Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity

Edited by:
Mathews George Chunakara



Echoes of Nicaea:
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Papers presented at the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS–X)

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The (Original) Nicene Creed of 325

We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
the only begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages.
Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made,
of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made;
who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven,
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.
And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried.
And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures;
and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father;
and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead;
whose Kingdom shall have no end.
And in the Holy Spirit.

Following the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381,
the Creed was further supplemented with the following:

And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
Who proceeds from the Father; who with the Father and the Son
together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.
In one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.
I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life
of the world to come.
Amen.

Foreword

The Christian world has been commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea held in AD 325. The Council of Nicaea was the first council known as an 'ecumenical council,' as it was the first time ecclesial leaders from different traditions in the entire *Oikoumenē* gathered. They were invited to gather for discussions, formulation, and affirmation of their Creed on faith. The First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 opened a new way for an institutional expression of authority in the universal Church, but it took at least half a century (AD 381) to synthesise and accept the vocabulary of Nicaea's theological affirmation and to agree on the universal significance of the first Council. Nicaea became a turning-point in the history of Christianity and it has been providing new impetus for Christian unity.

The anniversary celebrations of the distinctive expression that led to the Church's faith in Jesus Christ, which started last year in different parts of the world, echo the significance of the pivotal event in Christian history that established the Nicene Creed. The churches across the world have started reflecting upon, and commemorating, the richness of the Council of Nicaea, 1700 years on, which also leads us to deepen our understanding of how the Nicene Creed nourishes and guides Christian life every day. This anniversary is being marked by various celebrations, conferences, seminars, colloquia, and ecumenical events around the globe, with focus on the Nicene Creed's enduring impact on Christian faith and embracing unity.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) initiated the reflection on the significance of the Nicene Creed and its impacts on the ecclesial and ecumenical arena in Asia with a formal inauguration of the Asian commemoration of the 1700th anniversary that was held by CCA in October 2024 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in conjunction with the Tenth Congress of the Asian Theologians (CATS-X). The deliberations at the CATS-X were focused on the theme "Nicaea 1700: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity". The event started with an ecumenical worship service

and a public meeting at the Zion Cathedral of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia and was followed by the inauguration of the CATS-X.

The week-long events of the CATS-X, attended by more than 120 Asian theologians, became a common ecumenical platform in Asia to reflect further on the Creed of Nicaea. The CATS-X deliberated on various aspects of the main theme, as well as three subthemes focusing on: "Ecclesial Synchrony: Oneness in Faith, Witness, and Withness;" "Biocentric Solidarity: Covenantal Bond for Cosmic Wholeness;" and "Cybergenic Synergy: Envisioning Humanity and Digital Wellness." Several academic papers addressing contemporary issues related to the main theme and subthemes linked with the emerging Asian realities and theology in contexts. Almost all papers presented at the summit are included in this volume. It is hoped that this will be a useful resource for all who will continue to study and reflect on the Nicene Creed and its contemporary relevance.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA

PART-I

ASIAN COMMEMORATION OF THE 1700TH ANNIVERSARY OF NICAEA 325

Introductory and Welcome Address
Nicaea 1700th Anniversary Commemorative Address
Benedictory Addresses
Greetings Messages
Felicitation Messages
Inaugural Address

Introductory and Welcome Address at the Asian Commemoration of the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea 325

and the Opening of the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X)

Dr Mathews George Chunakara
CCA General Secretary

Esteemed church and ecumenical leaders, distinguished guests, participants of the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians, specially invited guests, and friends,

Greetings and welcome to this special Asian commemoration of the 1700th Anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea, and the inaugural session of the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS).

CATS, a triennial summit of Asian theologians organised by the CCA in collaboration with the Federation of the Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) of the Roman Catholic Church, Asian Evangelical Alliance (AEA), and Asian theological educational institutions such as Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and the Board of Theological Education of Senate of Serampore Colleges (BTESSC), has been convened since 1997. The Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X), now taking place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, holds special significance as it coincides with the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea, convened in AD 325.

Every CATS summit has addressed emerging issues and their theological significance in the Asian context. This tradition has been maintained since the idea of a platform for Asian theologians was first initiated by the leadership of the Christian Conference of Asia in 1997. I recall the discussions from those early years when I was on the staff of CCA in Hong Kong, during which the idea of creating a platform for Asian theologians was originally proposed. The discussion centred on the need to promote contextual theology in Asia, moving away from the traditional Western theological framework often followed by Asian churches and theological institutions.

Despite ongoing debates about doing theology contextually in Asia, the challenges remain significant. Contextual theology is not only an act of confessing the Christian faith but also involves engaging with life both inside and outside the Church and responding to the wider human

community. Recognising the complexities of this task, the need for a platform where Asian theologians and educators could come together was unanimously agreed upon, leading to the creation of CATS.

Between 1997 and 2024, including the one in KL, ten summits have been held, with each summit bringing together around 100 theologians. Over 1,000 Asian theologians have participated in this ecumenical platform over the years, addressing and debating a wide range of theological issues, with a special focus on theology in the Asian context.

As we all know, the theological dilemmas we face cannot be solved with quick fixes, and they compel us to continually expand the horizons of our faith. As Asian Christians living among people of various faiths, we must rethink our Christian faith and reformulate our theology in fundamental ways. CATS is one of several initiatives that contribute to this reformulation and articulation of theological convictions in Asia.

The CCA has consistently provided a unique platform for Asian theologians and theologians from the Asian diaspora to gather. CATS-X is yet another example of the CCA's commitment to fostering collaboration among Asian theologians, in partnership with ecclesial and ecumenical bodies, as well as theological educational associations. CATS offers a common space for theologians from a wide range of Christian traditions to come together, professing their faith in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The preparatory process for CATS-X, which began last year, involved discussions on various themes. Ultimately, the theme of 'Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity' was chosen in connection with the 1700th anniversary of the First Nicene Council. This theme is particularly relevant as Christians around the world will soon commemorate this significant historical event. As those partaking in CATS-X, we are now entering the threshold of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which took place in AD 325.

Christians around the world recite the Nicene Creed as a confession of faith. However, many may not fully understand the historical context in which this affirmation of faith was formulated. The Council of Nicaea was convened at a critical moment in the history of Christianity, and its significance has remained a topic of academic interest for theologians, historians, and scholars across the globe.

The 1700th anniversary of Nicaea 325 provides an opportunity for churches around the world to reflect on their historical journey, examining the themes discussed in AD 325 and their relevance today. This reflection, alongside the lessons learned over the centuries, will offer a unique opportunity at CATS-X to strengthen our common spiritual heritage.

A selected group of Asian theologians has been given the opportunity, through CATS-X, to reflect on the echoes of Nicaea and the enduring faith as we pursue the quest for unity. The theologians who have gathered here in KL, Malaysia, will have the opportunity to explore these issues from an Asian perspective. It is our hope and prayer that the deliberations at CATS-X will provide an opportunity for Asian theologians to explore ways of strengthening ecclesial synchrony, revitalising the visible unity of the Church through shared mission and witness in the world.

Unlike many ecumenical events, which often involve a limited number of church traditions, CATS-X is inclusive, representing a broad spectrum of Christian denominations in Asia, including Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Reformed, United and Uniting Churches, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Mar Thoma, Independent, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Assyrians or Church of the East, and others. This unique summit underscores CCA's ongoing commitment to providing a platform for theological dialogue across denominational lines.

It has truly become a remarkable gathering of Christian theologians, marking the most diverse summit of Asian theologians that the CCA has organised and facilitated so far. We are glad that, once again, the Christian Conference of Asia has pioneered an initiative to convene Asian theologians, this time addressing one of the most pertinent themes that churches across the world have discussed for centuries. We are also happy that this gathering is taking place again on the Asian continent, where Christianity was born and from where it spread across the globe in the course of two millennia.

We are especially glad to have prominent Asian church and ecumenical leaders be part of this historic event, particularly as we commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.

With these introductory remarks about both CATS and the Nicaea commemoration, let me take this opportunity to introduce and welcome our distinguished guests. Presiding over this session is Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza, Moderator of the CCA, belonging to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP). Bishop Marigza has provided leadership to the CCA in various capacities, having previously served as a member of the Executive Committee, Vice Moderator of the CCA during the last term, and now as Moderator since the 15th General Assembly held in Kottayam, India.

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay's in-person participation was highly anticipated at this historic event. In fact, he was scheduled to be in Asia this week for other programmes in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, as well. Unfortunately,

he was unable to board the flight yesterday from Geneva. However, he will still be part of this programme, participating fully and addressing us online from Geneva. He will deliver the inaugural address online as this event is being live-streamed.

We are also honoured to have His Eminence Cardinal Sebastian Francis with us, representing the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), to deliver the commemorative message for the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea. We are extremely grateful to Cardinal Francis for kindly accepting our invitation.

Benedictory addresses will be delivered by four prominent church and ecumenical leaders of Asia, including His Holiness Dr Baselios Mathews III, Catholicos of the East and Supreme Head of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. Despite his hectic schedule, His Holiness graciously accepted our invitation to be part of the inauguration of CATS-X and the special commemorative event for the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea.

His Beatitude Dr Theodosius Mar Thoma Metropolitan, the Supreme Head of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church, also graciously accepted our invitation to be part of this special event despite his hectic schedule. Both the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, two historic churches in Asia, both originating from the same stream of the St Thomas traditions and tracing their roots back to the First Century, in AD 52, are founding members of the CCA. These two churches are also founding members of the Council of Churches of Malaysia through their respective diaspora parishes in Malaysia. Both churches are active participants in the ecumenical arena at both the national and regional levels.

The Anglican Church in Hong Kong and the Korean Methodist Church are also very active members of the CCA and have been participating in the Asian ecumenical movement in different ways. Bishop Timothy Chi-pei Kwok of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong and Bishop Park Jung Min are no strangers in the Asian ecumenical movement. I recall that Bishop Timothy, as a young priest, was an official delegate to the CCA Assembly held in 2000 in Tomohon, Indonesia. Bishop Park, a prominent church and ecumenical leader, has also been actively involved in the ecumenical movement.

Greetings and felicitations will also be extended by Rev. Dr Eu Hong Seng, Chairman of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia, and Bishop Steven Lawrence, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia, a member church of the CCA in Malaysia.

Ever since the CCA decided to organise CATS-X, we have received encouragement and offers of support from the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), which is the CCA's member council in Malaysia. Very Rev. Fr Philip Thomas Cor Episcopa, President of the CCM, also serves as the Chairperson of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), which is a confederation of the Roman Catholic Church, the CCM, and the National Evangelical Fellowship in Malaysia. A long-time associate of the CCA in various capacities, Fr Philip Thomas Cor Episcopa has been a great source of support and encouragement to the CCA. Along with the President of the CCM, its General Secretary, Rev. Dr Philip Lok, has also been extending encouragement and support to the CCA for organising this programme in Kuala Lumpur. We are also grateful to Mr Thomas Mathew, the treasurer of the CCM, who helped the CCA from the beginning of the planning of these two events.

I would also like to acknowledge the presence of various well-wishers and supporters of the CCA who have been involved in its committees in the past and continue to support the CCA in different ways, especially as the CCA holds this event here after such a long gap. They include Dato' (Justice) Varghese George, a member of the Mar Thoma Church in Klang, who served as a member of the CCA General Committee in the 1990s, and former General Secretary of CCM, Mr Jacob Mathew, Orthodox Syrian Church Working Committee member and a member of the Kuala Lumpur/Dubai Orthodox Church, and several other friends and well-wishers of the CCA in Malaysia, all of whom came forward to support and encourage the CCA ever since we decided to organise these CCA programmes in Malaysia.

The Moderator of the CCA, Bishop Reul Marigza, and Vice Moderator, Dr Anna Alisha Mathew Simon, have been extending great support and encouragement. The CCA Secretariat is extremely thankful to Dr Anna for her hard work, especially in taking a major part in the work related to local coordination in organising these two special events.

There are about 120 Asian theologians attending the CATS-X. They come from different parts of Asia and other parts of the world. Special welcome to all of them. Members of different congregations of the CCA and the CCM member churches located in different parts of Kuala Lumpur are attending this inaugural session of CATS and the Nicaea-1700 commemorative celebration.

Thank you for being with us, and I welcome each one of you.

Presidential Address

Bishop Reuel Norman O. Marigza
Moderator, CCA

Christians around the world have started celebrating and commemorating the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea-325. We, in Asia, are taking a proactive step to prepare our responses to this historic milestone in the history of the Church.

As such, the CATS-X gathers here under the theme 'Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity - Asian Ecumenical Responses.' The Nicene Creed united the Church in one creedal formulation amidst the challenges of the faith at that era. Today, and in the diverse lands and cultures of Asia, we have come to reflect on the legacy of the Council of Nicaea, on the one hand, and the contemporary issues of the various contexts of Asia.

How far have we embraced unity? *Christianity Today* Magazine noted that the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, when it was published in 2001, "counted 33,830 denominations worldwide; with the amount of debate and division over theology and orthodoxy since then, that number is undoubtedly higher." The Gordon Conwell Center for Global Christianity confirms this reality: it stated that by mid-2021, there were already 45,600 denominations worldwide, and they projected that by 2025, a year from now, when we celebrate the 1700th Anniversary of Nicaea, there will be 49,000 and in 2050, there will be 64,000 denominations worldwide. And to think that in 1900, there were just 2,000 denominations. *Christianity Today* Magazine then asked: Are these myriads of denominations a sign of chronic division amongst the Church?

How have we lived out the prayer and desire of Jesus in John 17 that Christ's believers "may all be one." He prayed for unity patterned after the unity of the Godhead: "just as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in us…"[21]. This unity is God's gift and it is God's doing, but as Ephesians 4:3 puts it, "we must be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This Nicene Creed sought to unite us in an enduring faith.

However, unity has a purpose – and that purpose, according to Jesus, is: "so that the world may believe that You sent Me." That is why I always say, Christian unity is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Christian

unity has a missiological thrust and dimension to it: 'so that the world may believe.' But how can the world believe that there is One Body when there is no unity in the Body?

As our concept paper admonished: CATS-X "is not a mere historical exercise to reappraise and reaffirm the outcomes of the Council, but rather to deliberate on the theological foundations in the face of contemporary challenges." "Rooted in the historical significance of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, (our) theme serves as a guiding thread, weaving together the enduring facets of faith and the imperative of fostering unity within the multifaceted context of Christianity."

May this be so! Let us look forward to an engaging, meaningful, and relevant exploration and conversation as we remember and reflect on the legacy of a faith that endures and a unity that embraces all. Welcome to CATS-X, and may God bless us all!

Nicaea 1700th Anniversary Commemorative Address

His Eminence Cardinal Sebastian Francis,
Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

I bring you greetings from my brother bishops from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). The late Pope John Paul II said, we need both *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*, and we do not let one play against the other. We move from creed to deed, and back to creed, and back to deed. And let us not forget, it is the faith of the Council of Nicaea that has kept us together for 1700 years. So, let's get to know Nicaea, an ancient Greek city which is now located in modern-day Turkey, today, called Iznik — the very first Ecumenical Council in the history of the Christian Church, and that was intended to address the entire body of believers convened by the Emperor Constantine to resolve the controversy of *Arianism*, a doctrine that would have divided us all the way, a doctrine that held that Christ was not divine, but merely human.

The General Secretary of the WCC, Dr Jerry Pillay, in his paper on "Echoes of Nicaea, the Path Foreword", speaks about five concerns, and I am more or less in agreement with him. Well, the first of the main issues was a Christological issue about the divine nature of God the Son and the relationship of God the Son with God the Father. And they came out clearly to define the full humanity of Christ and the full divinity of Christ with no compromise. As our brother said, it also mandated a uniform observance of the date of Easter. And it also finalised the revelation of the Trinity. The revelation of the Trinity as three persons in one Trinitarian community. And it also finalised the kind of church that was going to move beyond 350 — a church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. And we needed that kind of a church in order to uphold the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, and the equality of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. So, the Council of Nicaea invites us to use the Latin term *Sentire Cum Ecclesia*, to think and to feel with the church. And this is about 300 years after the historical Jesus Christ walked on Earth and resurrected and ascended into heaven, and the apostolic period of the first 12 apostles was over, and the church continues to be governed by the successors of the apostles. I think of all of us here as a gathering of apostles, as a gathering of disciples. The Roman persecution of the early church was also over by the time of the Council of Nicaea, and the Roman superpower was also on the decline; these are some of the socio-political scenarios of the Council of Nicaea.

The temple of Jerusalem, as foretold by Jesus, was destroyed in circa AD 70, and that also would have had an impact on the direction of the Christian church. The scenario then was that we met in relatively peaceful times in Nicaea as one Church in this first Ecumenical Council, and maybe for the last time before we moved in separate and independent ways for various historical, doctrinal, political, and theological reasons. But I would like to suggest that it is like the three wise men from the East, who, after the encounter with Christ, returned to their destinations to share the story of Jesus and went on different paths. The scenario continues. So, the highlights of the Nicene Creed: it settled the dual nature of Jesus Christ as fully human, as fully divine in the one person of the Second Person of the Trinity. The fullest revelation of Christ, of the Trinitarian God, was spelt out in all its beauty. This revelation was the penultimate revelation of God as a Trinity of persons in full and intimate communion with each other. And this is what has kept us going for 1700 years.

Finally, we needed a church that was described with four attributes, four permanent qualities, as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. What kind of oneness are we talking about? Some spoke about 40,000 denominations, etc., and increasing. Well, I would like to suggest that it is not a sentimental or a romantic kind of oneness. I would like to suggest that this oneness is not about superiority or dominance, not even about uniformity, and definitely not about manipulation. But this oneness is about unity in the continuity of the mission of Jesus Christ, unity in the continuity of the mission. And this mission has been entrusted by the Father and the Son, primarily to the Holy Spirit and to all who collaborate with the Holy Spirit till today, until the end of time. So, this oneness is about the unity in the continuity of the mission.

When I look at all of us here, I feel good to be here because I feel this kind of unity that we need as Christians. We say that we are holy — what is holy? God is holy, and therefore the traditional understanding of holiness was to be set aside, set apart. But I would like to suggest that the holiness of God is the foundation of the holiness of the Church, the holiness of the Three Persons who are in intimate communion with one another. This holiness is about creativity. This holiness is about relationships within the Trinity that reflect the relationships among us. It is the most creative part of the Trinity, how the Father is totally focused on the Son, and the Son is totally focused on the Father, and this love between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. And therefore, holiness is about creativity, about relationships, about being totally focused on the other.

The Church is Catholic; this church that has held us together for 1700 years is Catholic. And maybe the best word today to explain what is Catholic is to use the word "inclusive." It is inclusive. It is universal. It is not about uniformity. This is what Pope Francis calls *Fratelli tutti*, *Omnia omnibus*. In his letter, when he made me a cardinal, he focused on Pentecost, and he spoke about how this closeness does not diminish the rich reality of the Church in her variety of languages and cultures, that is her universality, which has nothing to do with uniformity. Universality was revealed, Pope Francis told me in his letter, on the morning of Pentecost by the symphonic unity of "Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs" (Acts 2: 9-11). When I look at all of us, I feel that kind of synergy that the Pope is talking about, not uniformity, but universality. He goes on to say, the call to universality, what makes us Catholic, impels us to implant the faith in every culture, and that is what is happening in Asia. No matter how small we may be, implanting the faith in every culture, each with its own values and distinctive characteristics, he used the expression that we all may be familiar with- Inculturation of the faith.

