synergetic, the divine monarchy is based on both the oneness and the unity of God. Unity, as we have already said, is not identical to oneness. But in God, they coexist without any gap between them – on the grounds that there is no gap between the persons of the Father,

[15] "*Oratio* 29 (*De filio*) 2", in Joseph Barbel, *Gregor von Nazianz. Die fünf theologischen Reden* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1963). Translated by the author.

the Son and the Holy Spirit, as well as between these persons and the one essence of God. For Gregory, the Father is not only the source of diversity in the Trinity, being the cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit, but also the guarantor of the oneness and unity of God:

> The three have one nature – God. The principle of unity (ἕνωσις) is the Father, from whom the other two are brought forward and to whom they are brought back, not so as to coalesce (συναλείφεσθαι), but so as to cleave together (ἔηεαθαι).[16]

The divine monarchy that Gregory defended is thus strictly non-hierarchical. Gregory rejected any gradation in the relationship between divine persons. It was nonsense for him to say that there is a "great" Spirit, a "greater" Son, and a "greatest" Father (μεγάλου καὶ μείζονος καὶ μεγίστου). Any hierarchical conceptualisation of the Trinity, which he also called a "ladder", does not "lead to heaven, but brings one down from heaven."[17]

The Common and the Particular

In order to synthesise absolute divine oneness with absolute divine equality, the Nicaean and neo-Nicaean theologians, in addition to the dialectical pair of separation-distinction, used another dialectical pair, that of the common and the particular. It goes back to Plato and his idea of ideas. Ideas are essentially generalisations of specific things that surround us. For Plato, these generalisations are more real than the things themselves and live their own life somewhere above. Aristotle accepted Plato's idea of generalisations, but rejected their autonomous reality. He proposed to consider generalisations as an abstraction and not something real. He called this abstraction the "second essence". In contrast to the "first essence", which stood for specific objects, this essence described the commonalities between them.[18] It does not exist separately from the "first essence" in some superworld, as Plato had suggested.

Both Plato and Aristotle, despite their differences, agreed that these categories are universal: they can be applied to both the physical and the metaphysical. Christian theologians did just that: they applied them to both the Trinity and the Incarnation. At the same time, Christian metaphysicality was more metaphysical than the one that

[16] "*Oratio* 42 (*Supremum vale*) 15", in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* 36: 457–492. Translated by Lewis Ayres.

[17] "*Epistula* 101.67", in Paul Gallay, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze. Lettres*, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1964–1967).

[18] See Aristotle, "*Categoriae* 5", in Lolenzo Minio-Paluello, *Aristotelis categoriae et liber de interpretatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949).

Plato and Aristotle had in mind. In this sense, Christians went further than pagan philosophers, who also actively used these two categories.

While rightly claiming that their God is superior to any idea of divine that pagans might have had, Christians nevertheless used pagan categories in their theology. One of the first to do so was Apollinaris of Laodicea, a brilliant but controversial representative of the neo-Nicaean camp. He interpreted the oneness of God as commonality, and the divine plurality of the Father and the Son as a synonym for the particular. Apollinaris used the word "person" (πρόσωπον) to refer to the particularities of the Father and the Son.[19] In doing so, he interpreted the Father as the exclusive bearer of the divine commonality, while the Son participates in it only through his origination from the Father. This was a dubious idea that bordered on the idea of hierarchy in the Trinity. Therefore, it was rejected by Basil of Caesarea, who emphasised that the Father and the Son share equally in the divine essence. In order to avoid any particularity being admixed to the common essence, Basil proposed a separate term for the former – "hypostasis". *Ousia* and hypostasis were traditionally complete synonyms until Basil proposed a distinction between them. *Ousia* was for him a general hypostasis, and hypostasis – a particular *ousia*:

> If we have to state briefly our own opinion, we shall say this that the relation the common item has to the particular, *ousia* has to hypostasis. For each of us partakes of being (εἶναι) through the common formula of being (τῆς οὐσίας λόγῳ), but he is one or the other through the properties (ἰδιώμασιν) attached to him. So also there (sc. in the Godhead) the formula of being is the same, like goodness, divinity and what else one may conceive of: but the hypostasis is seen in the properties of fatherhood or sonship or the sanctifying power.[20]

In pagan philosophy, especially in Neoplatonism, there was a hierarchy between the categories of commonality and particularity. The former was considered superior to the latter. In Christian theology, however, absolute equality was affirmed between the common and the particular in God, as well as between the particularities, that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons have commonality to the same extent as they have particularity. The author of the 38th epistle attributed to Basil of Caesarea, possibly Gregory of Nyssa, clearly expressed this equality:

> It is impossible in any manner to conceive of a severance or separation whereby either the Son is thought of apart from the Father or the Spirit

[19] See Kelley Spoerl, *A Study of the Κατὰ μέρος πίστις by Apollinarius of Laodicea* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1991), 353.

[20] "*Epistula* 214", in Yves Courtonne, *Saint Basile. Lettres*, 3 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957–1966). Translated by Johannes Zachhuber.

