Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Introduction*

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The Done and the Left Undone

It is a privilege to have the opportunity for such extended reflection on my book *Nicaea and Its Legacy*.[1] No doubt some authors feel that their manuscripts are truly finished before they are published: I am one of those who merely abandons a manuscript to the copy editors when other pressures demand an end to hostilities. It should be no surprise, then, that I have always envisaged *Nicaea* as a snapshot of a moving landscape, not just in the ever-growing body of scholarship on the fourth century, but also in my own thinking. Accordingly I will begin here as I was invited to do in our discussion at Harvard, by offering an account of what I think *Nicaea* accomplishes and of some areas in which the book needs further work.

I hope that one of the most useful contributions *Nicaea* makes to debate over fourth-century Christianity is in offering an account of pro-Nicene trinitarianism in which Greek, Latin, and Syriac speakers shared a set of fundamental "strategies" in their trinitarian theologies. Because these strategies are shared, I argued, pro-Nicene theologies should not be divided most fundamentally into distinct "Eastern" and

* I would like to thank Sarah Coakley for her generosity in organizing the conference from which this issue of *HTR* has been produced, as well as for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I would also like to thank Mark DelCogliano, Rebecca Lyman, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and Medi Ann Volpe for their comments. It should be noted that throughout this paper my concern is with readers of the fourth-century controversies who have overt theological commitments and ends in view. There are many other scholars of the period for whom the debates I engage here will be initially uninteresting. It remains true, however, both that such scholars find themselves implicated in scholarly opinions driven (to a greater or lesser extent) by modern theological concerns, and that many assumptions about the explanatory power of social-historical theories are themselves deeply theological in nature. Hence it may well be that awareness of these discussions is of importance across the field of early Christian studies.

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

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"Western" sets. This is not to deny that there are differences between and among Greek and Latin theologians (and it is to offer no judgment about differences that may have emerged in later centuries), but it is to assert a fundamental identity at the level of those principles that were, at the time, taken to be at the core of pro-Nicene trinitarianism—Greek, Latin or Syriac. I also argued that in some ways the first of these strategies—a manner of insisting on the unity of God and the irreducibility of the three persons—appears particularly clearly in contemporary imperial legislation. There we find the irreducibility of the divine nature, power, essence, glory, and the irreducibility of the divine persons or hypostases asserted, and yet a variety of terminologies are taken to be acceptable. This basic distinction between unity and diversity is itself interpreted by other principles clearly stated by pro-Nicenes, with the doctrines of inseparable operation and the simplicity of the Godhead being particularly important. One other important function of these principles is to provide the context within which the traditional taxis of Father-Son and Spirit (and the Father's *monarchia*) was understood. Pro-Nicenes—again in East and West—are insistent on this taxis.[2]

In Chapters 12 and 13 of *Nicaea* I argued that this first strategy is inseparable from two others. One is a series of christological assumptions which stem from a pro-Nicene understanding of the Word as a co-equal person in the indivisible Godhead. Understandings of the Word as immediately sustaining the creation go hand in hand with accounts of salvation as a sharing in the Word's very life. Both help to create a sense of the mysteriousness of the created order and of the human being. The final strategy is a series of assumptions about the nature of human purification and spiritual progress (concomitant with the second strategy) that shapes pro-Nicene scriptural exegesis. Understanding these interrelated strategies is, I argued, essential to seeing the full context of pro-Nicene trinitarian discussion. Grasping something of the way in which these strategies are interrelated also provides the basis on which I suggest we can speak of a pro-Nicene theological "culture"—although here perhaps more than anywhere we need to look at the ways in which this culture was manifest in and through local contexts and traditions.

One aspect of my argument, offered *en passant* but probably of particular interest to modern "systematic" theologians, is my suggestion that the practice of dividing pro-Nicenes into distinct groups by reference to the fundamental analogies they use is unsustainable. In the first place, pro-Nicenes use a wide variety of analogies; in the second, pro-Nicenes use different analogies in different contexts and with much greater hesitation than we tend to do! The assumption that the use of a particular analogy determines the character of the unity and diversity fourth-century authors see in the Trinity is also, I would argue, without foundation. More specifically,

[2] See *Nicaea*, 278–300. For the definitions used in imperial legislation, see *Nicaea*, 251–53. These texts seem to contain strategies of definition parallel to those used in the text of a letter stemming from the 382 Council in Constantinople, which is likely to represent as close a view as we can get of the language used at Constantinople I in 381. See Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 5.9; *Nicaea*, 258.

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I have also argued that the use of an extended social analogy (by which I mean the use of three human persons as an analogy for the Trinity that does more than assert a parallel with the logic of individual and species relationships) is extremely rare, and—to be provocative—is as common in Augustine as it is in any of the Cappadocians. This is not to say that one cannot trace common patterns of analogical usage among particular traditions, but good work in this area is scarce and much remains to be done.