Pope Francis told me, a faith incapable of inculturation in Egypt, in Australia, or anywhere is not a genuine faith, for it succumbs to the temptation of uniformity, typical of a rigid way of thinking. At the same time, alongside the inculturation of faith, there is the evangelisation of cultures. We may be small, but as I told someone earlier, small must remind us that we are the mustard seed and not get into a minority persecution complex. These two aspects, inculturation of faith and evangelisation of cultures, are inseparable; maybe that is why the word Catholic came out at the Council of Nicaea to keep us together. No matter where, no matter what parts we took, we are Catholic, we are inclusive. And so, Pentecost is not only what happened within the Upper Room, where they were all Jews, they were all Galileans, but Pentecost is equally, even maybe more importantly, what happened when they left the Upper Room and when Peter addressed that crowd from all over the universe. Thank God the Upper Room was not made into a basilica or a shrine. It is empty till today, because the Holy Spirit is no longer in the Upper Room. The Holy Spirit has left the Upper Room and is now all over the world. So let us join, as I tell my people—join the winning team. And the winning team is Team Holy Spirit, to whom the Father and the Son have entrusted the continuation of the mission of Christ, and therefore it will succeed, together with

all of us who are collaborating with the Holy Spirit. I include here the mention of Pentecost, not only within the Upper Room, symbolised not by a dove, but by wind and fire. That wind and fire must continue to blow all over Asia. Pentecost outside the Upper Room, that same wind and fire penetrating faith with culture, inculturation of the faith all over Asia, even if you remain a mustard seed. Faith enters every culture on planet Earth, and in the evangelisation, bringing the Gospel to every culture. Here in Asia, we are storytellers. Our way of evangelisation is to share the story of Jesus with whoever wants to hear it. Or as Cardinal Giorgio Marengo of Mongolia said, "In Mongolia, we whisper the Gospel to one another, and that is our way of evangelising." So, brothers and sisters, faith enters every culture on planet Earth and in the evangelisation of every culture with the universal Gospel of joy, of mercy, and of hope. And every human person understands this language. It is the language for us that comes from the Gospel itself—the Gospel, the language of joy, of mercy, and of hope. Can we give a joint witness of joy, mercy, and hope, based on the joint witness of our profession of the Nicene Creed? If, God willing, we can celebrate Easter together next year—when two calendars collide and Easter falls on the same day—the Julian calendar, followed by several Orthodox churches, and the Gregorian calendar, followed by the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and several other churches—then, for some reason in God's plan, these two calendars come together in 2025 for Easter. So, can we bear witness to the world that we are one, and celebrate Easter 2025 together as one Church?

God bless you all, a Church of apostles, a Church of disciples, a Church of the people of God. Thank you, God bless you.

Benedictory Addresses

Benedictory Address by

His Holiness Dr Baselios Marthoma Mathews III Catholicos

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

"The Nicene Creed continues to affirm our faith and shape our ecumenical journey"

Esteemed, His Beatitude Dr Theodosius Mar Thoma Metropolitan, Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church; Prof. Dr Jerry Pillai, General Secretary, WCC; His Eminence Cardinal Sebastin Francis, FABC; Bishop Reuel Norman, Moderator, CCA; Dr Mathews George Chunakara, General Secretary, CCA; Very Rev. Fr Philip Thomas Cor Episcopa, President, Council of Churches in Malaysia; distinguished Bishops and leaders on the dais; and participants of the Congress of Asian Theologians—I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose presence unites us in this great gathering. I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Council of Churches of Malaysia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia, and Dr Mathews George Chunakara, CCA General Secretary, and his dedicated team for organising this timely and significant conference as we stand at the threshold of Nicaea 2025. Your work among the Asian churches and the ecumenical movement, together with local churches and ecumenical communities in Malaysia, continues to shine as a beacon of hope and unity in a diverse world, and we are deeply grateful for your commitment to the cause of Christian witness in Asia through the CCA.

The topic before us, The Ecumenical Potential of the Nicene Creed, draws us into the heart of our fraternal relations on an ecumenical platform. The Nicene Creed is not merely a doctrinal statement; it is a profound expression of the unity we find in the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Formulated at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, it stands as the defining affirmation of Christian orthodoxy, transcending time, culture, and geography. In a world where divisions abound, the Nicene Creed offers us a powerful reminder of what binds us together. It articulates the core of our belief in one God, the incarnate Christ, and the Holy Spirit who continues to work within the Church.

As we approach the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, we are invited to reflect on how this ancient creed continues to shape our ecumenical journey. The ecumenical potential of the Nicene Creed lies

in its capacity to bring Christians of different traditions together. When we confess "We believe in one God," we affirm our unity in the midst of our diversity. The Creed reminds us that our shared faith is deeper and more enduring than the theological, cultural, or historical differences that might divide us. As we engage in ecumenical dialogue, the Nicene Creed serves as a common foundation, a touchstone for our efforts to foster greater understanding and collaboration. It calls us to move beyond mere coexistence and towards true communion, where we bear witness to the world by embodying the love and peace of Christ. The Creed also speaks powerfully to the contemporary challenges we face—religious intolerance, socio-political conflicts, and the growing alienation of humanity from its Creator. In these times, our collective witness to the Creed becomes a prophetic act, affirming the reality of God's kingdom and the hope of reconciliation for all.

I would like to focus mainly on five areas while reflecting on the potentiality of the Nicene Creed in engaging ourselves in dialogue:

1. The affirmation of the divinity of Christ remains a central pillar of Christian faith, particularly in today's context, where some churches risk becoming mere social organisations. The Nicene Creed's declaration that Christ is "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" emphasises His divine nature. In a world where secular values often overshadow spiritual truths, this confession reasserts the foundational Christian belief in Christ as fully divine and fully human. This affirmation is crucial for the Church, as it prevents the dilution of the gospel message, which is rooted in the profound mystery of God becoming man for our salvation.

2. The Nicene Creed's affirmation of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection provides a profound point of reference for the shared faith of all Christians. When the Creed declares, "we believe" in these central events, it connects believers across all denominations in the foundational truth of Christ's victory over death. The resurrection stands as the cornerstone of Christian hope, promising new life and redemption. By collectively professing this belief, the Church remains unified in its mission to proclaim Christ's redeeming work, offering a message of hope in a world often characterised by despair and uncertainty.

3. The Nicene Creed's scriptural foundation offers another powerful platform for unity. Rooted in biblical truth, the Creed reflects the

teachings found in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels and Pauline epistles. Each line of the Creed can be traced back to Scripture, offering a common ground for Christians to unite around the essential tenets of the faith. This scriptural grounding not only reinforces the Creed's authority but also ensures that the Church's unity is anchored in the Word of God, which transcends time and cultural differences. This unity, strengthened by shared scripture, empowers the Church to remain steadfast in addressing global challenges.

4. The hope of Christ's second coming, as affirmed in the Nicene Creed, is a shared eschatological belief that unites all Christians. This anticipation provides a perspective through which the Church can view the ephemeral trials of life, placing them in the broader context of the eternal hope that Christ's return will bring. By keeping this affirmation at the forefront, the Church is reminded that its mission transcends earthly struggles, calling the faithful to remain vigilant and focused on the eternal kingdom. This shared hope also strengthens the Church's resolve in addressing global issues, offering a vision of peace and integrity rooted in God's ultimate plan for creation.

5. Finally, the Nicene Creed's reference to the work of the Holy Spirit serves as a powerful point of strength for the Church. The affirmation that the Spirit is "the Lord, the giver of life" underscores the Spirit's active role in sustaining and guiding the Church. The Holy Spirit's presence in the life of believers empowers the Church to remain faithful to its mission, even in the face of challenges. It is through the Spirit that Christians are united in love and equipped to carry out the work of reconciliation in a divided world. By emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit, the Church finds strength to move forward in unity and faith. As we look to the future, may the Nicene Creed continue to guide our steps on the path of unity. Let it remind us that ecumenism is not just an idea but a lived reality, rooted in the love of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. In this love, we find the strength to overcome our divisions and walk together in faith, hope, and charity. May our discussions here bear fruit for the glory of God, and may the Holy Spirit guide us as we prepare for the historic occasion of Nicaea 2025. Thank you, and may the peace of our Lord be with you all. Amen.

Benedictory Address by

His Beatitude Dr Theodosius Mar Thoma Metropolitan,

Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church

"The legacy of Nicaea calls us to embody the faith in concrete acts of love and justice"

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, esteemed theologians, church leaders, and ecumenical partners,

it is an honour to be with all of you today at the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X) as we gather under the theme "Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity," led by the Christian Conference of Asia. I commend the efforts of the CCA and its leaders, Bishop Ruel Norman Marigza, the general secretary of CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, and the members in organising this blessed event.

This historic occasion, coinciding with the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, is a call to each one of us to ponder not only the enduring legacy of the Nicene Creed but also the theological and spiritual responsibility we share in implementing unity across the diverse Christian traditions in Asia.

The Council of Nicaea, convened in AD 325, was a defining moment in the history of the Church. It charted the course for doctrinal clarity, establishing the foundation of the Nicene Creed that has unified Christians for centuries. The Creed's articulation of the Trinitarian faith, the Council's most enduring product, affirms the full divinity of Christ, co-equal with the Father, in the language of *homoousios* (Greek for "of the same substance"), and the unity of the Godhead continues to serve as a vital theological touchstone for all believers. However, beyond doctrinal clarity, the Council of Nicaea symbolises the Church's efforts to maintain ecclesial unity despite theological disputes. As the Nicene Creed became the basis for defining the universal Christian faith, it also became a symbol of the Church's collective identity. The Creed unifies Christians around a shared profession of faith in the Triune God, providing a foundation for dialogue and collaboration amidst diversity.

When we gather to commemorate this historical deliberation, it is essential to acknowledge the unique challenges and opportunities we face in our Asian context. Asia, with its rich heritage of religious and

cultural diversity, presents a dynamic and multifaceted landscape for the Church. Our task is not simply to affirm the faith handed down to us through the Nicene Creed, but to embody it in ways that speak to the realities of our context, marked by religious pluralism, socio-economic disparities, and a constant negotiation between tradition and modernity.

The theme "Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity" calls us to a twofold commitment. First, we must anchor our faith in the Triune God, holding fast to the truths that have sustained the Church throughout the centuries. Our faith is not static; it is a living tradition that requires ongoing discernment and engagement with the world around us. In the midst of cultural shifts, social upheavals, and evolving worldviews, we are called to bear witness to the eternal truths of the Word, as articulated in the Nicene Creed, while addressing the pressing concerns of our time.

We are called to embrace unity, a unity that transcends theological differences, cultural boundaries, and denominational affiliations. Jesus prayed for the unity of His children, that they may be one as He and the Father are one. This high priestly prayer remains a leading light for the Church today, particularly in Asia, where we are tasked with navigating the complexities of inter-denominational and interfaith relationships. Unity does not mean uniformity; it means finding ways to live out our shared faith while honouring the distinctiveness of our traditions.

The Nicene Creed, recited in our liturgies across various Christian traditions, serves as a constant reminder of our common faith in Christ. Every time we affirm this Creed, we participate in the communal identity of the Body of Christ, a body that is both global and local, diverse yet united. This unity in faith, however, is not merely a matter of theological agreement; it is a call to relational, practical, and spiritual solidarity. As Asian Christians, we are uniquely positioned to model a form of ecumenism that celebrates diversity while remaining anchored in the core components of our faith.

In this spirit, I wish to highlight the ongoing ecumenical dialogues between the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and other Christian churches. These dialogues, grounded in the shared faith of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, offer a blueprint for how churches with distinct theological traditions can come together in communion. The Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church has a rich history of ecumenical frontiers that embrace the various traditions across the world. By embracing the model of ecumenical openness championed at Nicaea, we are rediscovering

ways to engage in meaningful dialogue and partnership while respecting our doctrinal differences.

In commemoration of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, let us commit ourselves to a renewed effort in pursuing the unity for which Christ prayed. This requires not only theological discourse but also a willingness to work together in service to the world. The challenges we face, be they poverty, injustice, or the quest for peace, demand a united Christian witness. The legacy of Nicaea calls us to embody the faith we profess in concrete acts of love and justice, working together as the Body of Christ in the meta-modern world.

As we reflect on the echoes of Nicaea in our contemporary context, may we be inspired to uphold the faith with unwavering conviction and to pursue the unity that Christ Himself desires for His Church. The Nicene Creed, which has withstood the test of time, continues to guide us in our journey of faith. Let us be able to recommit ourselves in the light of this Creed, not only as a statement of belief but as an embodiment of our shared Christian identity. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit strengthen us as we continue to walk together in faith and unity.

May God bless us all.

Felicitation and Greetings

1

Felicitation and Greetings

Right Revd. Dr Timothy, Chi-pei Kwok,
Anglican Church in Hong Kong

Dear church leaders, theologians, and distinguished guests,

On behalf of Hong Kong Sheng Hung Kui (Hong Kong Anglican Church), I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) for organising this important event. Your dedication and hard work have brought together over 100 theologians, scholars, and church leaders from diverse ecclesial traditions. It is a testament to our collective vision of fostering dialogue and understanding among different denominations.

As we reflect on the topic "Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity," let us remember the spirit of the Council of Nicaea, which sought to affirm our faith and strengthen our fellowship. The Nicene Creed serves as a powerful reminder of our unity in Christ, transcending barriers and differences.

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of those who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes, particularly the leadership of Dr Mathews George Chunakara. Your commitment to ecumenism and the advancement of our shared mission is truly inspiring.

As we embark on this journey of discussion and reflection, may our time together deepen our bonds and inspire new insights that enhance our witness to the world. Let us embrace the call to work together, affirming that our diversity is a strength that enriches our faith community.

I look forward to fruitful discussions in the days to come. Blessings to you all.

2

Felicitation and Greetings

Bishop Park Jung Min,
Korean Methodist Church

Greetings from the Korean Methodist Church.

First of all, I would like to honour God for the opportunity to hold CATS-X and the 1700th anniversary celebration of Nicaea. And I would like to congratulate everyone who is attending, with the warm hearts of all the members of the Korean Methodist Church. In particular, I would like to thank you for your efforts to commemorate the inheritance of the Christian faith as stated 1700 years ago by those who built the foundation for Christianity, and doing so today through the theme "Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity."

Above all, I would like to pay attention to the word "Enduring". Today, the confession of faith that lasted for 1700 years is even more urgent. And today, the embracing unity that has been going on for the last 1700 years, the effort to become one, is even more urgent.

This unity is most clearly revealed in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. We are the body of Christ and members in particular. About the unity of the church, Jesus prayed, "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, (art) in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that thou didst send me," "May they all be one, just as you are in me and I am in you, so that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me."

The Church is one in Jesus Christ. On this unity, St Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:33, "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit."

I hope that through the CATS-X and Nicaea 1700th anniversary celebrations, we can restore the image of the Church that Jesus designed and expected.

I would like to share two special prayer requests with you: First, for the people and churches in Myanmar. I visited Myanmar last month. I saw

the Church and people suffering from the civil war. Please pray for the Lord's peace to come quickly to Myanmar.

Second, I request your prayers for the unification of Korea, the last divided country on Earth.

May the grace, love, and communion of the Trinity — God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit — be with you all.

Shalom!

3

Felicitation and Greetings

Bishop Steven Lawrence,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM)

Dear respected ecumenical leaders and brothers and sisters in Christ,

I greet you in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! Welcome to Malaysia, a blessed land where we must live and express our faith ecumenically. On behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia, I would like to welcome you (personally) to Zion Cathedral, built in 1924. We will be celebrating its 100th anniversary on 30th November 2024. I take this opportunity to congratulate the CCA, especially Dr Mathews and the staff of the CCA, for identifying and organising CATS-X in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and for allowing ELCM to be part of this historic event - the Nicaea-1700th anniversary commemoration and the inauguration of the 10th Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X).

About 1700 years ago, the Council of Nicaea was convened to address controversies of the time, an attempt and effort to address the issues through consensus. What's notable is the coming together of different denominations as part of God's household. We need not come together only when there are issues affecting us Christians, but we definitely need to come together to worship, commune, and listen to one another. Today, it is my prayer and hope that we, especially Christians in Asia, will not use our differences as points to separate or divide us but to use our common confession, the Nicene Creed, as a platform that unites us - "And if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if a part is honoured, all the parts rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). May we be one! All glory and praise be to God alone.

4

Felicitation and Greetings

Pastor Sam Ang,
Secretary General of National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF)

Dear Friends,

On behalf of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship – Malaysia (NECF), I would like to thank the organising committee of the special commemorative event for inviting us to say a few words.

I would also like to convey our apology on behalf of our Chairman, Rev. Dr Eu Hong Seng, who is not able to be here this afternoon.

As Malaysians, we are truly honoured to be the hosts for this anniversary commemoration of the Nicene Creed, especially in these challenging and difficult times both for the world and our nation.

The Church needs to fulfil her role both as the salt and light as well as the Bride of Jesus Christ. Therefore, she needs to stay focused and stand in unity on issues that are confronting her.

However, we must remain faithful to the Bible, which is the Word from our Lord.

Our prayer is that through this ecumenical platform for Asian theologians, with the theme "Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity", we will rise above our situation and truly bring the presence and glory of Jesus Christ to the churches that we represent.

God bless you.

5

Message of Greetings

Rev. Dr Philip Lok,
General Secretary, Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM)

On behalf of the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), I greet you all with the words of the Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise be to

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:2–3).

Last year, the CCM celebrated the 75th anniversary of our ecumenical body. In 1948, the founding fathers representing the mainline denominations in the then British Malaya came together to initiate this ecumenical movement. Back then, we were known as the Malayan Christian Council, but after the churches in Singapore established their own National Council of Churches, we were renamed the Council of Churches of Malaysia.

Even though our name has changed, our vision and mission as an ecumenical body have not. We have remained steadfast in our commitment to work towards the manifestation of greater unity of the Malaysian churches in our witness and service. After a journey of 75 years, CCM is today an ecumenical family of 12 member churches representing 7 mainline denominations, 12 associate members of Christian organisations, and 2 affiliate members. Our family has close to 600,000 individual members, spread across both East and West Malaysia. In addition, we are either members or affiliates of international ecumenical bodies like the WCC and the CCA. We are also partners of regional national councils like NCCs and PGI.

The past few years have been rather turbulent for our churches here in Malaysia. Briefly speaking, we are experiencing a shrinking space in our worship life as Malaysian Christians. This is in part due to the agendas of some political parties in our country. For instance, one of the sad episodes is the restrictions imposed by the authorities on the usage of the word "*Allah*" in our churches and by Christians. Then, there was the call for the burning of our Bahasa Bibles by some extremist groups. But through all these challenges, the churches in Malaysia have stood together, shoulder to shoulder, in resisting the efforts of religious extremists to take away our freedom to worship.

By the grace of God, Malaysian churches have also undergone profound transformations in recent years- from communities depending on foreign missions, they have become autonomous bodies, fully responsible for their life and witness in society. As a minority church, we have learnt to hold together our faithfulness to the gospel of Christ, and peaceful relations with our fellow Malaysians of other faiths.

In closing, the CCM wishes the CCA and all the participants of CATS-X a very fruitful and inspiring conference. As you commemorate the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, and re-visit our historic creed, may the Holy Spirit further deepen the unity we have in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Inaugural Address

The Echoes of Nicaea and the Path Forward

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
General Secretary, World Council of Churches (WCC)

Introduction

Dear colleagues, friends in Christ, distinguished theologians, and all gathered here today,

It is an honour to address this Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians. As we gather, I am deeply reminded of the invaluable contributions Asian churches and theologians have made and continue to make to the Christian faith. Your contributions reflect the richness of diversity and the deep theological heritage that Asia offers to the global Christian landscape.

The theme of this gathering, "Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity," speaks not only to the historical significance of the Council of Nicaea but to its ongoing relevance in shaping our faith, our witness, and our ecumenical journey together. I am so pleased to see you reflecting on the Nicene Creed and its historical, doctrinal, and contemporary relevance in the Asian context. I believe that your discussions would offer significant contributions to the topic. As you know, the World Council of Churches is placing significant focus on commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. In this regard, a number of activities across WCC programs will engage with the very questions you are addressing at your own conference. Additionally, we are also commemorating the centenary of the Stockholm Conference on Life and Work, alongside other important ecumenical jubilees. For this reason, the WCC has designated 2025 as a Special Ecumenical Year, offering us an opportunity to revisit the original impulses that have shaped our common calling as a fellowship of churches, to assess and reflect on today's challenges, and, most importantly, to discern our path forward together. In this context, I invite us today to explore what the Council of Nicaea is inviting us to think, discern, and do as we reflect on its ecumenical relevance. How do its lessons speak to our journey toward visible unity? How do they inspire our commitment to justice? Nicaea offers us more than a doctrinal legacy. To my mind, it confronts

us with five critical invitations: to live out our faith in action, to journey together towards unity as a conciliar fellowship, to offer visible signs of unity through common celebrations, to pursue justice as an integral part of that journey, and to decolonise our communities and realities. These points are also so well captured in the sub-themes of your conference, namely, Ecclesial Synchrony: Oneness in Faith, Witness and With-ness, Biocentric Solidarity: Covenantal Bond for Cosmic Wholeness, and Cybergenic Synergy: Envisioning Humanity and Digital Wellness.