> is parted from the Son; but there is apprehended among these three a certain ineffable and inconceivable communion and at the same time distinction, with neither the difference between their persons disintegrating the continuity of their nature, nor this community of substance confounding the individual character of their distinguishing notes <...>
>
> The same thing is both joined and separated (τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ συνημμένον καὶ διακεκριμένον εἶναί), and if, as though speaking in riddles, we devise a strange and paradoxical sort of united separation (διάκρισίν τε συνημμένην) and disunited connection (διακεκριμένην συνάφειαν).[21]

The distinction between the common and the particular as *ousia* and hypostasis was not yet clearly articulated in the Nicaean definitions of faith, but was certainly implied by them. This distinction was developed by the neo-Nicaean theologians. The most important of them were the so-called Cappadocians, namely the already mentioned Basil of Caesarea and the two Gregories: of Nazianzus and Nyssa. Their fate is somewhat similar to Nicaea itself, the interpretation of which they devoted their lives to, and resembles the dynamics of the mustard seed in the Gospel's parable. They came from one of the least civilised and intellectual regions of the Greco-Roman world, Cappadocia. It was like that small grain among the other provinces. When they stood up to defend Nicaea, they were trampled on just as hard as Nicaea itself. But they withstood and bore fruit a hundred times more numerous. Their theology became the apotheosis and clearest interpretation of Nicaeanism – the most branchy tree from the parable.

The Holy Spirit

The last branch to grow on this tree was the doctrine of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This doctrine was implicit in the Nicene Creed, but still only implicit. The definition of this Council was laconic, stating only that one should believe "in the Holy Spirit," without specifying his relationship to the Father and the Son. Just as implicitly, the Holy Spirit was placed at the lowest level of the Trinitarian hierarchy by those who fought against Nicaea. This belief came to be associated with the name of the Archbishop of Constantinople Macedonius (in office in 342-346 and 351-360), although it had been formulated long before him.

From about the 360s onwards, neo-Nicaean theologians began to more clearly support the idea of the equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. One

[21] In Yves Courtonne, *Saint Basile. Lettres*, 3 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957–1966). Translated by the author.

of the first to express this idea was Didymus the Blind. He defended the full divine honour that the Holy Spirit shares with the Father and the Son:

> So that no one separates the Holy Spirit from the will and fellowship of the Father and the Son, it is written: "For he will not speak on his own accord, but he will speak as he hears" (Jn 16:13). The Savior said something similar to this about himself: "As I hear, so I judge" (Jn 5:30). And elsewhere: "The Son is not able to do anything on his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (Jn 5:19). For if the Son of the Father is one, not according to the error of Sabellius who confuses the Father and the Son, but according to their inseparability of essence or substance, then he is unable to do anything without the Father. The works of separate individuals are distinct, but when the Son sees the Father working, he is himself also working, yet working not in a second rank and after him. After all, the works of the Son would begin to diverge from those of the Father if they were not performed by equals.[22]

The pneumatology of Didymus was an inspiration for Basil of Caesarea, who argued that the Holy Spirit is the same God as the Father and the Son, equal even under the divine monarchy. Basil insisted that there is no order in the Trinity. Otherwise, the persons would be considered first, second, and third. This "subordination", as Basil called it, would lead to the recognition of three separate gods:

> For those who insist on saying that there is a sub-numeration into first, second, and third, let them know that they have introduced the polytheism of the errant Greeks into the undefiled theology of the Christians. For the evil of sub-numeration leads to nothing other than a confession of a first, second, and third God.[23]

Instead of being called the "third", the Holy Spirit, according to Basil, is "one", just as the Father and the Son are "one".

> One is the Holy Spirit, and he is proclaimed singly. He is joined through the one Son to the one Father, and through himself, he completes the famed and blessed Trinity. That he is not ranked in the multitude of creation but rather, uniquely named makes clear enough his kinship with the Father and the Son. For he is not one among many; rather he is one. As the Father is one, and the Son is one, so also the Holy Spirit

[22] "*De spiritu sancto* 160-1", in Louis Doutreleau, Didyme l'Aveugle, *Traité du Saint-Esprit* [Sources chrétiennes 386] (Paris: Édition du Cerf, 1992). Translated by Kellen Plaxco.

[23] "*De spiritu sancto* 18.47", in Benoît Pruche, Basile de Césarée, *Sur le Saint-Esprit* [Sources chrétiennes 17 bis] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968).

> is one. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is as far from created nature, as–it is reasonable to say–a monad is from the composites that have plurality. He is made one with the Father and the Son in the way that a monad has kinship with a monad.[24]

Cappadocian pneumatology was the culmination of the Nicaean theology, which uncompromisingly affirmed the anti-hierarchical and egalitarian nature of Divine Being. Both are absolute and prototypical of any known form of anti-hierarchism and egalitarianism. At the same time, they are absolutely compatible with the monarchy of the Father, which does not translate into subordination in any way. Any subordination as applied to the Trinity, from the point of view of this theology, is evil.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nicaea found itself at the crossroads of complex dialectical processes – in many senses of the word "dialectic". It became the initial thesis of a long process of reception of non-hierarchical Trinitarian theology. This process went through the antithetical phase of rejecting Nicaea, even with attempts to apply the procedure of *damnatio memoriae* to it, and successfully culminated in the neo-Nicaean synthesis, which was enshrined in the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381. The success of this synthesis was ensured by another synthesis – between classical dialectic, based on Aristotle's categories, especially as interpreted by such Neoplatonists as Porphyry, and Christian monotheistic metaphysics. From this point of view, Nicaea was the high point of Christian scholasticism in its original creative form. It also became a bifurcation point for all subsequent synodal and theological processes. These processes continued in what less creative scholastic theology identifies as the age of Christological debate.

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