This last sentence brings us to a set of questions about which I think *Nicaea* has some suggestions to make, but also to one which fourth-century scholarship will increasingly need to reconsider. How should we envisage unity and diversity among pro-Nicenes? Where can we identify distinct pro-Nicene traditions, and on what basis do we do so? Just as an earlier generation of scholarship did much to demonstrate the complexity of non-Nicene theology, it is time now to do the same for pro-Nicene. Indeed, how we should even define the pro-Nicene? My approach so far has been to search for a minimal definition while also arguing that pro-Nicene theology developed over a period of time. Some of those we identify as archetypical pro-Nicene figures were, at least for much of their careers, only partially—even if significantly—pro-Nicene, rather than fully so. Hilary of Poitiers and Athanasius are particularly significant members of this group. One finds in their later works some of the key principles whose implications are worked over during the period between 360 and 380, but often these principles sit alongside others barely consonant with them.

An ongoing conversation with Michel Barnes has been the context within which my own definition has evolved. Barnes distinguishes between Neo- and Pro-Nicene theology, and distinguishes both from the "old" Nicene theology of Nicaea's framers and first defenders. I prefer to speak similarly of "old" Nicene theology, but then to speak of "pro-Nicene" as a constantly developing theology with at least two significant phases between 360 and 380.[3] In this debate we share common assumptions that older debates about the differences between "Nicene" and "Neo-Nicene" are misleading, both when they assume too determined a content for either term, and also when they assume that a pure Nicene position was present in Athanasius from which later theology did or did not vary. Despite our agreement here, I am not yet convinced that the evidence provides sufficient clarity for us to use two distinct terms to name phases of Nicene theological development. The fluidity between the phases of Nicene theology, especially the persistence of arguments from the first phase into those who are exemplary of the second, indicates that we should be wary of too easy a division here. While Barnes is certainly correct to highlight

[3] For my definition of "old-Nicene" see Ayres, *Nicaea*, 98–100; for "pro-Nicene" see Ayres, *Nicaea*, 236–40. For Barnes's accounts see "One Nature, One Power: Consensus Doctrine in Pro-Nicene Polemic," Studia Patristica 29 (1997) 205–23; idem, "*De Trinitate* VI and VII: Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," *AugStud*, forthcoming. My own definitions of pro-Nicene continue to evolve: see my *Augustine's Trinitarian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) ch. 2.

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the changing shape of exegetical debate as a central location of these shifts, local variation prevents us from identifying debate over a particular text (such as John 5:19) as a necessary marker of the pro-Nicene. My position in this debate will no doubt change as our work advances.

Nevertheless, despite these disagreements, Barnes and I concur with much recent scholarship in viewing these controversies as fundamentally exegetical in character. As scholars have come to be more interested in the dynamics of premodern exegesis on its own terms (whether or not they also wish to call for its use in modern theology), they have been better able to examine the complex mix of exegesis and philosophical reflection that shaped trinitarian debate. My own approach has focused on emphasizing the importance of what I have termed "grammatical" exegesis in doctrinal argument and on showing how philosophical work was an integral part of these exegetical techniques.[4] While I hope *Nicaea* contributes to our understanding of exegetical argument, it is interesting to note how much this marks a common concern of a wide range of current writers on this period. For example, in his reviews of our books, Maurice Wiles criticizes both John Behr and me for the willingness to advocate for the modern use of some early Christian exegetical practices.[5]

In concluding these initial comments I would also like to identify four theologians about whom I would like to have said much more: Eusebius of Caesarea, Epiphanius, Didymus, and Marius Victorinus. All four are greatly understudied and all four are far more significant (for various reasons) than *Nicaea* might indicate. I avoided spending time on the cluster of works that have frequently been attributed to Didymus simply because of the uncertainty that surrounds them. In retrospect this seems mistaken, given the great deal of extra evidence they offer.[6] Similarly, in *Nicaea* I made little use of liturgical materials. This is, in part, because of my own sense that scholars have tended to take an overly romantic and idealistic view of the relationship between theological development and liturgical practice. In fact, we frequently observe a *lex credendi, lex orandi* that renders such texts very complex when we seek to use them in our accounts. At the same time, while we have materials that can be used to demonstrate the interrelationship between pro-Nicene theologies and their liturgical practice (and in any second edition these would have to be included in Chapters 11–13), we have little that can be dated with sufficient certitude to show developments over the course of the fourth century.

[4] By "grammatical" I refer to the reading practices that adapt or simply copy those one would have learned at the hand of the *grammatikos* in the late antique educational context. See Ayres, *Nicaea*, 31–37.

[5] See *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 (2005) 669–70 (Behr), 670–75 (Ayres).

[6] In the book on which I am now working, *The Giver of Life: The Rise of the Spirit 350–400*, I will make much more extensive use of them.

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