The Nicene Faith: A Living Testament to Enduring Truth

When we reflect on the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and the formulation of the Nicene Creed, we are not merely engaging with a historical relic or an ancient theological formula. We are reminded of the living faith it represents—a faith that testifies to the truth of Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son of God, who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Creed, formulated in AD 325, affirms Christ's divinity and humanity, and it expresses the unity of the Triune God, inviting us into a shared confession of faith. The Nicene Creed is a reminder and call to oneness in Faith. To this day, this is the faith shared by most, if not all, Christians, despite their confessional, denominational, cultural, and other backgrounds. We might not recite the Nicene Creed, or we might use different versions of it, but we all stand behind the faith in the Divine and Holy Trinity, expressed in it. However, the significance of the Nicene Creed extends far beyond doctrinal boundaries. More than a set of intellectual propositions, it is a faith that calls us to embodiment—a faith to be lived in our communities, in our actions, as individuals and churches, and in our witness. This leads us to the first invitation of Nicaea: How do we live our faith in action? How do we, as theologians and as the Church, ensure that the faith we confess does not remain abstract but becomes incarnate in our daily lives? From Creed to Deed: The Invitation to Embody Faith through Action. The first invitation that Nicaea offers us is to live our faith through action. It is a call to witness together. The Nicene Creed is a unifying thread that has bound Christian communities across centuries and continents. Yet, it is not merely a statement to be recited; it is a call to action. In a world filled with suffering, injustice, and division, we are challenged to move from creed to deed. The faith we confess must shape the way we live, the way we respond to the brokenness of the world, and the way we embody the love of Christ in tangible, transformative ways. This call to action is pressing in the Asian context, where many communities face the daily realities of poverty, migration, religious

pluralism, and systemic injustice. As people of faith, we are called to explore how the Nicene faith inspires movements for peace, justice, and reconciliation in such a context. How do we live out the truth that Christ is Lord in a world where many suffer under oppression and inequality? The connection between "right belief" and "right action" is essential here. The faith we proclaim must not remain in the realm of theological discourse alone. It must translate into concrete action that reflects God's justice and compassion as we address the numerous injustices in the world, such as economic, gender, climate, and digital injustices. In the words of the apostle James, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Nicaea invites us to consider ways in which our faith comes alive through works of mercy, justice, reconciliation, and peace. It invites us to reflect on and respond to injustices here in the Asian context.

Pilgrimage and Synodality: Journeying Together in Faith

The second invitation of Nicaea is the invitation to journey together, not as isolated communities, but as a fellowship. The very word synod, which has defined the original gathering of Christians at Nicaea, comes from the Greek word *synodoi,* meaning "those on the same journey together." This describes the call to With-ness. This image of journeying resonates deeply within the ecumenical movement. In the WCC, we speak of churches journeying together on the pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity. Therefore, synodality, or journeying together as the people of God, reflects this communal aspect of our faith. It reminds us that our journey is not an individual endeavour but a shared pilgrimage. The early church gathered at Nicaea to discern the truth of the Gospel together, and today, we are called to continue that pilgrimage. As we embark on this journey, we are confronted with challenges that test our commitment to unity. Division, both within the church and within society, can hinder our progress. Yet, the invitation of Nicaea is to persevere, to seek unity even in the midst of diversity and disagreement. Our pilgrimage is not static. It is dynamic, constantly moving forward as we discern together what it means to live out the faith of the apostles in our present context.

Conciliar Fellowship: Living the Apostolic Faith in Community

The third invitation of Nicaea is to seek unity among the churches, and to do so in a conciliar way, reflecting the original spirit of Nicaea. At the First Ecumenical Council in AD 325, bishops gathered to discern the truth of the Gospel together, embodying the principle of conciliarity—a model of decision-making through mutual discernment and shared accountability.

This practice of coming together to seek the mind of Christ remains inspiring today as it was nearly 1700 years ago. For decades, the World Council of Churches has embraced this model of conciliar fellowship, striving to embody mutual commitment while pursuing the ultimate goal of full visible unity. As we reflect on the legacy of Nicaea and our ongoing ecumenical journey, we must ask ourselves: "Where now for visible unity?" Nicaea embedded in the consciousness of the Church a vision of one, unified Body of Christ. This vision has remained the guiding force in our quest for visible unity and continues to challenge us to bridge divisions. In October 2025, the WCC will commemorate the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea with the Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order, exploring the theme "Where Now for Visible Unity?" This global gathering will offer a platform to reflect on how we can live out the apostolic faith in our diverse contexts, and how we can continue to journey on the pilgrimage of unity. In Asia, where Christians coexist alongside numerous other religious traditions, the call to unity carries particular significance. The challenge is to live the faith of the apostles with humility, respect, and openness, while remaining faithful to the truth of Christ. This means balancing our commitment to the Gospel with a readiness to engage constructively with the complexities of pluralism and secularism. The vision of Nicaea challenges us not just to affirm unity in words but to embody it in how we live and witness together as one body of Christ.

A Common Date for Easter: A Visible Sign of Unity

The fourth invitation of Nicaea is to offer visible signs of unity, perhaps most powerfully through the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. One of the most enduring symbols of Christian unity is our shared celebration of Easter, the central event of our faith. And yet, here too, we find division, as different Christian traditions celebrate Easter on different dates. The quest for a common date for Easter, which played a significant role in the convocation of the Council of Nicaea, remains a powerful symbol of our desire for unity. As we approach the year 2025, this endeavour takes on new significance. In 2025, as you know, all Christians worldwide will celebrate Easter together. I believe we are called to use this momentum to imagine the powerful witness it would be if Christians around the world, in every tradition, celebrated the resurrection of Christ on the same day every year. Such a united celebration would not only affirm our shared faith but also serve as a visible sign of the unity we seek. I believe that this call for a common celebration is particularly important in

a multi-religious context, such as that of Asia, where Christians constitute a religious minority in many countries. A united Easter celebration would be a profound testament to the power of Christ's victory over death and a visible witness to the world of the unity of His body, the Church. Nicaea invites us to ask: How can we, as a fellowship of churches, work together to offer this visible sign of unity to the world?

Seeking Justice and Unity: A Dual Mission

As we journey towards visible unity, we must also recognise that this journey is inseparable from the pursuit of justice. The Nicene faith is a testimony to the profound mystery of the incarnation— the reality of the Son of God who became fully human. In taking on humanity, Christ did not remain distant or detached from the struggles and sufferings of the world. Instead, He entered into its brokenness, embracing its pain and offering a way toward reconciliation and redemption. This incarnational reality is central to our faith and speaks powerfully to our call to serve humanity and all creation. The Nicene Creed's acknowledgement of God as "maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible" is a sure indication of covenantal bond and interconnectedness that binds humanity with the entire ecological system. Therefore, incarnation presents us with an ongoing invitation to embody God's love and justice in the world. This divine act of solidarity with humanity and creation calls the church to a similar commitment—to step into the world's suffering and injustices, not as passive observers but as active agents of healing and reconciliation.

We are called to care for creation, proclaim justice and serve as responsible stewards. In this sense, our service to humanity is not an optional addition to our faith but an essential expression of it. The journey toward unity, therefore, cannot be separated from the journey toward justice. The same Christ who prayed for the unity of His followers also preached the coming of God's Kingdom—a Kingdom marked by love, peace, and righteousness. Moreover, the incarnation reveals that every person bears the image of God and is worthy of dignity, care, and justice. This means that our commitment to unity must encompass a commitment to transforming the unjust systems and structures that continue to harm and dehumanise people. The pursuit of visible unity is, therefore, not just about bridging theological or institutional divides within the church but about reflecting the incarnate love of Christ through concrete actions that promote justice, dignity, and reconciliation. Our unity in Christ must

be demonstrated through a united commitment to serve, heal, and uplift the suffering and vulnerable in our communities and beyond. And this is why we speak of the pilgrimage of justice and unity. In that regard, Nicaea invites us to ask: How can we ensure that our quest for unity is always linked with our commitment to justice? How can we embody a Nicene faith that seeks justice for the oppressed, liberation for the marginalised, and dignity for all people?

Decolonising Church Practices and Theological Imagination

As we reflect on the Council of Nicaea, we must also confront the colonial legacies that have shaped Christian history, particularly in regions like Asia. Although Nicaea was convoked by an emperor, its faith was discerned and decided by Christian bishops. This distinction urges us to ask: How does the Council of Nicaea speak to our current efforts to decolonise Christianity? For many churches, the spread of Christianity is intertwined with the painful history of colonialism. In this context, Nicaea presents us with a fifth invitation: the call to decolonise our church realities and theological imagination. Colonialism often imposed uniformity at the expense of diversity, marginalising indigenous voices and local expressions of faith. Though initiated as an imperial council, Nicaea invites us to reclaim it not as a symbol of rigid orthodoxy or "the faith of the Empire," but as a moment of conciliar discernment—a gathering of the global church to listen, learn, and honour the diverse ways God's truth is revealed across cultures. This invitation challenges us to ask: How have colonial legacies shaped our understanding of the Nicene faith? How can we decolonise our theologies to better reflect the richness of diverse Christian expressions? It compels us to dismantle lingering colonial structures in theology and practice, to elevate the voices of theologians from the Global South, and to allow the Nicene faith to take root in local contexts. Ultimately, this invitation is about embracing a unity that celebrates cultural diversity, ensuring that the Gospel is a force for liberation rather than oppression. By doing so, we allow Nicaea to inspire a faith that honours the dignity, freedom, and humanity of all peoples.

Conclusion

As we reflect on Nicaea's enduring legacy, we see that it offers us more than doctrinal clarity or historical memory—it presents us with profound invitations to shape our collective present and future. Nicaea calls us to live our faith through actions, to journey together in conciliar fellowship, and to seek visible unity, not least through shared celebrations. But these

commitments cannot stand alone. They must be firmly linked with our dedication to justice and the decolonisation of our theological imagination. In a world marked by division, injustice, and lingering colonial legacies, the Nicene faith challenges us to embody Christ's incarnational love by pursuing justice for the oppressed, reconciliation among all people, and unity of all Christians. It calls us to uplift the dignity and humanity of every person, ensuring that our quest for unity is rooted in compassion and inclusivity. In this spirit, may the echoes of Nicaea continue to inspire us to journey together in faith, serve as agents of justice, and embrace a unity that reflects the love and mercy of Christ in the Asian context and to the world.

The Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X)

Thematic Keynote Address

Why should Asian theologians wrestle with the Council of Nicaea?

J. Jayakiran Sebastian

1. Introduction

I am really pleased that we have gathered here at this time as Asian theologians to listen to "Echoes of Nicaea" and to examine "Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity", and to offer "Asian Ecumenical Responses." This gathering certainly invites us to a rich banquet of theological, ecclesial, hermeneutical, sociological, and ecumenical reflections, drawing us collectively to an honest and enriching discussion and interrogation of events that have impacted the life and witness of the church from 1700 years. A brand-new book investigates the material remains of the purported place where the Council was held and examines the material remains of what the writer asserts is "the birthplace of Christian theology."[1] While this seems to be an exaggeration since one can make the case that Christian theology was born three centuries before Nicaea, there is something to ponder upon here in terms of what I call attempts to formalise Christian teaching and Christian theology seen in Trinitarian terms, recognising, of course, that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was left open at that time, to be filled in during those years of tumultuous ferment leading up to the Council of Constantinople in 381. At the same time, one has to reckon with what is seen as the "fall" of the church, given the nexus between the empire and the church at the Council of Nicaea and beyond. Daniel H. Williams writes: "The fourth century saw that moment in ecclesiastical history when the context and community of Christian faith was radically changed once a Roman emperor adopted its beliefs and lived long enough to politically enforce its way of expressing those beliefs."[2]

It is also an obligation on our part to consider and respond to the query as to whether, in "receiving Nicaea", we ought to consider if we also have received and implicitly accepted the narrative of the winners. I have spent a lot of time and energy in my own work on the early teachers of faith, including in my published doctoral dissertation on the baptismal controversy in Cyprian of Carthage,[3] developing the principle of "reaching

back in order to move forward", and also on ways of "enlivening the past", which forms the title of my other book, the subtitle of which is "An Asian Theologian's Engagement with the Early Teachers of Faith."[4] I concluded the book with these words: "reaching back in order to move forward would imply that one needs to problematise the present and in so doing one needs to understand and represent the past in order to shape the future."[5]

All this leads us to ask about the role of the past in the present, and that is what this gathering is all about. We gather together, driven by the desire for unity—unity in mission, unity in witness[6]—to ask about the construction of the past in the present, not least the reality of past theological controversies and debates in the life of Asian Christians and indeed in Asia itself. The Bulgarian winner of the International Booker Prize 2023 for his novel *Time Shelter*, Georgi Gospodinov, in looking at the past, wrote:

Does the past disintegrate, or does it remain practically unchanged like plastic bags, slowly and deeply poisoning everything around itself? Shouldn't there be factories for recycling the past somewhere? Can you make anything else out of the past, besides the past? Could it be recycled in reverse into some kind of future, albeit second-hand? Now, these are some questions for you.

Among the questions that we Asian theologians need to ask is the question about whether Nicaea should in any way determine our own theological quest, a rather odd question to ask, one may say, given that the purpose of this gathering is to commemorate Nicaea! How do we respond to the point made by a formidable patristics scholar of a previous generation, Robert Grant, who wrote about the need to "free ourselves from the belief that either Nicaea or Chalcedon was predestined."[7] Not all churches represented here have bound their theology inextricably to Nicaea, and the reality is that churches represented here diverge on post-Nicaean developments, including the events leading up to and beyond the Council of Chalcedon in 451[8] and the emergence of the *filioque* clause in Western Latin theology that have intensely engaged ecumenical conversations at multiple levels, most recently in the "Common Statement on the Filioque" coming from "The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church" on May 27th this year.[9] But I get ahead of myself and the reason for our gathering, which is to look back at an event that continues to reverberate, directly and indirectly, and impacts our identity

as Asian Christians today in so many different ways, sometimes clearly seen and sometimes more opaquely, and so my focus now will be on how we can as Asian Christians wrestle with the Council of Nicaea. I want to offer five ways of dealing with this.

2. Nicaea and the History of the Church in Asia

As anyone who has taught or studied Asian Christian theology and the history of the church in Asia can attest, getting a handle on what Asia is is a herculean task and almost impossible to get a clear answer, even in geographical terms.[10] Some ecumenical international church organisations have bundled up things in talking about "Asia-Pacific", but does this help or complicate matters further? What about "Asia-Atlantic"? Or what about the Asianness of Asia? Is there a way of encapsulating that in terms of food, clothes, climate, shared histories, or ethnicity? An attempt to answer this question reveals the absurdity of essentialising "Asianness" and yet, here we are, celebrating our diversity and, at the same time, seeing in the faces of one another, not strangers but fellow-sojourners and fellow-explorers of the Nicaean legacy, whether we come from the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, or Pentecostal traditions, or others that are hybrids of these broad categories, or even fall outside these over-simplified umbrella terms that often do not do justice to the involvedness of our faith-identities within the Christian fold, not to say anything about the reality that many of us personify manifold religious belongings and assorted denominational belonging in who we are and from where we come. As Asian Christians who, for the most part, affirm our baptismal identity as a primary step in our Christian belonging to Christ and to Christ's Church, Nicaea offers us much to think about, given that the Roman emperor Constantine was now playing the role of imperial patron of the church and in the decade leading up to the council of Nicaea, it was his "intent to end all arguing about the 'god-ness' of Christ" and the wrangling between Arius and those who opposed some of his views didn't help the imperial desire for theological uniformity and clarity.[11] What all this led to at the council was "voting about God"[12] by a large group of Eastern bishops, with hardly anyone from the Latin West. Canon 19 of the Council has a direct reference to the followers of Paul of Samosata, bishop of the church of Antioch around 260, the "first theologian known to have used the word *homoousios* in Christian discourse,"[13] and says, "Concerning the Paulianists who have come over to the Catholic Church, the decision is that they must by all means be baptised again …"[14] This itself is an outcome of the baptismal controversy that tore the Church

apart in the middle of the previous century, as exemplified in the writings of Cyprian of Carthage, leading to questions of the "boundaries" of the church only within which it was claimed that the Holy Spirit operated. How then could those judged to be outside claim the efficacy of baptism? Is all this taking us far from our urgent work today as Asian theologians, or is all this underlying our own work, and if so, why and how? Can we just shrug our shoulders and "move on" or should we put our shoulders to the wheel of Nicaea and play our own part in continuing to unpack those long-ago events and disputes and offer our own perceptive and particular contributions to scholarship, not all of which is abstract but basic to our Asian understandings of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church?

3. Nicaea and Linguistic Analysis

The outstanding African-American scholar, Robert Hood, posed a very poignant question in one of his books, namely, "*Must God Remain Greek?*"[15] and we need to ask as to what extent the Nicene Creed must remain Greek, even as we consider the implications of language, linguistics, and translation in the shaping of our Christian imagination and our conceptualisation of God and Jesus Christ. To what extent is it incumbent upon us to understand the phraseology of the Creed in the context, which includes the metaphysical and philosophical terminology used to come up with this compromise formula, and to reckon with the way the Creed has "travelled" across time and space and embodied itself in our theological, liturgical, and devotional language, not to say anything about hymnody? Are we still banging our heads together on these and related theological issues just as the emperor Constantine, seeking to bring uniformity to the empire, considered the Arian controversy "a nuisance to be removed ahead of the council" and sought to overcome this "by writing to Alexander of Alexandria and Arius and banging their heads together" as the German academic, Wolfram Kinzig, colourfully puts it?[16] Banging heads together can only result in headaches or worse, so how best can we use the linguistic tools that we as Asian theologians possess, not only in Greek, Latin, and Syriac, but in the multitude of languages that are either our mother tongues or languages that we have mastered? Let me give you one example, and that is the phrase "ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί" which in my mother tongue, Kannada, is translated "*tande tatava vū* ītana *tatava vū ondē*". What is the linguistic domain of *tatava*? The German philologist-missionary from the Basel Mission, Ferdinand Kittel, in his monumental work, *A Kannada-English Dictionary*, looks at this

word and says that it connotes "the state of being that: true state, real state: reality, truth: essential nature: the very essence: the real nature of the human soul as being one and the same with the universal soul." This obviously draws on ancient Hindu philosophy, and Kittel also notes this when he points to its provenance in the literary and religious traditions.[17] The well-known formula "*tat tvam asi"*, translated as "That thou art", now raises the question as to whether the knowledge of Sanskrit in my own context is needed to unpack the meaning of the Nicene Creed and begs the question as to whether we can engage in God-talk only if we know Sanskrit? Obviously, opinions are sharply divided about the need for mastering the languages of those who were responsible for one's marginalisation or using such skills in smashing the power of the oppressors.[18]

4. Nicaea and the Marginalised Realities Today

While all this may seem esoteric and far-removed from the messy realities of marginalised and suffering people in our own contexts, does Nicaea have anything to do with communities like the one I am most familiar with, the Dalit communities in India, including those who taught me what theology was all about when I served as a pastor straight out of theological seminary with five congregations of the Gauribidanur Pastorate of the Karnataka Central Diocese of the Church of South India, from mid-1984 to mid-1986?

Drawing on what I experienced, in an essay on the methodology of Dalit theology, one of the things that I stressed was that the traditional understanding(s) of religion, religious practices, the "why" of conversion, religious "objects", the instrumentality of worship and the liturgy, the importance given to the mediation of priests and those believed to have access to the numinous, have to be investigated using methodological tools that recognise that so-called academic "respectable" modes of inquiry not only have serious in-built shortcomings and overt and covert "prejudices", but that such modes of inquiry are deliberately skewed against the knowledge-praxis of the modes of inquiry of those marginalised communities, whose very marginalisation was actively promoted by such "scholarship."[19]

As theologians and public faith practitioners in this context of religious pluralism, most notably explored by Stanley Samartha,[20] and economic disparities, all impacted massively by new ways of interconnectedness and interdependence, where a small handheld device can contain worlds

within worlds, where everything I say can be checked or questioned, responded to or disparaged in real time, I am wondering what a revised Asian theology of liberation would look like, without undermining the importance of the work by Aloysius Pieris, who reminded us that "contemplation and action can be vitiated by self-seeking, by a veiled refusal to drink of the chalice of Christ or to undergo the baptism of the cross."[21]

5. Nicaea and the Future of the Church

It is fascinating that even as we talk about Nicaea and its legacy, we are also bound by the reality that we as a people claim to be those who are gathered into believing communities as a consequence of the person and work of Christ and assert that our foundational documents are found in the Bible. It is in the same century that saw the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople that the books of the New Testament gradually came to gain ascendancy in various communities through complex processes, resulting in what is called the 'canonisation' of scripture. This has implications for Asian Christian theology and also for the ongoing process of Biblical studies and interpretation, a task in which Asian scholars have excelled. We would do well to take the admonition of R. S. Sugirtharajah seriously when he writes that the often-complacent claim of Asians and others that their interpretations are an 'alternative discourse' may send a wrong signal. Such an assertion takes for granted a persisting and undisturbed preeminence of Western interpretation without making a serious and significant dent in it. It makes more sense to speak of a 'coterminous' rather than merely an 'alternative' or 'derivative' discourse, with the same scope and range of meanings as the dominant Western scholarship.[22]

When it comes to the Bible, we continue to wrestle with what Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon call "Bible blind spots." They invite us to "reassess how and what we read in the Bible, as well as how and why we see the Bible as authoritative."[23] The range of creative interpretative writings, including from Asia, brought together by these scholars, and by R. S. Sugirtharajah and Kwok Pui-lan, are impressive and eye-opening. In one such collection that brings together "Third World and indigenous scholars and theologians", Kwok Pui-lan writes about how the collection "testifies to the strength of their Christian faith and the resilience of the human spirit. Their words and actions offer us a rare gift – hope abundant."[24]

6. Nicaea and Life Together as Churches in Asia

In talking about the imperatives today for Asian Christians, R. S. Sugirtharajah pointedly states that the "crucial hermeneutical question is not what the historical Jesus looked like but what he means for Asia today."[25] As we pay attention to the "echoes of Nicaea", the theological and ecclesial priorities for us today include allowing the convictions of that time to continue to permeate our life together even as we pursue the ecumenical dream of embracing unity. These priorities include:

- recognising how Nicaea named Mary in the Creed and linked her with the Holy Spirit in terms of the incarnation of Jesus and asking ourselves as to how we have dealt with tokenisation, mansplaining, leadership realities, not least in liturgical and ecclesial functions, the consequences of the feminisation of poverty, family displacement and forcible separation, the impact of migration on women and girls, the use of mass media and social media to objectify women. Given that women are invisible in the Council itself in terms of participants and in the historical reports, how best can this fleeting mention of Mary serve today as a challenge and opportunity to those of us gathered here representing a variety and range of churches, traditions and denominations, to magnify and affirm the parity of human beings in every aspect of our existence as religious beings? What does this mean in terms of recognising Jesus, born of Mary, as "the crucified people"[26] in Asian testimonies and affirmations and lamentations?

- recognising how Nicaea named Pontius Pilate in the Creed and linked him to Jesus' crucifixion, and asking ourselves as to how we deal with the persistence of evil in our political, economic, social, cultural, interpretative, and ecclesial structures and systems? To what extent have we been conforming to the world and not seeking to actively transform it? What would transformation look like when it comes to realities like status, position, prestige, pomp, power, and the attribution of value? How do we understand the words in the Creed about suffering and being buried and rising and coming again? Have we been faithful to how all these are interconnected? Who is the one whom we await if not the suffering and dying One, the One who "sits on the right hand of the Father", the One who will "come again in glory", glory that bears within it the horror of the cross and the evil intentions of those who would seek to crush the One who "came down from heaven" for us and for "our salvation"?

- recognising how Nicaea affirms God's creation as including things "visible and invisible", asking ourselves about our place in the immensity of the macro and the invisibility of the micro. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic[27] has forced us to confront the unexpected but always present reality of death, which is characterised as "the most absolute of absolutes", which "is, in fact, a relative balance between the forces of decay and rejuvenation."[28] How do we practice a theology of humility given that the God of all creation is also the One who "for us and for our salvation came down from the heavens"? Have we affirmed an anthropology of human-centric triumphalism, and if so, what does it take to recognise the challenge of the Creed to "put us in place", so to speak, within the world of nature and all that God has made?

- recognising how Nicaea affirms God's reign as not having an "end" (τέλος), what then are we commemorating now? Not 1700 years as having an end in the churches, denominations, and traditions that we embody and represent, but a dynamic end calling us to revisit and re-energise and revitalise the Nicene Creed, a creed that offers us a vision of enduring and dynamic faith and of unity that can be embraced. Together we can use our histories, theologies, liturgies, ecclesial structures, human ingenuity, as well as the faith-commitments of the religions and religious quests of our neighbours, whether they be antagonistic or affirming of our own faith-journeys, all fragments gathered up and offered as our ecumenical response to the perfect completeness of God who draws us into the life of the world to come.

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[1] Mark R. Fairchild, *The Underwater Basilica of Nicaea: Archaeology in the Birthplace of Christian Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 2024)

[2] Daniel H. Williams, "Constantine, Nicaea, and the 'Fall' of the Church," in Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones, eds., *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community* (Routledge, 1998), pp. 117 – 136, here on p. 117.

[3] J. Jayakiran Sebastian, *"... baptisma unum in sancta ecclesia...": A Theological Appraisal of the Baptismal Controversy in the Work and Writings of Cyprian of Carthage* (Ammesbek bei Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek (Peter Jensen), 1997, and ISPCK, Delhi, 1997).

[4] J. Jayakiran Sebastian, *Enlivening the Past: An Asian Theologian's Engagement with the Early Teachers of Faith* (Gorgias Press, 2009).

[5] *Enlivening the Past*, p. 176.

[6] See my "Revitalizing the Fading Ecumenical Memory and Reenergizing the Promise of our Ecumenical Future: Can Ecumenism be Taught?" in Peter Casarella and Gabriel Said Reynolds, eds., *The Whole Is Greater Than Its Parts: Encountering*

the Interreligious and Ecumenical Other in the Age of Pope Francis (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company/Herder & Herder, 2020), pp. 141 – 156 and "Estranging the Stranger? Revisions and Re-visioning Ecumenical Missiology," in Michael Biehl et al., *Witnessing Christ: Contextual and Interconfessional Perspectives on Christology* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020), pp. 63 – 69.

[7] Robert M. Grant, *Jesus After the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 14. As a BD student in the early 1980's at the United Theological College, Bengaluru, I was greatly impacted by his earlier brilliant article that enabled me to understand church-state relationships in a new way, "Religion and Politics at the Council at Nicaea." *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 55 (1975), pp. 1- 12.

[8] See *Does Chalcedon divide or unite? Towards convergence in Orthodox Christology*, eds. Paulos Gregorios, William H. Lazareth, Nikos A. Nissiotis (World Council of Churches, 1981). One should never forget the brilliant book by V. C. Samuel, *The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined* (Christian Literature Society, 1977).

[9] The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Lutheran-Orthodox-Joint-Statement-Filioque-EN.pdf

[10] A valiant attempt was made by the Princeton Theological Seminary historian who was born to missionary parents in what is now North Korea, Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume I – Beginnings to 1500* (Orbis Books, 1998), and, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume II – 1500 – 1900* (Orbis Books, 2005).

[11] For an outstanding reassessment of the life and work and legacy of Arius see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 2002).

[12] Ramsy MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (Yale University Press, 2006), with the quote on p. 27.

[13] See the entry "Paul of Samosata" in John McGuckin, *The SCM Press A – Z of Patristic Theology*, 2nd ed. (SCM Press, 2005), pp. 255 – 256, here on p. 255. Also see Andreas Weckwerth, "The Twenty Canons of the Council of Nicaea," in Young Richard Kim, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 158 – 176, with the discussion on Paul of Samosata and his followers on pp. 171 – 172.

[14] Translation in J. Stevenson, ed., revised with additional documents by W. H. C. Frend, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337* (SPCK 1987), p. 323.

[15] Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Fortress Press, 1990).

[16] Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (De Gruyter, 2024), p. 219.

[17] Rev. F. Kittel, *A Kannada-English Dictionary* (Mangalore: Basel Mission Book and Tract Depository, 1894), p. 686.

[18] I note that many of the ancient Hindu scriptures contained in the Vedas were edited and translated by that outstanding theologian, Raimundo Panikkar, who embodied hybridity in his own being. See *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari* (Pondicherry: All India Books, 1983 [1977]

[19] "'Can We Now Bypass That Truth?' – Interrogating the Methodology of Dalit Theology," in *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, issue on 'Methodologies,' Vol. 25, No. 2 – 3 (April/July 2008), pp. 80 – 91, here on p. 88. [This article has also been published in James Massey and Indukur John Mohan Razu, eds., *Revisiting and Resignifying Methodology for Dalit Theology* (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies and Bangalore: United Theological College, 2008), pp. 93 – 115; *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research*, Issue 29, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan. – June 2009), pp. 75 – 83; David Emmanuel Singh and Bernard C. Farr, eds., *Christianity and Education: Shaping Christian Thinking in Context*, Regnum Studies in Global Christianity (Oxford: Regnum International, 2011), pp. 263 – 275; and in *Archivio Teologico Torinese*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2012), pp. 225 – 239].

[20] S. J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions: Toward a Revised* Christology [1991] third Indian ed. (Orbis Books/Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute, 2000).

[21] Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1988), p. 8.

[22] R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Asia: From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial* Age (Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 262 – 263.

[23] Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Spotlighting the Bible's Blind(ing) Spots, in Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, eds., *Bible Blindspots: Dispersion and Othering* (Pickwick Publications, 2021), p. 14, where they also point out that in "response to the global events of Covid-19, climate change and #BLM, reading for dispersed and othered bodies is unfinished business."

[24] Kwok Pui-lan, "Introduction," in Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* (Orbis Books, 2010), p. 13.

[25] In his "Prologue and Perspective" to R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Asian Faces of Jesus* (SCM Press, 1993), p. x.

[26] C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Fortress Press, 1996).

[27] See my "The Twenty Seventh M. A. Thomas Memorial Lecture (2020): Ecumenism and the Pandemic: Seven Challenges and Seven Opportunities Today," in Mathew Chandrankunnel, ed., *Rev. Dr. M. A. Thomas' Memorial Lectures – Twenty-Seven Years of Lectures on the Founder of the Ecumenical Christian Centre, 1993 – 2020* (Bangalore: Ecumenical Christian Centre Publications, 2021), p. 381 – 394. [Also published with a different Introduction as "The Promise of the Single Contralto," in Vinod Victor, ed., *Quilling our Visions, Weaving our Dreams: A Festschrift to Rini Ralte* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2021), pp. 16 – 27.]

[28] Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Song of The Cell: An Exploration of Medicine and the New Human* (Scribner, 2022), p. 348.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, and the Role of the Coptic Orthodox Church

Bishop Daniel

1. The Coptic Orthodox Church since its establishment and now:

Saint Mark the Apostle was the one who established the Coptic Orthodox Church. Pope Shenouda III wrote: "No home had more fame than St Mark's home. It was there where our Lord Jesus Christ observed the Passover with his pure disciples. There He washed their feet and gave them His Covenant, His Holy Body and Blood. That was where the disciples hid before the resurrection. In it, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, and they spoke in tongues. This great home was the first Christian Church, and its most upper room was the famous Zion chamber."[1] Saint Mark preached Christianity in Alexandria, and he ordained a bishop, priests, and deacons, as R. Morgan mentioned: "The pagans then began to conspire against him. Saint Mark perceived the danger that was brewing, and he rapidly appointed Anianos as bishop, and appointed three priests and seven deacons from the faithful."[2]

The Coptic Orthodox Church was established first in Alexandria. Birger A. Pearson wrote: "While I think it is possible that Christian (and Jewish) Gnostics could be found in first-century Alexandria, it is more likely, prima facie, to suppose that other, more dominant, varieties of Christianity existed there, more reflective of the Jerusalem origins of the Christian mission and of the dominant varieties of Judaism in Alexandria at that time".[3] In addition, in the first century, a Jewish priest, scholar, and historian, Flavius Josephus, mentioned that in the first century, a third of the Alexandrian population were Jews.

1.1: The history of Christianity in Egypt begins in the first century with the visit of the Holy Family to Egypt,[4] escaping from King Herod; the Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates this occasion on the 1st of June every year.

1.2: Christianity was introduced into Egypt on a small scale.[5] Before Saint Mark, it was mentioned in the Book of Acts 2:10 that there were some Jews of Egypt who were present at Pentecost. Also, there is another piece of evidence in the Book of Acts 18:24-28, the Alexandrian Jew, Apollos, who became a Christian and preached in Ephesus.

Saint Mark the Apostle converted Anianus,[6] who was considered the first converted person from the Pagans' worship to the worship of Christ and

became a Christian. Later, Saint Mark ordained him as the second Pope of Alexandria. From then on, the preaching of Christianity continued in Egypt till now.

2. What are the beliefs of the Coptic Orthodox Church?

The Faith of our Coptic Orthodox Church is: Apostolic, Trinitarian, Mystical, Sacramental, and Ascetic.

What are the remarkable characteristics of the Coptic Orthodox Church?

The Coptic Orthodox Church is an Apostolic Church, as the founder of it was one of the Seventy Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, Saint Mark. Also, Saint Mark is one of the four Evangelists,[7] and Saint Mark is regarded by the Coptic Orthodox Church hierarchy as the first of our 118 unbroken lineage. Some of the great theologians[8] were from the Coptic Orthodox Church, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril, and this is because of the amazing vision of Saint Mark, who established the first ever Theological School in Alexandria. The Coptic Orthodox Church is the church of Martyrs, wrote Levi Joshua Klempner. "The Coptic Church has long anchored itself to the rock of martyrdom. Its Coptic calendar constantly reminds the believers of the past examples set by martyrs. The first year of the Coptic calendar is pegged to the epoch of the enthronement of Emperor Diocletian in AD 284, who is known to have headed the last major wave of Roman anti-Christian persecution and who sent many martyrs to their deaths".[9]

The Coptic Orthodox Church is the founder of Monasticism in the whole world. Saint Athanasius wrote: "Saint Anthony, the ideal of monastic life, is presented as someone who literally fulfils what the gospel says. Anthony first hears when the apostles leave all to follow Our Lord and how the early Christians sold their goods and placed them at the apostles' feet. He does the same. In his early ascetic life, we have constant references to the gospel and scriptures, and the first section concludes with him imitating Elijah and holding the prophet as an example for all hermits."[10]

3. **What were the reasons for the assembly of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?**

There were many reasons, but the main reason was the heresy of Arius (born c. 250 or 260[11] in Libya – died 336 in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), i.e. his age was 86 or 76),[12] a Christian priest in Alexandria, who believed that: "The Son of God (Christ) is not equal to the Father." He went further and said that the Son of God is not co-eternal or co-existent

with the Father.[13] Arius also claimed that Christ was created rather than being divine.[14]

Arius also denied that Christ was "of one substance with the Father".[15] The reason behind the heresy of Arius was his previous studies under Lucian of Antioch, who introduced him to suspicious teachings of a Gnostic nature.[16] Arius based his teachings on a number of Biblical texts, including: "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), and He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation (Col. 1:1).

Arius believed that God created the Son because God wanted to create the world, and as the nature of God can't create the material world directly, God created the Logos to create the world, and according to Arius, the Son is a mediator between God and the world.[17]

Based on Arius' teachings, a great division arose which shocked the whole church and the Roman Empire.[18]

Where did the First Ecumenical Council take place?

The First Ecumenical Council (FEC) was convened in Nicaea, in the Roman province of Bithynia, on 14th June AD 325, as decided by the Roman emperor, Constantine the Great (27th February AD 272 – 22nd May AD 337), in his 65th year. He was a polytheist till the age of 40 and then converted to Christianity in the year 312.[19] He spent the last 25 years of his life as a Christian.

Who was the chairperson of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

The First Ecumenical Council was opened by Emperor Constantine I himself.[20] Bishop Hosius of Corduba in Spain presided over the FEC.[21]

How many church representatives attended the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

Constantine invited all 1800 bishops of Christendom: 1000 bishops from the East and 800 bishops from the West, but only between 250 to 350 attended, and there were two opinions on the exact number of attendance; Eusebius of Caesarea believed they were 250, Eustathius of Antioch mentioned they were 270; however, according to Athanasius, the assistant of Pope Alexander I (the 19th Pope), the number of bishops in attendance was 318.[22]

What was the duration of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

The FEC was officially opened on the 20th of May and ended on the 25th of August in the year AD 325, in Nicaea.

5. The role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea:

Before the assembly of the First Ecumenical Council:

The heresy of Arius started in Alexandria, where he started to gather on his side bishops, presbyters, and deacons.[23] This was recorded in a letter by Pope Alexander, the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch XIX, in his letter to the fellow ministers of the universal Church in every place.

Pope Alexander of Alexandria gathered a council in Alexandria in the year AD 319 and examined the teachings of Arius, and warned him and his followers of their wrong teachings about the Divinity of Christ. But Arius did not listen. Pope Alexander then gathered another Council from the Bishops of Egypt and Libya[24] in Alexandria in the year AD 321 and anathematised Arius and those on his side from the Church.[25]

In the year AD 322, the followers of Arius gathered a council in Bethania and then another council in Palestine in the year AD 323 and rejected the anathematisation of Pope Alexander against Arius.[26]

Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia supported the teachings of Arius,[27] and he built a very close relationship with Constancia, the sister of the Emperor Constantine. Through her, the Emperor was convinced that the teachings of Arius were right. Then, in AD 324, the Emperor sent his close friend Hosius, the Bishop of Carthage, to Alexandria to try to mediate between Arius and Pope Alexander. However, the mediation failed because of the violence of the followers of Arius. Hosius, the Bishop, was convinced of the decisions of Pope Alexander and told the Emperor the wish of Pope Alexander to call for an Ecumenical Council under the supervision of the Emperor to offer an apologetic response against Arius. Hosius, the Bishop, was in support of the request of Pope Alexander, and the Emperor agreed.[28]

Some challenges before the gathering of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea:

The administration of the Council:

Who will be the chairperson of the Council? According to Saint Athanasius,[29] Bishop Hosius of Carthage was the one who chaired the sessions of the FEC. The bishops objected to the attendance of Athanasius, the secretary of Pope Alexander, as he was a deacon. To solve this issue, Pope Alexander ordained Athanasius a Priest.[30] Athanasius, who became the

20th Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church and wrote a very valuable book against Arianism, said: "If the Logos did not exist eternally with the Father, then the Holy Trinity will not be eternal as well".[31] Who signed the decisions of the FEC? At the beginning, 300 agreed to sign, and then another 18 bishops were convinced, and 2 bishops refused, so the total number of bishops' signatures was 318.[32]

The threat of the spirit of divisions that Arius posed before the gathering of the FEC:

Arius started to publish many false letters to deceive the simple people with his teachings. Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, started to convince the emperor about the big divisions between the bishops concerning the teachings of Arius. Arius started to spread his teachings among the consecrated sisters in Egypt, and he gathered around him 700 sisters.[33] The teachings of Arius also reached the monks, which made Saint Anthony the Great warn his monks from following the teachings of Arius.[34]

How many members from the Coptic Orthodox Church attended the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

Pope Alexander, the 19th Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark, accompanied by 20 Coptic Orthodox bishops[35] (although some sources put the number of the bishops representing the Egyptian Church at 15),[36] along with the deacon of the Pope, Athanasius, attended the FEC. Athanasius was between 20 and 25 years old, and it was said that he was the strongest personality[37] that attended the FEC.

From which places in Egypt were the members of the Coptic Orthodox Church who attended the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

Pope Alexander I came from Alexandria, Bishop Bavnoty came from Luxor, Upper Egypt, and Bishop Butanone came from Heraclea- this city was demolished[38] and now its place is in Tel El Sahreeg, Facos Centre, Eastern Province in Egypt.

What were the roles of the representatives of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

Pope Alexander, the 19th Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, and the twenty Coptic Orthodox Bishops and deacon Athanasius played a significant role in defending the sound faith even before the FEC. Pope Alexander, together with 36 Bishops and 44 deacons, including Athanasius, called a Synod for the church of Alexandria in the year AD 320, and the Synod

unanimously agreed on the condemnation of Arius[39] and signed a document to this effect.

Because of the solid, sound, and strong faith of deacon Athanasius, in addition to his past experience, the followers of Arius objected to the Emperor about Athanasius attending the FEC. The Emperor did not listen to them because of what he saw and heard from the strong answers of Athanasius concerning the claims of Arius.

When Athanasius became the 20th Pope of Alexandria, the whole world was against him, and he made his famous statement: "I am against the world".[40]

What were the official offices of the members of the Coptic Orthodox Church attending the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

Three were elected members of the FEC to write the Canons of the FEC; two of them were from the Coptic Orthodox Church: Pope Alexander I of Alexandria and his deacon Athanasius. It is significant to mention that the style of the writings of the Canons of the FEC was similar to the style of writings of Athanasius.[41] The famous Athanasius of Alexandria helped formulate the original version of the Nicene Creed (325 CE).[42]

What were the final outcomes of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea?

The teachings of Athanasius were upheld, declaring Christ to be consubstantial and co-eternal with God the Father,[43] and the Creed was promulgated by the Council.[44]

6. Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity:

The enduring faith since Nicaea till now, and ways of economising this faith for the generations to come.

As Darius, the king, made a decree that all people must fear before the God of Daniel, for He is a living God and steadfast forever, as mentioned in Daniel 6:26. So, as the teachings, the doctrine, and commandments of our God, as mentioned in Matthew 24:35: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away."

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave the authority to His disciples and their descendants to bind the wrong teachings on earth, as mentioned in Matthew 16:19: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." So, to endure the faith we received from our Fathers, we need to prepare the second

line of good teachers and servants who will be capable of continuing the journey of enduring faith, as Saint Paul said in 2 Tim. 2:2: "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

As churches, we need to abide in the faith that was agreed upon in Nicaea by enduring anything rather than putting obstacles in the way of the Gospel of Christ, as mentioned in 1 Cor. 9:12. Doing this requires the churches to obey the truth of sound faith, as Saint Paul said in Gal. 5:7.

Our existence as churches for the truth is for the salvation of the world's elected people, as mentioned in 2 Tim. 2:10.

As churches, to keep the sound faith of Nicaea, we need to endure anything, even external persecution against us, as mentioned in 1 Cor. 4:12.

Ways of embracing the Unity of Churches now, as the Churches were in Nicaea:

The church leaders' role locally:

Embracing the unity of the churches is the desire of the Lord Jesus Christ, who said in John 17:11: "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are." Also, the churches need to know that it is good and pleasant to God when the churches work towards Unity, as it was mentioned in Psalms 133:1: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

The church leaders need to exercise the utmost caution in choosing the bishops generally, either the Diocesan Bishops or the General Bishops, and priests as well; the bishop or the priest must have sound doctrine and must be strong in faith to the point of martyrdom. Bishop Meletus of Lycopolis, now Assiut in upper Egypt, denied the sound faith in the time of persecution;[45] then Arius followed him.

The church leaders must pay very significant attention to having a very strong monastic movement and educating the monks on sound doctrine. Saint Anthony, the founder of the monastic movement, went to Alexandria twice,[46] to support the sound doctrine and to support Pope Athanasius against Arius.

The church's leaders must put in substantial efforts to have a very strong monastic movement for nuns, and also for consecrated sisters,

and educate them on sound doctrine. Arius convinced 700 virgins[47] and consecrated sisters to follow his wrong teachings.

The church leaders' role ecumenically:

For the unity of the churches, it is very significant for the church's leaders to have direct and continuous communication with each other. Pope Alexander of Alexandria sent a message to Pope Alexander of Constantinople about the heresy of Arius,[48] as the Arius heresy started the division in the church. And the church must be united and live in peace, as Saint Paul said in Eph. 4:3: "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".

The church leaders must be united and not allow heretics to serve in their dioceses. Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, Ossias, Bishop of Basidia, Bolus, Bishop of Sour, and Gregory, Bishop of Beirut, allowed Arius to open a religious organisation[49] in their dioceses. Saint Peter said in 1 Peter 3:8: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another."

For the unity of the churches, the church leaders need to meet on a regular basis, in a round table, to share the challenges faced by the churches. The chairmanship can be rotated. Bishop Hosius of Carthage[50] was the one who chaired the FEC, not the Bishop of Nicomedia nor the Bishop of Rome.

It is significant to have regular meetings between the churches and their representatives, to have one mind on the topics that divide the churches; the Ecumenical Councils can help in this dimension as well. It is worth noting that the representatives of the churches must include the youth; there is a small number of youth involved in the Ecumenical Movement.[51]

The world is now full of many atheists and agnostics; it is the order of our Lord Jesus Christ for us to preach as united churches for the sheep from other folds and bring them to the bosom of Christ so that there will be one flock and one Shepherd. This is what the Lord Jesus Christ mentioned in John 10:16: "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."

The church leaders and the civil authorities:

For the unity of the Churches, there must be a church, well supported by political influence, to solve any doctrinal dispute. Pope Alexander of

Alexandria requested Emperor Constantine I, through Bishop Hosius of Carthage,[52] to conduct the FEC in Nicaea to solve the heresy of Arius and other matters. It happened.

The church leaders and the media:

It is very important that the church leaders must update the congregation continually about the news of the churches. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea claimed that only 250 bishops[53] attended the FEC; to prove the indifference of the FEC, the actual number of the attending bishops was 320.

7. Conclusion:

I would like to quote what Dr Paulos Mar Gregorios[54] wrote: "We need to seek three things: shed some light on how we came to be where we are, suggest some changes in the present picture, and propose some goals to orient us towards tomorrow".

It is the duty of each church to encourage priests, servants, and the youth to study sound theology and sound doctrine to help in the eventual unity of the churches. This can be done through reading the valuable books of early Church Fathers and scholars like Saint Athanasius.

It is not only our hope but also our responsibility in front of God to understand and empower the ecumenical movement on all levels, to enable the churches to continue sustaining the sound faith and embracing the unity between the churches through effective and continuous dialogues between the theologians of each church.

At the end, I would like to express my gratitude and sincere thanks for having me, and I pray to our Lord Jesus Christ to guide, help, and protect all of us and grant us His Power to serve Him to the end of our lives in all honesty.

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[34] Ibid, P. 223,225.

[35] It is significant to mention that one of those twenty Coptic Orthodox Bishops was Botamon the Bishop of Heraclea, who was killed later in the year 341 A.D. by the hands of the followers of Arius.

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Echoes of John 17 in Nicaea: A Paradigm for Wider Ecumenism and Dialogue

Johnson Thomaskutty

Introduction

This paper re-reads John 17:1–26 in the light of the Nicene Creed with a focus on the theme of oneness. A multilayered and polyvalent analysis of the text reveals that the theme of oneness holds the prayer together to suggest a significant way forward for the Johannine community. The vision and the mission expressed in the prayer align the thought patterns of Jesus, the narrator, and the Johannine community to convey some significant truths related to unity. The interactions and the resultant wider perichōrētic relationships within the text and beyond it communicate some principles related to dialogue and ecumenism. The incorporation of the ideas of oneness within both the Fourth Gospel and the Nicene Creed illuminates the texts to suggest new paradigms. The Nicene Creed and the affirmation of unity between the Father and the Son can be reinterpreted in the light of John's understanding of oneness and ecumenical bonding. The contemporary church can derive several ideas from John 17 and the Nicene Creed to facilitate a paradigmatic model in her role and function in the extended world. We shall explore some of the principles that underlie the Johannine and the Nicaean frameworks to develop practical implications in the contemporary context. A Johannine-Nicaean model can be considered as a paradigm in our ecumenical journey against the prevailing exclusive and parochial approaches to ecumenism. The task of the article is threefold: understanding the theme of oneness in John 17; exploring the possibilities of integration between John 17 and the Nicene Creed using each to illuminate the other; and developing a paradigm out of a correspondence between the texts to suggest some practical lessons to the contemporary church and society.

Oneness in John 17 in relation to the Council of Nicaea (325 CE)

John 17 has some of the key expressions indicating the oneness theme of the Fourth Gospel (Carson 2018:197-236). The narrator uses some of the significant expressions to develop the theme with focus. This aspect of oneness was further discussed in the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 CE (Giulea 2024:133-171). McGuckin says, "The mysterious harmony of the Logos and the Father is fully understood only when one confesses the coequality of the Father and the Son. That means not simply sharing a similar status of being or even sharing the same level of power in being, but more precisely the Son sharing the self-same being of the Father

(Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus)" (McGuckin 2009:2). At the outset of Jesus's prayer, the glorification aspect is presented as the Father glorifies the Son and in turn the Son brings glory to the Father (v. 1b). The theme of glory is overarching as it establishes the oneness between the Father and the Son. The Father-Son interaction and association is at the centre of all the expressions stated until 17:10. In John 17:10, a dynamic oneness interaction between the Father and the Son is once again discussed (Moule 2007:72-78). In John 17:11, through the narrative expression "they may be one, as we are one," the paradigmatic role of the Father-Son relationship is clearly stated as a model for the world. Byers states that "the term 'one' is a means of group identity construction correlating the Johannine disciples with the 'one' God of Israel" (Byers 2017:107). This aspect of group identity and correlation is at the root of the Johannine discussion. As the Johannine narrator affirms the Father-Son relationship and the Father-Son and *Paraklētos* unity in concrete terms, the Trinitarian and Christological beliefs propounded by the Nicaean Council in 325 CE establishes a foundation for subsequent Christian thought (Ayres 2004:11). While the Nicaean Council in 325 CE affirmed the oneness between the Father and the Son, the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE brought the Trinitarian discussions into a fulfilling shape. But the Johannine Farewell Discourses in chapters 13-17 lay strong foundations for such Trinitarian, Christological, and pneumatological discussions.

In John 17:11, the expression *hen* (one) is used with an emphasis on "they may be *one*, as we [Father and Son] are *one*" (Byers 2017:106).[1] In this context, the idea of oneness in Jesus's prayer goes into closer relationship with his discourse in John 10:30 and 15:1-5 (Byers 2017:106). The expression *hen* is again used in 17:21a: "that they may all be *one*. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Moule 2007:164-170). In John 17:22, the narrator further uses the construction *hōsin hen kathōs hōmeis hen*, meaning "they may be one, as we are one" (Blum 2010:331-332). In John 17:23, the expression *hōsin teteleiōmenoi eis hen*, which means "they may become completely one," is once again stated within the prayer of Jesus (Moule 2007:171-177). All these together confirm for the reader that the oneness aspect is one of the primary concerns of the narrator. The Nicaean and the Constantinopolitan concept of *homoousios,* derived from the Greek expressions such as *homo* (same or identical) and *ousia* (being or essence), is in correspondence with the Johannine understanding of *hen* (oneness; see Bethune-Baker 2004:1-2). This conceptual framework runs from the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* to the Johannine community (*Sitz im Leben Kirche*) understanding and from the *Sitz im Leben Kirche* to the Nicaean understanding of oneness and unity (see Giulea 2024:133-171).

There is a gradual development of thought patterns in John 17 by way of using the explicit and implicit connotations of *hen* as follows: first, a dynamic oneness relationship between the Father and the Son was already in existence and that dialogical interaction was considered the basis for all other community fellowships (v. 10; Blum 2010:331-332; Moule 2007:72-78); second, as the Father and the Son are in oneness, the same is standard for the believers to adopt in their interpersonal and community relationships (v. 11; Blum 2010:332); third, the believers' oneness relationship should be aligned within the foundational Father-Son oneness fellowship (v. 21a; Moule 2007:164-170);[2] and fourth, the oneness relationship among the believers in the world remains open for a wider fellowship so that the Father-Son-Believers fellowship may grow further for a universal integration (Moule 2007:171-177). Byers states that "Though 'one' is recognised as some sort of expression of Father-Son unity in 10:30, readers of the Gospel regularly understand 'one' in John 17 as a call to social harmony among believers" (Byers 2017:106). As stated above, the oneness fellowship expressed in John 17 is envisioned as wider and inclusive, universal in scope, heaven and earth interactional, eternal in duration, and transformative in praxis. This basic ideological framework is explicit within the Nicene Creed as it uses the explicit expressions such as *hena theon patera pantokratora* (*one* God the Father Almighty), *hena Kurion Iēsoun Christon ton huion tou theou ton monogenē* (*one* Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God), *mian hagian katholikēn kai apostolikēn ekklēsian* (*one* Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church), and *hen baptisma* (*one* Baptism).[3] The Creed also has some implicit expressions connecting to the theme of oneness (McGuckin 2009:2).

Father and Son relationship

In a context in which *Arianism* (Gk. *Areianismos*, referred to by Gregory of Nazianzus) was spreading in the Alexandrian church and across the globe, Arius argued that Christ is not divine but a created being (see Brennecke 2014:1-3). While Arius propagated a superior and inferior dichotomy between the Father and the Son, the Johannine expressions like glory and glorification suggest how the Father and the Son share divine faculties. As a first layer, John 17:1-5 builds a paradigm for wider Christian unity. In the prayer of Jesus, he states that his hour in the world has come so that the Son may be glorified by the Father (Bauckham 2015:58, 43-62).[4] The glorification of the Father in heaven is well aligned with the glorification of the Son in the world (17:1b, 22, 24; see Loader 2017:107). As the glory of the Father and the Son is one and the same, overshadowing of the divine glory both in the heavenly and in the earthly

realms is in view (Adams 2020:163-200). The corresponding relationship between the Father and the Son is expressed through phrases like *doxason sou ton huion* (glorify your [Father's] Son) and *ho huios doxasē se* (the Son may glorify you [Father]). This correspondence is further expressed through the expression *homoousion tō patri* (one substance with the Father) in the Nicene Creed (Ortiz and Keating 2024:74-102). The flourishing of the divine glory is possible only when the Father-Son oneness is established (Akala 2014:109-117). Jesus's filial identity and agency language are recapitulated by Köstenberger and Swain (2008:58) to show the Father-Son interaction: Jesus himself is the referent of *theos* in 1:1, 18, and 20:28. He is called the 'Son of God' in 1:49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; and 20:31 (and possibly 1:34; his claim is disputed in 19:7). Other Christological titles involving reference to *theos* are 'Lamb of God' (1:29, 36); 'Chosen or Holy One of God' (1:34 variant; 6:69); and 'bread of God' (6:33).

In the world, the Father gave authority to the Son so that he could provide eternal life to those who are given unto him (17:2). Jesus is sent with authority to execute the heavenly mission in the world (17:3, 8b, 18, 21, 23, 25; Adams 2020:163-200). The Son glorified the Father by way of doing the heavenly work and also accomplishing it in the world (17:4-5; Köstenberger and Swain 2008:165-186). The narrator explicitly states the unity between the Father and the Son in glorification and mutual engagement. The Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus is *phōs ek phōtos* (light from light), *theon alēthinon ek theou alēthinou* (true God from true God), and *gennēthenta ou poiēthenta* (begotten not made). While Arius proposed Jesus' createdness, the Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus was an extension of God from the heavens to fulfil the mission in the world (Jackson 2007:29-44). The Johannine expressions attributed to Jesus, like light, truth, and begotten, are part and parcel of the Nicene Creed (Micks 2005:33-42).

The Son revealed the Father in the world, and the Father, in turn, gave him the disciples out of the world (17:6, 26). Everything given to the Son comes from the Father (17:7, 9, 24). The Son gives the words of the Father to the world (vv. 8a, 14) and prays for their protection (v. 15; Kim 2017:53-58). The people of the world believed that Jesus came from the Father (v. 8b; Akala 2014:109-117). The understanding that the Father and the Son are in a corresponding relationship through *homoousios* was discussed at the Nicaean Council. That means the Johannine narrator emphasises that whatever belongs to the Father belongs also to the Son, and whatever belongs to the Son belongs to the Father (v. 10a; Blum 2010:131-132;

see Kroll 2012:1). In the light of the Nicene Creed, Holcomb says, "It is like light. How can you separate light from light? You cannot. Neither can the Father and the Son be separated" (Holcomb 2014:37).

As the Son came from the Father and returned to the Father, he is no longer going to be accessible in the world (v. 11, 22, 23; Köstenberger and Swain 2008:149-164). Moreover, the name that the Son holds is the Father's possession (vv. 11-12). As the Father's love remains in the Son (vv. 23b, 24, 26), the Father and the Son are able to indwell mutually (v. 21; Köstenberger and Swain 2008:165-186). This love relationship between the Father and the Son was established even before the creation of the world (vv. 5, 24). As Jesus knows the Father (v. 25), he is obedient to his will (Kim 2017:53-58). The oneness relationship, mutual indwelling, and heavenly-and-earthly interaction between the Father and the Son are clearly stated through the prayer. While on the one hand the oneness of the Father and the Son is at the centre of both the Fourth Gospel and the Nicene Creed, on the other hand the preeminent Christology of John (1:1-5; cf. Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-3) is reflected in the Nicene Creed as follows: *dia hou ta panta egeneto* (through whom all things came into existence; cf. John 1:3). Thus, we notice that several of the expressions in the Creed are directly connected to the Fourth Gospel.

Son and the believing community relationship

The communion between the Son and the believers is yet another layer of oneness embedded within the framework of John 17 (Hera 2013:123-140). As the relationship between Jesus and the believing community is explicit within the framework of Jesus' prayer in John 17, the ecumenical community of God is explicit in the Nicene Creed through the following expressions: *pisteuomen* (we believe), *homologoumen* (we confess), and *prosdokōmen* (we look for). These expressions in the Creed demonstrate the communitarian outlook of the Nicaean Council (Jackson 2007:9-14). The Father granted authority to the Son over all people, and as a response, the Son lavishes eternal life to all who believe in him (vv. 2-3; Blum 2010:331). Jesus revealed God's glory among the people in order to complete the heavenly work (vv. 4, 6a). The works of Jesus are instrumental for the people to obey the message of salvation (v. 7; Gifford 2011:52-53). Through their obedience, the believers are transformed to know that Jesus came from the Father (vv. 7, 8b; Blum 2010:331). Thus, Christology and discipleship are integrally aligned within Jesus's prayer (Gifford 2011:51-52; Hera 2013:123-138). As the community of God is integrally connected to Christ, the extension of Christ's unity with the community is based on the unity between the Father and the Son. The aspect of salvation through Christ is reflected throughout the Nicene Creed. Hera

comments: "Jesus gives a positive assessment of the disciples. However, he does not describe their response to his revelation as the result of their achievement. The reason for their acceptance, knowledge, and faith lies not in their effort but in the initiatives of Jesus: it is because (*hōti*) he has given them the words that were given to him by the Father (*hōti ta rhēmata ha edōkas moi dedōka autois*)" (Hera 2013:138). On the one hand, Jesus provides the believers with the words that the Father gave him, and on the other hand, the believers wholeheartedly accept him and his words (v. 8a). The ecumenical relationship that the community of God declared through the Nicene Creed is rooted in the connectivity between the believing community of God, irrespective of their various backgrounds, and the bonding love of Jesus.

While Jesus prays for the community of believers (v. 9), they together stand as a means of divine glory in the world (v. 10). Ecumenism as a means of divine glory is demonstrated through the unity of the church communities from the time of the Nicaean Council and even before. In the contemporary context, the ecumenical initiatives among the various church communities show the divine witness in the world.[5] When Jesus is about to depart from them, he makes sure that Father's protection is upon them (v. 11; Blum 2010:331-332). The virtue of oneness among the believing community is based on the paradigmatic unity of the Son with his Father (v. 11b; Beasley-Murray 1999:298-299). The believing community shall be protected in the world through the power of the name the Father gave to the Son (vv. 11, 12, 15; Blum 2010:332). Thus, the relationship between Jesus and the believing community establishes a wider *perichōrētic* unity (Lampe 1961:1077; Torrance 1966:102; Lawler 1995:49).[6] Moreover, the *homoousios* is extended even to the level of the community of God. Christian churches, organisations and associations in the contemporary context can take the message of Christ and community relationship into their ecumenical witness in the world. For that, the messages of John 17 and Nicaean deliberations are significant foundations (Jackson 2007:9-14).

Furthermore, Jesus's prayer is that the believers might enjoy the full measure of heavenly joy among themselves (v. 13; Beasley-Murray 1999:299-300). This aspect of joyfulness is significantly at work in the modern ecumenical initiatives. In that process, the Nicaean Council played a significant role. As John says, the disciples possess the word of God and continue believing in Jesus, and they are a sanctified group set apart from the rest of the world (vv. 14, 16, 17, 19; Beasley-Murray 1999:300-301). While Arius and his followers were drifting away from the word of God, the community of God considered the word of God as a valuable treasure for their life and sustenance (Williams 1987/2001:29-

47). Richey says, "Jesus wants all believers to live sanctified or holy lives as God is holy (Lev 19:2; John 17:17) . . . The lives of the believers are to reveal Jesus's character, love, and presence to the world (John 17:10) . . . Jesus wants us to be joyful (see John 15:11; 16:24, 33; 17:13). The key to joy is living in an intimate relationship with Jesus, the source of all joy (John 15)" (Richey 2012:70). After preparing them for the mission, Jesus sends them into the world just as he was sent by the Father (v. 18; Beasley-Murray 1999:300-301). Through ecumenical unity, the church exemplifies a Christ-centred solidarity in the world. This spirit of unity and joyfulness is one of the significant contributions of the Nicaean Council. The church is called to witness the mission of sanctification through her oneness with Christ to lead the world as an abode of divine virtues.

The expression in the Nicene Creed *sotērian katelthonta ek tōn ouranōn* (for our salvation he came down from heaven) shows Jesus' salvific initiative in the world. In that sense, both in the Johannine narrative and in the Nicene Creed, the unity between Jesus and the believing community in the world is emphasised. The believers are entrusted with the task of mission so that they may witness the heavenly truth among the unbelievers (v. 20; Bolsinger 2019:342).[7] Jesus envisions peace and harmony in the world through the witnessing initiative of the believers (v. 21; Beasley-Murray 1999: 302; Gifford 2011:52-53).[8] He shares the heavenly glory among them so that they may actualise the reality of oneness in the world (v. 22; Matson 2002:98). A complete unity of the believers and the future believers is the master plan of Jesus (v. 23; Gifford 2011:52; Matson 2002:98). John 17:24-26 emphasises the love relationship between the Father and the Son and its impact upon the believers (Richey 2012:70). In sum, the first layer of unity between the Father and the Son lies at the root of the second layer of unity between the Son and the believing community. The Church in the contemporary context is encouraged to engage in a Christ-centred ecumenism, unity, witness, and extension of love so that the salvific plan of God may be fulfilled. As the theme of salvation is at the centre of both John 17 and the Nicene Creed, the *ekklēsia* of God is expected to spread the message of salvation, liberation, and transformation.

Father and the believing community relationship

As a third layer of unity, the narrator foregrounds the relationship between the Father and the believing community. The prayer is addressed to the Father in heaven on behalf of the believers (v. 1). The Son takes initiative to make a connection between the Father and the believing people (vv. 4-5, 6a; Veiss and Hunt 2021:164).[9] In the Nicene Creed, the initial statement progresses as follows: *pisteuomen eis hena theon patera*

pantokratora poiētēn ouranou kai gēs horatōn te pantōn kai aoratōn (We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible). The believing relationship of the church community with God the Father is stated right at the outset of the Creed (Oden and Bray 2009:1-110). The Father gives authority to the Son over the people (v. 2a), and also expects that they might receive eternal life (v. 2b; Whitacre 1999:403-406). By definition, eternal life enables people to know that Father is the only true God (v. 3; Whitacre 1999:403-406). The believers belong to the Father; hence, they are given to the Son (v. 10). They know that everything came to them, including the words from the Father (vv. 6b, 7, 8a, 14a). The ecumenical *ekklēsia* is connected to God the Creator as they are Christ's body. This very reality is explicitly stated both in John's Gospel and in the Nicene Creed as Jesus appears as the begotten Son of God, light from light, and true God from true God (see Suerte Felipe 2013:36).

As Jesus is the only mediator between God and the world, the people of God are connected to God through the means of the Son. As the relationship between God and the world is emphasised through the expression "God so loved the world, that he gave" (John 3:16), the Nicene Creed also affirms the same relationship in the first few clauses of it (Green 2001:17-23). The believers realised that Jesus is a heavenly representative sent from the presence of the Father (vv. 8b, 9; Whitacre 1999:408-413). The Father is able to protect the believing community through his very name (vv. 11a, 12a; Veiss and Hunt 2021:166). Van der Watt states, "Through them [the believers] the presence and love of God should reach the world. This whole process will be guided by the Father's love (17:23, 26)" (Van der Watt 2019:219). As the Father remains in unity with the Son, he wishes the believers to remain in unity among themselves (v. 11b; Beutler 2013: 434). In John 17, the theology proper is well conceived in relation to discipleship and a *perichōrētic* unity between the Father and the believing community. This is the divine *homoousios* that is integrally connected to the believing community (Dünzl 2007:3-20).

The believers are protected by the Father while they remain in the world (v. 15; Beutler 2013:434-437). As they are the Father's gift to the Son, they believe and obey the Father-Son unity (vv. 16, 25; Beutler 2013:439). In turn, the Father sanctifies them by the truth (v. 17; Veiss and Hunt 2021:166). Just as the Father sent the Son into the world, the Son sends believers into the world (vv. 18, 21b, 23; Beutler 2013:437). The Father is not only concerned for the existing believers but also for those who are about to be transformed in the future (v. 20; Williams 2011:145). As the Johannine Jesus reveals his descending and ascending motif to save the

world, the Nicene Creed mentions that the Son descends from the Father, ascends back to the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father. As the mission of Jesus is both present- and future-oriented, and the Nicene Creed is intended to solve the present crisis of the church and mentions Jesus's coming again to the world, the presence of Jesus with the Father in heaven is for the glorification and sanctification of God's name in the world. The Father's vision about an open-ended mission is obvious here.

While involved in the *missio Dei*, the believers can model the Father-Son unity among themselves (v. 21, 23). The Son gave them the glory of the Father so that they may be one as Father and Son are one (v. 22, 23; Van der Watt 2019:219-220). Veiss and Hunt say, "Jesus calls for unity between Jesus and the Father, the disciples, Jesus, and the Father, and finally between all the believers. Unity may be viewed as centred around the mission and vision of the organisation" (Veiss and Hunt 2021:168). The believing community can conceive a complete measure of unity only when they know the Father-Son unity (vv. 23, 26a; see Dünzl 2007:11-20).

The Nicene Creed states that through the witnessing, sanctifying, and unifying mission of Jesus, he makes the name of God known among the disciples. The Father loved the believers as he loved the Son (vv. 23b, 26b; Williams 2011:146). As the Son returns to the abode of the Father, the believers are prepared to hope for the same destination in the future. In that sense, the unity of the Father, the Son, and the believers might come to an eternal reality (v. 24; Williams 2011:146). The narrator of John 17 envisions a paradigmatic relationship between the Father and the believing community through the medium of the Son. This is further reflected in the Nicene Creed. Such an idea is at the root of the Creed and hence of the whole enterprise of ecumenism.

Relationship among the believing community

The fourth layer of unity develops among the believing community. They experience eternal life among themselves, and that enables them to be united under Jesus (v. 2; Moloney 1998:461). The believers know the only true God and perceive that Jesus comes from the Father (v. 8b; Moloney 1998:462). When they realise the unity between the Father and the Son, they understand the necessity to maintain unity among themselves (vv. 3, 6, 8; Moloney 1998:461). The believers exist in the world to exemplify cordiality and fellowship (v. 4; Beutler 2013:429). When the community of God confesses the Nicene Creed, they affirm the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they accept the fact that the unity of the Triune God is a paradigm for them to function in

the world as a united community (Anatolios 2011:235-240). Culpepper comments, "The unity of the church is based on its common origin, at the cross. Ultimately, however, John insists that the unity of believers is rooted in Jesus's oneness with the Father, so that just as Jesus was one with the Father, 'his own' will find their unity through their unity with him" (Culpepper 2021:72). They know that the Father gave everything including the words of eternal life to Jesus (vv. 7, 8a; Moloney 1998:462). As the words of the Father became incarnated in the person and work of Jesus, the ecumenical body of Christ can exemplify the divine voices and actions through her involvement in the world.

When they remain in the unity formed out of the Father-Son communion, they are saved (v. 9; Beutler 2013:432-433). The Father and Son relationship develops into a glorious position when the believers remain united in the world (v. 10a). That means, the heavenly glory is manifested in the world through the unity of the believers (v. 10b; Moloney 1998:466). Amstrong says that, "Jesus' prayer for relational unity simply means he is praying that all his followers will live as he lived. In particular, his prayer points to his personal relationship with the Father" (Amstrong 2010:44). When the disciples remain united in the world, the Father's protection is assured for them (vv. 11, 12a; Muthiah 2009:chapter 2). The Father-Son unity is a paradigm for them in the world so that "they may be one as we [Father-Son] are one" (v. 11c; Muthiah 2009:chapter 2). Here lies the crux of the modern ecumenical movement. The first-person plural expressions in the Nicene Creed (i.e., 'we believe,' 'us people,' 'for us,' 'we confess,' and 'we look forward') give us a clue concerning the ecumenical spirit of the Christian communities in the Fourth Century CE and their corporate confessions and actions.

The believers can enjoy the full measure of Jesus's joy when they are united together (v.13b; Moloney 1998:468). While they live in the world, they have the word of the Father as a protection (vv. 14a, 15). As Jesus is not of the world, the believers, through their faith and obedience, can enjoy the favours and blessings from above (vv. 14b, 16; Beasley-Murray 1999:299-300). They are not only protected in the world but also sanctified by the truth (vv. 17, 19; Beasley-Murray 1999:300). As the Nicene Creed emphasises, church unity is not something that is achieved by human efforts but is a divine-human enterprise. As the Father sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends them into the world. By remaining in the Father-Son unity, the believers can be involved in the mission of God (v. 18; Thomaskutty 2020:77-96). Moloney comments, "As Jesus's association with the Father determined his life, the disciples' association

with Jesus, who has revealed the truth to them, determines theirs. They are to make God known in the world" (Moloney 1998:469). The believing community is assigned to make the Father-Son unity known in the world through their fellowship, solidarity, and togetherness (v. 20; Moloney 1998:472-473). They witness the truth of God and demonstrate the Father-Son unity in the world so that others can be brought to that unity (v. 20; Mosher and Marshall 2015:160). The mystical union between the Father and the Son can be exemplified through believers' togetherness in the world (v. 21; Van der Watt 2019:219-220). The glory of God/Jesus can be reflected in the world only through the lifestyle of the believing community (v. 22; Mosher and Marshall 2015:160). Goyret comments that, "A good sign of our times is the increasing number of Christians, of various denominations and confessions of faith, who appreciate ever more deeply that disunity cannot be accepted as the status quo" (Goyret 2022:1; cf. Paul II 1995:1). When the believers embrace the Father-Son unity, they enter into a complete oneness based on the principle of love (v. 23; Culpepper 2021:71). Jesus envisions a glorious relationship among the believers in order to introduce a transformed human culture (vv. 24-25).

Father-Son-believers and world relationship

The fifth layer of unity in the prayer is narrated as being between the Father-Son-believers and the world outside. The oneness of the Father-Son-believers is described not simply as a closed and exclusive entity but as an open-ended and inclusive one where entrance is widely open toward the unbelieving world (Okure 1998:1566-1568). Similarly, the universal scope of God's mission is obvious in the following expressions of the Nicene Creed: God is 'maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible' (*poiētēn ouranou kai gēs horatōn te pantōn kai aoratōn*); and the Son is the one 'through whom all things came into existence' (*dia hou ta panta egeneto*). As both the Father and the Son together created the universe, the church has a significant responsibility to the world. With that inclusive intention, the Father gave authority to the Son over *all flesh* (*pasēs sarkos*, v. 2a), although eternal life is shared only with those who believe (v. 2b; Beasley-Murray 1998:296). Beasley-Murray (1998:296) comments, The glory of the Father and the Son is expressed in the bestowal of eternal life upon humankind. The authority of the Son to convey this gift is inherent in his position as Mediator of the saving sovereignty (cf. 5:21-27), and by his exaltation as Lord of the kingdom, it extends to "all flesh." The redemption of Christ is universal in scope (cf. 3:16; 12:31-32).

Though Jesus completed the work of God in the world and the mission of God is universal, the people of the world are divided into those who believe and those who do not believe (v. 4; Dockery 2008:47). In vv. 6-19, Jesus focuses on the believing as they received the grace of God and transformed themselves in the union of the Father-Son (Blomberg 2001:220). But those who are not transformed remain as enemies of God. They can believe in Jesus and enter into the unity proclaimed by him. Jesus revealed the heavenly glory to those whom the Father gave him out of the world (v. 6a). In the world, there is a conflicting situation that exists between those who believe and put their obedience in Jesus and those who disbelieve and remain in disobedience (vv. 6b, 7, 8; Blomberg 2001:220). The Nicaean Council emphasised not simply a unity that restricts itself within the Christian boundary but a unity which extends beyond the *ekklēsia* and is hence concerned for the world outside.

Jesus prays for the protection of the believing community from the evil one (v. 15; Blomberg 2001:222). As the Father sent the Son into the world to transform it, the Son sends the believers to transform the rest of the world (v. 18; Beasley-Murray 1999:300-301). The believers are instrumental in liberating the unbelieving [people] through the eternal message of God (v. 20). Jesus envisions oneness of the believing and the unbelieving in the world (see Fuglisi 1999:22). That becomes a reality only when the believing community engages in witnessing the unity of the Father-Son and the unbelieving people accept the oneness of God (v. 21; Rausch 2005:219). As the Nicene Creed emphasises the universality of God's mission, the church is expected to take part in the mission with a wider ecumenical vision in the world. Jesus's mission agenda completes the circle in the following ways: unity among the believing community in the world; extension of unity between the believing and the unbelieving through open-ended relationships; expansion of the Father-Son-Believers unity to the unbelievers for wider collaboration; and integration of the "from above" ideology in the world "from below" for transformation and liberation (vv. 22-23; Dockery 2008:47). The principle of love lies at the centre of the unity established by the attempts of Jesus in the world (vv. 23, 26). Okure comments that, "The united presence of the disciples in the world is a convincing sign that God sent Jesus (v. 23). Conversely, their division puts in question the divine origin of his mission" (Okure 1998:1567). Jesus reveals the name of the Father in the world through his words and deeds and also through the witnessing of the believers (v. 26; Beasley-Murray 1999:304-305). The Father-Son-Believers oneness remains open-ended so that the world can embrace and be part of it. This aspect of John 17 is well-aligned within the framework of the Nicene Creed.

Oneness in John 17 and Nicaea 325 CE as a paradigm

We could see that the five layers of unity developed in John 17—between Father and Son, Son and Believers, Father and Believers, among Believers, and Father-Son-Believers and world—can be perceived in closer relationship with the Nicene Creed. Moreover, the role and function of the Holy Spirit inscribed in John's Gospel and in the Nicene Creed can form an overarching layer within the paradigm (Moule 1978/2000:43-52). John 17 has to be analysed in connection with the rest of the Farewell Discourses (chapters 13-16). The wider unity described in Jesus's prayer makes more sense when it is related to the *Paraklētos* (John 14:15-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; and 16:12-15; Thomaskutty 2020:97-110). While in the Greco-Roman context *Paraklētos* was considered as a "helper in court" or "one who is summoned" as part of the judicial system, in John, the "indwelling" of the *Paraklētos* and her/his oneness with Father-Son-Believers is in view (Ashton 1992:5:152). When Jesus departs the world, the disciples need not be paralysed by sadness as *Paraklētos* would help them to realise the presence of Christ (Schnackenburg 1980:3:126). The word used with *Paraklētos* is not *heteron* but *allon* (14:16).[10] The 'another' should not be taken as different in substance but of the same kind (Carson 2018:50). The Nicene Creedal expression *homoousios* can be better understood in relation to the Trinitarian unity.

In the Nicene Creed, the Holy Spirit is presented mostly in Johannine idiom: 'the Lord and life-giver' (*to kurion kai zōopoion*); 'who proceeds from the Father' (*to ek tou patros ekporeuomenon*); and 'who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified' (*to sun patri kai huio sumproskuvoumenon kai sundoxadzomenon*). In John 17 and in the Nicene Creed, the Father-Son-Holy Spirit unity is affirmed in relation to the believing community and to the world at large. This was further clarified in the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE (Burns and Fagin 2002:90-154). Both in John and in the Nicene Creed, the Holy Spirit proceeds not as a different entity but as a person of the Trinity sharing the same substance (Witherington 1995:251). F. F. Bruce calls this "another *Paraklēte*" as Jesus's *alter ego* who is to be with the disciples permanently (Bruce 1983:302). The *Paraklētos* is also considered as *Christomorph*, a person who perpetuates Jesus's mission on earth (Hoeck 2012:27-28). In other words, *Paraklēte* mirrors Jesus's earthly mission by guiding the disciples in the way of truth in a hostile situation (Thomaskutty 2020:104-105). The *Paraklētos* functions in complete oneness with the Father-Son-Believers unity.

The Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers unity formed in the world is a paradigmatic oneness open toward the wider realities of the world for

conversation and dialogue. The inclusive mission of Christianity takes into account the following two aspects: witnessing Christ; and withnessing the pathos of the world (Augsburger 1971). The Johannine community developed an understanding of unity that bridges the ideologies of the world "from above" and the world "from below" and extended its invitation toward the wider world to embrace the Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers oneness (Doohan 1988:174). This Trinitarian understanding of the Fourth Gospel is further expanded in the Nicaean and Constantinopolitan councils. The open-ended unity experienced in the Johannine community context and universally proclaimed in the Nicaean Council can be a model in the contemporary ecclesiastical scenario for wider integration and cross-pollination (Doohan 1988:174).

In the multi-denominational, multi-religious, and pluralistic global context, we should develop a wider ecumenical understanding that takes the following things into consideration: an integration of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Charismatic views; and an extension of a dialogue between the Christian and other religious ideologies (Radano 2012; Walsh 2011). The Christian theological curriculum can facilitate the inner unity concerns and the open-ended approaches for celebrating oneness in the wider scenario (Cornille 2013). The Johannine praxis of inner unity and inclusive approach can be adopted as a visible reality when the Christian church and the inter-religious bodies engage in ecumenical involvements (Kysar 2005:136). This aspect is also emphasised in the Nicaean and in the Constantinopolitan councils. This approach shall facilitate a wider ecumenical and open-ended mission of the church.

The Lutheran World Federation International Conference in Namibia in 2015 identified four core features of transformative theology that inform and are informed by political and economic realities: contextual, critical, creative, and concrete (Burghardt and Sinn 2017:153). In the Asian context, theological schools witness considerable theological advancement as they emphasise contextualisation of the Gospel message in the political and economic realities of the nation, engage critically with the biblical worldview by adopting the "in front of the text" approaches, remain creative in promoting the dialogue between the biblical message and contextual realities, and affirm the faith in concrete terms by taking seriously the speech and act concerns (Thomaskutty 2019:89). The theological communities in Asia function as charismatic in their scope, evangelical in witnessing, ecumenical in relational aspects, and liberative in engagements in the public square. As the Johannine community was a contextualised version of Christian community, critical in their engagements in faith and praxis, creative in their thought patterns and

social engagements, and concrete in moulding the community ethos, the contemporary Asian theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies emphasise all these elements in their theological and missional agenda (Thomaskutty 2019:93). As unity and ecumenism are the core realities of the Nicaean and the Constantinopolitan Councils, the church in Asia can foster a wider unity rooted in the spirit of ecumenism and dialogue to demonstrate her inclusive mission. As the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) are champions of inclusive *ekklēsia* and wider ecumenism, the vision and mission of the Johannine community and the Nicaean Council are continued even today through the activities of these global bodies.

There are various streams of ecumenical initiatives in the global church context and at the theological and organisational levels. While some churches/institutions/organisations are involved in "open-ended" and "inclusive" ecumenical approaches, there are some who implement "closed-ended" and "exclusive" approaches to others (Kärkkäinen 2003). The Johannine method of "inner negotiation" and "outer interaction" can be a good way forward for the theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies in the global context (Lamb 2014:104-105). As the Johannine community attained a "glorious position" (vv. 10, 22), "eternal life" (v. 2), "knowledge" (vv. 3, 6, 8, 23, 25, 26), "Word of God" (vv. 8, 14), "protection" (vv. 11-12, 15), "joy of God" (v. 13), "sanctification" (vv. 16-18), "oneness with God" (vv. 20-21, 22-23), and "love of God" (vv. 23, 26), the people outside the fold are invited by the believing community to embrace the Father-Son-Paraklētos-Believers oneness and attain all the divine virtues (Thomaskutty 2019:75-96). The Nicene Creed foregrounds a scenario similar to the Johannine in which "inner negotiation" and "outer interaction" are facilitated with a wider ecumenical spirit.

On the contrary, the people of the world are filled with "hatred" (v. 14), steeped in "unknowing" (v. 25), and stand against the glorious Father-Son-Paraklētos-Believers oneness (Coloe 2021:314). When the world was filled with hatred and unknowing, the Johannine community and the Nicaean Council followed an open-ended relationship and invited the world to a wider ecumenism (Wright IV 2009). This approach of the Johannine community and the Nicaean Council can be a model for the theological fraternity and the ecclesiastical authorities in today's context. As the Johannine community was transformative, inclusive, widely ecumenical, and liberative in its role and status, the Christian theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies across the globe can adopt this paradigm in their pedagogical, exegetical, homiletical, and hermeneutical engagements (Kim 2014:57-66). A Johannine paradigm of inner negotiation and outer dialogue can be considered as a unique method in the multi-religious

and pluralistic global context. This paradigm of the Johannine and the Nicaean can be popularised across the globe for unity and reconciliation.

Concluding remarks

In recapitulation, Jesus's axiomatic prayer in John 17 in correspondence with the Nicene Creed foregrounds a new way forward in Christian witness, dialogue, and ecumenism. The theme of oneness expressed in the prayer and in the creed is multi-layered as several levels of interactions are at view. The relationship demonstrated between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Believers, the Father and the Believers, the Believer[s] and the Believer[s], and the Father-Son-Believers and the World and the integral connectivity incorporated in the prayer and in the creed can be properly understood when we interpret them together. The introduction of the Holy Spirit in John 14:15-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; and 16:12-15 and within the creed frames the oneness of the Father-Son-Paraklētos-Believers with an emphasis on inner negotiation and outer dialogue.

John's missional and ministerial paradigm as conceptualised in relation to the perichōrēsis described among the Father, the Son, the *Paraklētos*, and the Believers can be better understood in relation to the Nicene Creed. The church can demonstrate the divine glory in the world through the means of its existence as a united community. This paradigmatic principle underscores the Johannine and the Nicaean theo-praxis. The church/institutions/organisations in today's context can adopt a Johannine-Nicaean model in exercising the theological and ideological curriculum, witnessing the truth of God and 'with'nessing in relation to the ethos of the world. A Johannine-Nicaean way forward can be considered as a paradigm in our ecumenical journey against the prevailing exclusive and parochial approaches to ecumenism. The concept of *homoousios* highlighted in both the Nicaean and the Constantinopolitan councils was at the heart of the Johannine community's existence. In the contemporary context, the axiom "they may be one as we are one" can be adopted as a model in bolstering the theological and missional engagements.

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[1] Byers says, "Oneness in John portrays the divine identity as somehow interlinked with ecclesiology, and conversely, the oneness language expressing ecclesiology in this Gospel is always grounded in the oneness of divine identity."

[2] "Oneness is the building up of the believers (Eph 4:4, 16). Such oneness is genuine and intrinsic." See https://livingtohim.com/2014/09/three-aspects-of-oneness-in-john-17-1-oneness-in-the-fathers-name-by-the-eternal- life/, accessed on 10 December 2021.

[3] The derivatives of 'one' like 'hen,' 'hena,' and 'mian' (feminine for 'hena') are used in the Nicene Creed. See https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/nicene_creed.htm, accessed on 2 October 2024.

[4] Bauckham states that, "The whole Gospel story moves toward what it calls 'Jesus's hour.' By this, John seems to mean the complex of events that occur in chapters 12-20 (i.e., the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus). This is the hour of Jesus's exaltation, when he is exalted on the cross in order to be exalted to heaven."

[5] Even before the Nicaean Council, the idea of organization of the Christian community was initiated during the apostolic and sub-apostolic ages. But the Nicaean Council contributed much in the stabilization of community organization. See Daniélou 1964:339-356.

[6] *Perichōrēsis* derives from the Greek noun *chōra*, meaning 'space' or 'room,' and from the verb *chōrein*, which can be translated as 'to contain,' 'to make room,' or 'to go forward,' with the added idea of reciprocity introduced by the particle 'peri.' Lampe translates *perichōreō* as 'encompass,' 'alternate by revolution,' or 'pass into reciprocally.' "It indicates a sort of mutual containing or enveloping of realities, which we also speak of as co-inherence or co- indwelling." It is "the dynamic process of making room for another around oneself." This Greek term is used to describe the eternal mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity, which also means that "all three persons occupy the same divine 'space.'" In the current article, the *perichōrētic* union is conceived in a broader sense as the Father, Son, *Paraklētos*, Believers, and the World outside are brought to the focus.

[7] According to Bolsinger, "In John 17, Jesus pushes the theme of embodiment and unity even further than the spiritual unity of his followers with him. Indeed, the very purpose of the life-conforming spiritual unity is not conformity for conformity's sake, but for the sake of mission and witness."

[8] Beasley-Murray comments that "the unity of Christian believers . . . is more radical and fundamental: it is rooted in the being of God, revealed in Christ, and in the redemptive action of God in Christ."

[9] Suzana Dobric Veiss and Elizabeth K. Hunt comment: "In John 17 glory appears as a significant theme as displaying/acknowledging perfected character (John 17:5; 17:22); open approval of God (17:1); lifted to a position of authority (17:1; 17:22; 17:24); honoring another by words, actions, and thoughts (John 17:1; 17:4; 17:10); and heaven (implied), a place, Jesus's dwelling (John 17:24)."

[10] Cf. *Jub* 25:14; *T. Jud* 20:1-5; 1QS 3:18-25.

‘Oneness’ as a Heterogeneous Reality in Asia

Sr Rasika Pieris

Introduction

The Nicene Creed of faith, widely used to profess what we believe in by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and others, is a scripture-based summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the Creed’s core is the teaching that there is only one God; the Father, Jesus the only-begotten Son of God, and the Spirit are one God. This is the Oneness of God. Oneness in the Bible is often synonymous with unity, harmony, and indivisibility, especially in relation to the doctrine of God and God’s creation: the unity of God and the unity of believers. The church, as the Body of Christ, is the bearer of the Spirit, who shapes the church as “a community of witnesses”. The presence of the churches offers an encounter between Jesus Christ and the peoples of Asia as the Creed calls for unity within the church, being ‘of one mind’. Hence, taking unity and diversity within the Triune God into consideration, my effort is to discuss the ‘oneness’ of Asian heterogeneous reality, which is a source of communion and harmony as it is the witness of Christians in pluralistic Asia.

1. The ecclesia within the diversified Asian context

A defining characteristic of the Asian continent is its pluralism in the cultural, religious, historical, and political spheres. Asian countries are rich in cultural and religious traditions. Religions, profound philosophies of life, and cultures have been the soul of the Asian peoples for many generations, due to which Asians have never been a homogeneous group. Even though Christian presence in Asia goes back to the earliest centuries, Christianity was (re)introduced by Western forces from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. However, the Christian community is a fragment of a much larger multi-religious and multi-cultural community in Asia, a bare five per cent of the total population.

Aloysius Pieris claims that Christianity came across in Asia more “as a Euro-ecclesiastical expansionism that threatened the mission of the ‘chosen people’ rather than as the message of deliverance that Jesus, the Holy Man from West Asia, wished to share with them.”[1] Furthermore, he says, the church in Asia is not of Asia, but is a monarchical or feudal

establishment of another continent.[2] Hence, Christianity and Asia have remained strangers to each other despite their *longue durée*. For the Church of Asia to be the Church in Asia, it must distance itself from the roots of the Western and colonial idioms. This pluralistic cultural context demands a non-West-centric and non-great power-centric model.

Asian poverty and Asian religiousness are two dominant realities in Asia. Therefore, Pieris says, Christianity must respond to both these issues, not in isolation, but together.[3] In other words, Christians will not adequately address the problem of Asian poverty unless they do so within the context of dialogue with Asian religions, and they will not carry out an authentic and successful interreligious encounter unless they base that dialogue on concern for the poor.

The evil patriarchy-construct, which subjugates and oppresses women in society, is also in operation in the church. The institutional church is not only patriarchal, hierarchical, and clerical but also colonialistic, capitalistic, and feudal. Patriarchy is an ideology that gives power to men and legitimises the oppression of women in all sectors of society. Patriarchy in the church is nurtured by androcentric biblical interpretations that are gender-biased. Essentialising theology from the perspective of women is also the de-patriarchalisation of theologising in Asia. Any theology from Asia that does not deal with the multi-layered oppression of Asians, especially women, due to clericalism, hierarchical structures, is limited in scope and cannot liberate any person in Asia. Unless all the oppressed are liberated, no one can be liberated.

Despite harsh realities, Felix Wilfred says, "A fundamental characteristic of Asian tradition is its vision of unity. All things and events are manifestations of the one ultimate and undifferentiated reality, variously called Sarvam, Brahman, Sünyatä, Tao and so on."[4] Hence, the final goal of churches is to bring all peoples into oneness with God, which is the ultimate and undifferentiated reality. This offers us a ground to address the oneness of God because we cannot each be one with God, yet not be one with each other.

2. Oneness of God: God-talk in Asia as essential to the discourse of ecumenism

To begin my reflection on God-talk in Asia, I would like to share one of the powerful experiences of a Tamil woman from my own country as an

example of listening to the pluralistic women's narratives of God-talk in their struggle for liberation, which I feel is essential. How the women speak of the 'Only One God'.

> When we struggled for life in the bunkers, some of our people were injured and died on the spot by shelling. Not only the people who were shot, but our God was also shot. We, as a family, believe in God, who is also vulnerable like us, but never forsakes us at any time, as God was with us in our struggle for freedom. We still have the strength to face life because the same God is with us, even today.

The traditional assumption of God's omnipotence was challenged by the sharing of the woman who happened to become a widow at a young age due to the ethno-national war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Nevertheless, she did not want to claim that God's power had failed. Instead, her response reveals that God is vulnerable. As Carter Heyward claims, openness and vulnerability are prerequisites. Compassion begins in the soil of our vulnerability. But it is a vulnerability that is seen as strength, not weakness."[5]

Another war widow expressed how she and her people powerfully experienced God through their daily interactions with one another.

> I still remember the day when we were in Mullivaikkal. I did not have anything to give my youngest child, who was crying despondently. Then, can you believe one woman came to us with some biscuits? I gave them to my child. Even though all the people suffered during the last days of the war, they helped one another. That is the presence of God for me. I really thank God for being with us and continuing to be with us in our struggles.

She imagined a relational God in a 'right relationship' with one another. Hence, the question remains not about 'Who God is' but how we are to speak about God in our daily experience as we struggle for liberation.

The present experiences of God of contemporary people, especially women who have been excluded from the process of God language formation in Biblical and post-Biblical times, shed light on the fact that human language about God cannot be frozen into old, traditional terms, even if those terms come from the scriptures or later Christian tradition.

The new language about God must not contradict the knowledge about God that we have from the scriptures and the Christian tradition, but it may, and indeed it must, also reflect "the present faith-experience" of people.

Our image of God, the God of Oneness, affects how we see ourselves, how we worship, how we relate to one another, how we work for justice, and all the other aspects of life. In other words, how Christians shape language about God powerfully moulds the collective identity of the community and directs its *praxis*. How we understand the 'oneness of God' directs us to live the oneness within the church, moving away from the borders that separate us from being in unity to have ecumenical relationships. Hence, the following is to discuss the significance of overcoming oppressive cultural demands in ecumenical relationships.

3. Overcoming oppressive cultural demands in ecumenical relationships

Felix Wilfred claims, "the basic oneness of reality is also a source of communion and harmony among the various parts of reality, which all have cosmic, human, and divine dimensions. The totality of reality is that all its parts are interconnected and interdependent. We ourselves are a part of this web of harmonious relationships which binds the entire reality together."[6]

The ecumenical relationships between different Christian denominations and different Asian religions are an advance toward a greater understanding between cultures. Culture and religion are two interconnected elements that affect people in Asian society. As mentioned earlier, Asia is rich in cultural diversity, which makes the culture unique and contributes to the Asian identity. Nevertheless, the culture is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, culture gives a community its identity, but on the other hand, it is used as a means to justify the oppression or suppression of people, especially women. In the name of culture, women have become subordinate.

The practices that subordinate women and defend the same in the name of culture are a common reality not only in society but also in many churches in Asia, even though culture is a dynamic and contested force, rather than a static and unchanging monolith. Throughout history, the question of the participation of women in the life of the churches has been a central commitment. Nevertheless, women's voices have, in the

past decades, become sharper and more courageous, and they have made a major contribution to ecumenical dialogue, even if their visibility in numbers is not always reflective of their capabilities and commitment to contribute. Speaking about these ecumenical deals, Radford Ruether claims, "When men negotiate ecumenical relations between churches, it is often assumed that women should be willing to pay the price, rather than be an 'impediment' to the merger."[7]

There is a need to listen to women's experiences, and women need to feel that they have been heard and have made a contribution to the life of the church. When lived *praxis* becomes the axis for theologising, the lived experiences of women cannot be excluded. Hence, without consulting women, it is not realistic for churches to speak of the integration of cultures and to build true relationships among all members.

Nevertheless, ecumenical women in Asia are connected to secular women's efforts and with women of other faiths to bring transformation in the lives of women, to challenge violence in all its manifestations, and to demand justice, dignity, and equality for all women and men. These experiences of women who find new ways of being in the church with their potential while challenging the oppressive cultural norms in their churches are an influential and essential source of deconstructing the theologies, ideologies, and cultural norms that have long been sustained by a conception of men's power over women. Each man and woman, despite their gender, ethnicity, and culture, is a part of the whole; a web of life; hence, we all are interconnected, interdependent, and interrelated. The unity of God makes us a unified people. Therefore, our mission is to witness to the oneness.

4. Coming together for mission: A oneness as Witness

In 2009, an ecumenical prayer service was held in an Anglican church in Colombo to remember the people who were killed during the war in Sri Lanka and to honour, in a special way, those who died in the war. A few Tamil and Sinhala Christians from various Christian denominations, such as Anglicans, Methodists, and Catholics, participated. This prayer service was organised to join in sharing the pain of the people in the North and East who were still suffering deeply as a result of the war. This was also a non-violent way of protesting against the Government and the Sinhala nationalists about the way they had celebrated the war victory. It was

a public declaration that this small group, despite their denomination, ethnicity, ideologies, and gender, supported and was with the oppressed people of the country during their time of suffering and distress.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles describes how the early Christian community witnessed their faith:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common."[8]

These verses illustrate that when believers are united in purpose and spirit, miraculous events can unfold, and shared resources ensure that the needs of all are met. The communal life of the early Christians was characterised by unity, shared possessions, and mutual support. This early Christian community in Acts 4 is a foretaste of the Reign of God, due to which this text is invoked frequently as a model for the church to follow today. It is clear that the existence of the community flowed from their relationship with God. For them, faith is not passive but is, rather, a firm confidence that results in action.

As togetherness is oneness, not sameness, a theology of the unity of the church understands that unity does not mean homogeneity. It transcends denominational, cultural, and societal boundaries as they all share a common identity of oneness. Unity in the body of Christ does not mean uniformity; rather, it means a harmonious functioning of diverse members towards a common mission. Christian unity refers to the desire and effort of Christians to come together and form a united community; however, we do not come together for the sake of coming together but for a mission.

Witnessing to the church's mission is therefore not merely one of "going forth"; it is also one of listening, receiving, and openness to the presence of the oneness: to be one with the people who are struggling for liberation from their oppressive realities. Hence, the multiplicity of religious heritage that exists and interacts within and among Asians needs to provide resources for a paradigmatic shift in the struggle for liberation. The ecumenical, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic gathering, dialogue, sharing, worship, and journeying together need to extend the solidarity of both men and women for the common goal of working together for liberation.

Conclusion

The challenge that remains a concern for the Church of Asia is to distance herself from the colonial roots and its representations and make a paradigm shift from Eurocentrism to Asia-centrism. Eurocentrism does not fully echo the Asiacentric ideals of interdependence and interrelatedness which are core values of Asia-centricity. Using Asian *praxis* as a hermeneutical lens is significant to Asia-centricism.

It is problematic to speak of Christianity in the singular as there is a great diversity in the way the Christian faith is lived and practised in the Asian plurality of churches. Hence, the interaction between Christianity and Asian religions needs to be deepened, while breaking from the Western 'orthodoxy' and norms.

Asian *praxis* not only demands moving from suppressionism to ecumenism but also beyond these boundaries, without which making sense of the Church of Asia will be a futile exercise. Mimetic histories of leadership models that are vertical may not be suitable as the context demands an inclusive structure that is horizontal and that ensures the participation of people from all walks of life. For the Church of Asia to choose the 'preferential option for women' is ensuring the preference G(g)od adopted by taking the side of the oppressed.

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[1] The English version of a German original, Aloysius Pieris, "Buddhismus und Gewalt: Ein Blick auf die Situation in Sri Lanka," *Forum Weltkirche* (Verlag Herder, Freiburg) 133 (Nov-Dec, 2014): 21.

[2] Pieris, "Mission of the Local Church in Relation to Other Major Religious Traditions", CTC BULLETIN, Vol. 4, No.: 1, April 1983, p.41.

[3] Cf. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation: Faith Meets Faith Series* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 15-23.

[4] Felix Wilfred, "Asia and Western Christianity", in Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies, Vol 2, Issue 3 (October, 1989), 269. (268-281).

[5] Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1988), 207.

[6] Felix Wilfred, "Asia and Western Christianity", in Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies, Vol 2, Issue 3 (October, 1989), 269. (268-281).

[7] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Ecumenical deals' that leave women out', available from https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001d/121401/121401k.htm.

[8] Acts 2: 42-44.

Biocratic Celebration as the Benchmark of Being Blessed: A Triadic Perspective on Covenantal Community Consciousness

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Introduction

The Nicene symbol of faith commences with the beautiful unfolding of life with an incredible masterstroke: "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible."[1] Life made its footprint magically and magnificently, tracing its origin in God, the source and summit of life in manifold forms and names under the canopy of heaven and earth. Life was in the beginning. Life was God. Life is made manifest in the course of moments, but in the providence of God. From life springs forth life; it thirsts for and moves to life in fullness, temporal and eternal. Life matters, for thought, Word, and deed have their axis. What to say? The articulation of the life-giving Nicene symbol is the fruit of many heads and hearts put together for the life of the Church; it was for a harmonious and prosperous life of the faithful in the world. Life is the arc of celebration throughout the history of creation, including the Nicene Council and its Symbol of faith. Is this Congress not convened of and for a better life? The Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, which was held in Asia in the year 325, inspires and motivates us to reflect, renew, and revive the lifeline of our faith story in the Asian context, a meaningful event for a third epochal encounter, rediscovering the chords of harmony and joy in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master.

With the above preliminary note, it is appropriate to clarify a few terms found in the title of this paper. The term 'biocracy'[2] denotes the rule by life, meaning life should be given its unique place in governance. 'Biocracy' is used in comparison with democracy, which is the rule by the people.

It is high time to highlight the significance of the principle of life as the substratum of human flourishing. Majoritarian rule often neglects minority rights and destroys the ecosystem and equilibrium of interconnectivity vital for life, forcing us to pause and revive the care and concern for the community of life, the substratum of human growth

and development. 'Biocratic' is the adjectival form of biocracy. This term is not used in opposition to democracy. Instead, it is used to underline the importance of life and the community of life compared to the sheer community of people. Life is the beginning of all. The creation story and evolution theory vouch for the precedence of life to the emergence of human beings. Human beings have to take a call on life, the first and final act of God.

The term 'celebration' refers to relationships. Where there is life, there are relationships. Life springs through the celebration of relationships of all that exists. Over against the dyadic relationships – vertical and horizontal – a triadic relationship – radical, horizontal, and vertical – attracts our attention.[3] To have holistic relationships, threefold realities – God, creation, and human beings – must be recognised, respected, and responded to. A Triadic perspective, therefore, refers to the threefold relationships with God, creation, and fellow beings, having union and communion with these realities and building up relationality through rationality.

'Covenant community consciousness' refers to the biblical and theological notion of community, pointing to the celebration of relationships based on the covenant of God, the totality of the network of the Lord, the land, and people. Such a covenant community consciousness enables and empowers people to befriend everything in the universe as the handiwork of God, naturally promoting a sense of the sacred and service to all in the world, which will impart a sense of reverence and lead people to a mystical encounter with the nature, one of the two books of Revelation, as Saint Ephrem exhorts.

Let us discuss the topic under three interrelated sections, namely, 1) Biocratic Vision, 2) Eucharistic Celebration, and 3) Beatific Horizon.

1. Biocratic Vision

Starting from God, the wellspring of life, the life-stream flows incessantly through creation, reaching out to human beings who are part of God's creation; the Nicene Symbol looks for "the life of the world to come." The Nicene Symbol is odd to the Lord of life; all things springing from God's making, spiralling up to the mystery of redemption in Christ, who is co-existing and co-eternal with God, showing forth the Spirit, "the giver of life" towards the orchestration of "life of the world". The Lord of life and the celebration of life form the arc of the Nicene Symbol.

1.1 ". . . maker of all things visible and invisible."

The opening sentence of the Nicene Creed vouches for life and its manifold manifestations, "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." All things visible and invisible are the making of the Lord our God. Admitting God as the Creator, the Symbol proclaims God as the source of life. Life flows from God, or God is life. There is no life without God. Wherever there is life, there is God. According to the profession of faith, we acknowledge the permeating and pervading presence of the Lord in the universe, visible and invisible, because it is the handiwork of God. Does the phrase "things visible and invisible" point to the evolving work of the Lord in the world? Undoubtedly, the seen and the unseen are from God. This belief necessitates a plain and profound admission that everything in the universe shares in the divine life and, hence, is sacred and reveals God's beauty.

In his *Hymn on Paradise*, Saint Ephrem of Nisibis recounts two Books of Revelation: Nature and the Scripture, meaning the faithful should make the best use of both books for a better encounter with the Lord. Ephrem writes:

> In his book, Moses
> described the creation of the natural world
> so that both Nature and Scripture
> might bear witness to the Creator:
> Nature, through man's use of it;
> Scripture, through his reading of it.
> These are the witnesses
> *which* reach everywhere,
> they are to be found at all times,
> present at every hour,
> confuting the unbeliever
> who defames the Creator.[4]

All beings are epiphanies of God's life, and, therefore, all deserve recognition, respect, and response from human beings, the image of God in the universe.

> Nothing there in Paradise is useless: both grass and roots bring benefit and profit; whoever tastes them is rejuvenated, whoever breathes in their scent grows fair; in the bosom of

its blossoms and flowers is hidden a veritable treasure, a gift for those who pluck it; the fruits of Paradise bear rich wealth for those who gather them.[5]

Creation's truth, goodness, and beauty lead us to God's truth, goodness, and beauty, for one mirrors the other. It is the hour to recover and revive the blessedness of being in Mother Nature's lap and experience the enveloping presence of the Creator. As we breathe, so we live.

1.2 "Through him all things were made."

The statement, "Through him all things were made", is a recognition of Jesus Christ's role in creation, substantiated by biblical and theological perspectives. Moreover, it is a continuation of the first sentence of the Nicene Symbol, which underscores the handiwork of God the Father and emphasises the Son's operation in the present. This sentence comes in the middle of the Symbol. Saint Paul writes, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:15-16). The motif of creation and life is vibrant in these words of the sacred scripture.

As in the first instance of the Symbol, so, too, in the present articulation, "Through him all things were made" invites our attention to develop an adequate reverential and friendly approach and attitude to the world and everything in it, for all things – life in all things – reveal Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master. Jesus, through the mystery of the Incarnation, has further accentuated the importance and relevance of caring for the world and every life form in it. In addition, Jesus picks up things from creation to illustrate the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Jesus takes the imagery of a grain of wheat to unfold the mystery of death and life, a self-portrait of his life and ministry. Whether it is a mustard seed or a grain of wheat, it reveals the beauty and glory of God. By his baptism in the river Jordan, Jesus made water holy, and the heavens mingled with earth, showing the good pleasure of God the Father about Jesus. Using the soil, Jesus manifested the healing power of the elements of the world. Through his death on the Cross, Jesus raised the Tree of Life in the new garden of God. The garden of Gethsemane gave Jesus an ambience of contemplation of, and communion with, God.

All things were made through him, and today, they make the Saviour's presence – loving, living, and healing – visible and tangible. They sing in

unison the hymn of praise and thanksgiving. Don't we have to deal with life and everything in the world – an impression of Emmanuel – as faithful and friendly disciples of Jesus Christ?

1.3 ". . . maker of heaven and earth."

The Nicene Symbol professes God as the maker of heaven and earth. The images of heaven and earth cover the whole universe, giving us a profound feeling of the arc of life. They present a complete picture of reality and share the sense of life with all its forms and stages. This comprehensive painting of the universe entails a corresponding comportment with everything in it. All things in heaven and earth belong to God – the Lord of All – and, therefore, to all those who belong to God. Heaven and earth declare God's glory. Are we not called to behold it with our eyes and sing praises with our lips? Participating in God's glory revealed in heaven and on earth, we journey to eternal life, God's gratuitous gift.

The Book of Genesis begins with a fitting narrative of the truth of the universe, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). All things in heaven and earth beat with life. The prayer taught by Jesus resonates with the pulsation of life in heaven and earth, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:9-10). There is life on earth, a replica of heavenly reality, for the author of the two is the same. Maybe something is missing on Earth compared to heaven. Is the rhythm or harmony missing? Is it due to the lack of a symphony? Alignment is the need of the hour, capable of mingling earth and heaven. To enforce harmony and beauty on earth, we have to imbibe the perspective of the Gardener or the Creator. In other words, to become the image of the children of God, who till and keep the earth to make it a wonderful and fruitful garden for the joy of all.

2. Eucharistic Celebration

The liturgical celebration's style aligns with the Nicene Symbol's structure. Being a member of an Eastern Church, belonging to the Syro-Malabar Church of the Thomas Christians of India, I will be referring to the liturgical text and celebration of the ancient apostolic Church in India. The liturgical celebration resonates with biblical insights and theological perspectives, synchronising with the Asian and Indian ethos. According to the Eastern Churches, the Liturgy is the *locus theologicus*, which

celebrates their Christian existence and what they are. The adage of *lex orandi lex credendi* holds good in Eastern Church Liturgy.

As Eastern theology is more symbolic, so is Eastern Liturgy. The faithful experience heaven on earth in their liturgical celebration, an invitation to immerse themselves in the heavenly and earthly blending. It is a pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem while contemplating the Mystery of Christ and committing themselves to the integral development of the whole world. Nothing is alien to Christian worship. We take everything to God in prayer, praise, thanksgiving, worship, and adoration, "I celebrate these divine mysteries for the people, Your flock, for the remission of their debts, the forgiveness of their sins, the salvation of their souls, the reconciliation of the whole world, and for peace and tranquillity of all the Churches."[6] *Sanctus* in the liturgical celebration, a constituent element of several liturgies, is typical of the harmonious blending of earth and heaven, a symphony of life orchestrated by God's glory:

> Holy, holy, holy Lord, the mighty God. Heaven and earth are filled with Your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who came and is to come in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.[7]

"Heaven and earth filled with Your glory" is an oft-repeated phrase in the Divine Liturgy, which, when recognised and responded to by people, we become partakers of life's celebration on earth as it is in heaven. A merging of heavenly and earthly life, as commemorated and celebrated in the Liturgy, sets the stage for biocratic celebration respecting God, creation, and people.

2.1 Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and hope to human beings.

The angelic hymn at the Nativity of Jesus Christ marks the formal beginning of the Liturgy of the *Qurbana* (the Eucharistic Liturgy), disclosing the new dispensation with the mystery of the Incarnation. This hymn solemnly and simply presents the roadmap towards salvation inaugurated with the ministry of Jesus. The angelic hymn describes the threefold realities and relationalities: God, earth, and human beings. These relationalities merge and complement each other: glorifying God, establishing peace on earth, and giving hope to human beings. Jesus accomplished this mission, and his missionary disciples must follow in the footsteps of their Master, carrying out all these three missions faithfully and fruitfully.

Biocratically speaking, the angelic hymn is a blueprint for establishing peace on earth, whatever brings glory to God and hope to human beings through human interactions and interventions, as Jesus did in his time. Peace stands for all-round holistic progress and prosperity. The Liturgy invites the assembly to fix their gaze on earth while they glorify God in the highest, which, in turn, will guarantee hope to humans. These threefold realities and relationalities are interrelated and mutually complementing; one mirrors the other. Maintaining a balance between God, creation, and humans is the challenge and privilege of the liturgical assembly. There is no watertight compartmentalisation but genuine interconnectivity towards holistic development and full flourishing.

Peace on earth is not merely the absence of war. Indeed, the liturgical congregation prays for the ending of all wars. Genuine peace is the well-being or welfare of all things. Keeping nature's rhythm, we must work towards the well-being of everything in the world. The angels brought the message of the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds, keeping watch over their cattle in the field, and the starlit sky communicated the birth of Jesus to the magi. The message of salvation comes to the people in close communion with nature who are at home with heaven and earth.

Soon after celebrating the angelic hymn in the *Qurbana*, the assembly lifts their heart to God in the prayer Jesus taught with different antiphons. One of the antiphons reads, "Our Father in heaven, heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Angels and people sing out Your glory; Holy, holy, holy are you."[8] The gathering encounters earth and heaven filled with God's glory by entering the liturgical space-time. Does this liturgical experience inform us that the encounter of the earth and heaven go hand in hand? There is a co-mingling of the earth and heaven, immanence and transcendence; it is a continuum. Does this not indirectly instruct us that to have the sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste of heaven depends on our earthly experiences?

The celebrants hold earth and heaven together in the following *slota* (oration), which is typical: "Lord, our God! May the adorable name of Your most glorious Trinity be always praised and glorified, adored and exalted in heaven and on earth, Lord of all, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, forever."[9] The congregation repeatedly realises the necessity of relating to earth and heaven in one breath. This relationship with the earth and heaven is the Nicene Symbol's legacy and the mother Church's heritage.

2.2 ". . . thanksgiving from every tongue and praise from every creature"

In the Anaphora, the assembly celebrates the worth and beauty of creation at different moments of the *Qurbana*. The second *g'hantha* (inclination) prayer is in praise of the most Holy Trinity on account of creation:

> "Lord of all, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! The adorable name of the most Blessed Trinity is worthy of honour from every mouth, thanksgiving from every tongue, and praise from every creature. For, in your kindness, You created the world and everything in it, and showed humanity Your immense mercy."[10]

All things in creation praise and worship the Lord God. The gathering remembers the great things of the Lord for His people, for the beautiful creation. There is a coming together of all creatures, including humans and creation. In this prayer, we notice the priestly function of human beings praising and honouring the Lord on account of the entire creation. People feel responsible for raising their hearts and minds to God, remembering the immense divine mercy. The above prayer is a sample of several prayers in the Liturgy showcasing our closeness with creation and commitment to the Creator. Are we not called to put on a lifestyle concurrent with the eucharistic mindset towards creation and grow in a symbiotic style?

Another prayer by the celebrant orchestrates the Trinitarian economy: "God the Father, You are holy. You alone are the true Father! All Fatherhood in heaven and on earth comes from You. Eternal Son, You are holy. Everything was created through You. Everything is sanctified through You."[11] The mystery of the Holy Trinity envelops us, and its impact is tremendous. All things are holy, and they take us to encounter the Holy Trinity. Life in the world springs, is sustained, and sanctified by the Holy Trinity, and, therefore, there is no reason to reject life but to rejoice with it in communion with the mystery of the Trinity. Is this prayer not a powerful echo of the Nicene Symbol? Are we not enabled and empowered to continue the Liturgy of praise and thanksgiving even after the Liturgy? Where there is the communion of the Blessed Trinity, there is life in its fullness and bliss.

2.3 "To make us share in Your divine life."

The Liturgy of the *Qurbana* "gives life to the whole world."[12] Remembering the economic Christology, the congregation acknowledges in adoration,

"To make us share in Your divine life, You assumed our human nature, restored us from our fallen state, and brought us from death to life eternal."[13] Jesus, through his Paschal event, blessed humanity to vivify it with divinity. The purpose of salvation is to become whole – to restore the image of God – the divinity mingled with humanity. Life is the substratum of Christ's mystery and salvation history, which the worshipping community solemnly commemorates and celebrates in every Qurbana, enlightening and enriching people with life, human and divine. Is this not the sense of the Nicene Symbol? Does not this celebration impinge on the celebrants to transform into the mind of Christ, who became a servant to save the world? The liturgical assembly commemorates and celebrates the promise of Jesus, "Whoever approaches me and receives me with love will live in me forever and will inherit the kingdom of heaven."[14]

The second Epiclesis in the *Qurbana* invokes the Holy Spirit on the whole congregation rather than the offerings. It reiterates the accompanying fellowship of the Holy Spirit in the community and liberates people to enter and encounter new life in the heavenly kingdom:

> May He dwell on this *Qurbana* of Your servants and bless and sanctify it. May this *Qurbana* grant us remission of our debts, forgiveness of our sins, great hope in the resurrection of the dead, and new life in Your heavenly kingdom with all those who have found favour in Your presence.[15]

The prayer of Epiclesis anticipates and actualises the mystery of our faith: new life in the heavenly kingdom with all who have found favour in Your presence. Those who have gone astray from the path of life – the new life in the Spirit – have recourse to remission of debts and forgiveness of sins and regain the vitality and vibrancy to celebrate the life of the Lord in the world with all people. Accompanying the faithful in their journey to the new life, the Holy Spirit dwells in the assembly, making it holy to be worthy partakers in divine life for eternity.

Renewing their faith in the promise of Jesus, people flock to the wondrous divine mystery, "Whoever approaches me and receives me with love will live in me forever and will inherit the kingdom of heaven"(62). This aspiration of the celebrants conveys the theme of life, encoding eternal life fully in alignment with the biblical revelation.

Life is the undercurrent of the *Qurbana* celebration, and the latter accelerates life for the celebrants to be on their faith journey. At the

close of the litany in the Rite of Reconciliation, the assembly, in one voice, responds, "May they be the source of life everlasting" (65). To begin the Rite of Communion and to mark the Rite of Reconciliation, the celebrant prays on behalf of the community, "Enable us to stand in Your presence with cheerful faces and pure hearts" (66). The celebrant announces, "For Yours is the kingdom, the might, the power, and the dominion in heaven and on earth. Now, always, and forever."[16]

In all these instances and others of the *Qurbana* celebration, the theme and vibration of life become fundamental and prominent, a permanent style of the liturgical celebration. The final benediction of the *Qurbana* makes the theme as eloquent as at the commencement, "May He bestow His mercy and blessings on us, the whole world, and the holy Church and all her children. Now, always, and forever."[17] Life in fullness, here and hereafter, is the concurrent theme of the liturgical celebration, unveiling the project of God for the world. Are we not inspired to celebrate life with God in the world in the company of fellow beings? Is this not the will of God for our times?

3. Beatific Horizon

As your horizon, so is your action. Our horizon sets the action plan. The Nicene Symbol presents a panoramic horizon – an integral and inclusive horizon on life – beginning with creation and culminating in the eschaton. The painting on the canvas is colourful and meaningful, comprehensive yet concise. The beatific horizon sketched in the Nicene Symbol resembles nothing less than a beatific vision. Does this not offer a world vision to marvel at, meditate on, and attain a certain amount of mastery? The arc of life is the arc of the Nicene Symbol.

3.1 Unfolding of Life

Life beats in the world as the heartbeat of a human being. The Word, "Let there be . . ." (Gen. 1:3) makes life visible in the world. God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind" (Gen. 1:24). In the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, the evolution of life is mystically shared, "In the beginning was the Word, . . . through him all things were made; . . . In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (Jn. 1:1-4). The eternal Word – life in himself – became the world. The unfolding of life is magical and meaningful. Life

fills everywhere, and because it is the light of all, we see the glory of God (Jn. 1:14). In other words, the life of God is the light that shines before our eyes. At another level of creation, "the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). The creation of human beings is unique. However, human life is intimately related to earth – landedness – and coupled with the breath of God. Humans are open to the Lord, rooted in the land and associated with each other (Gen. 2:22-24).

In the unfolding of life, we notice threefold realities: God, creation, and humans. We are what our relations are. The triadic relationships emerging from threefold realities are vertical, radical, and horizontal. Often, we neglect to highlight the radical relationships of humans with creation. Landedness[18] – the *adamah* motif – of humans is fundamental to their existence and operations, as revealed in the biblical account of creation. This assertion does not mean that there was no radical relationship with creation. Survival of humans is impossible without its rootedness. The bond of humans with the elements of creation, earth, water, air, fire, and ether, existed from the beginning, but this aspect of humans was not sufficiently and explicitly stated. Given the ecological crises, it is high time to accentuate the landedness of humans without undermining their openness to God and relatedness to fellow beings.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10). To have life fully flourish, there is the need for these triadic realities, seen at every stage of salvation. There are three realities at the moment of creation: God, creation, and people. In conversation with and communion of these threefold realities, we see the garden of Eden flourishing, and there is the thrill of life. The rupture in relationship with creation is detrimental to the garden life, resulting in people being driven out of it (Gen. 3:24). More than ever before, striking a balance of the delicate bond among the triadic relationships is a challenge and privilege. Bringing forth life in abundance, the grain of wheat has to die unto itself (Jn. 12:22-26). So, too, humans, for their flowering in the garden of God, have to develop a bond with the ground (Gen. 2:15) by maintaining a friendship with creation.

We see the same pattern slightly modified in the successive decisive stages of salvation—the Cross of Christ, the sign of salvation, may be a typical example of redemption in Christ. Jesus on the Cross successfully reveals the threefold realities. First, the cross is made up of a tree,

symbolising nature, and the tree is rooted in the hill of Calvary, again a symbol of the universe. The wooden cross and its rootedness in the earth refer to the much-needed radical relationship with creation. Second, the outstretched hands of Jesus on the cross embrace all humanity, a typical example of the horizontal relationship with human beings, moved by compassion and forgiveness. Third, the total surrender of Jesus to God on the cross brings the vertical relationship with God. In this manner, the Cross of Christ takes us to the encounter of triadic realities and corresponding relationships, thus making it a symbol of salvation, wholeness, and inclusiveness of visible and tangible relationships.

In the phase of the eschaton, we encounter the threefold realities and subsequent relationships. First, the image of the new earth and heaven in the Parousia is typical of our radical relationship with nature. Second, the picture of the assembly of God refers to horizontal relationships with fellow beings. Third, in the eschatological time, we encounter the Lord enthroned, a beautiful symbol of our oneness with the Lord, the vertical dimension of our relationship. Thus, we see the pattern of the triadic realities and corresponding relationships that make our lives whole and blessed, the prototype of which is choreographed in the Nicene Symbol.

3.2 Seeing, Loving, Sending to Preach the Gospel to all creation

The beatific vision is a blessed gaze of the Lord, who has gone before us to show us the path of a holistic and integral perspective on life in the world. We believe in God, the maker of earth and heaven, who saw all he had made as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). This act of the Lord inspires us to see the truth, goodness, beauty, and glory of life in creation. Does this utterance and gesture of the Lord God leave us a command to work in and wonder about the world and its myriad life forms? Can this attitude of God be a game-changer in approaching diverse life forms in the world?

The beatific vision is in imbibing the spirit of the Lord God for the world. We believe in God, who “so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). In this decisive saving act of God, we encounter God, who not only sees and enjoys the beauty of the world he made but also sends his only Son to save the world and become the source of eternal life. This desire and decision to save the world by giving eternal life through his Son is a clarion call to imitate the beatific vision of God for the world in our lives to be a blessing and to bless the Lord.

At the final leg of Jesus' earthly sojourn and mission, Jesus commissions his disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mk. 16:15). Is this commission of Jesus to us, his missionary disciples, to go forth to preach the good news of life in the world? Should we not be transformed into missionaries of Christ, bringing a beatific vision of God to the world? Do we have a gospel to preach to earth and heaven? We are servants of God and friends of Jesus to spread the good news of life in every form and stage.

Filled with the beatific vision of Jesus – the truth, the way, and the life – we human beings – the children of God, the disciples of Jesus Christ, the fellows of the Holy Spirit – are friends of creation, irradiating the true nature of the image of God in the celebration of creation and life. Thus, we might live a faithful and free life of the disciples of Jesus on earth, heralding the good news at every moment of our lives.

3.3 Covenant Community Consciousness

Life thrives in a covenant context, giving partners safety, security, unconditional accompaniment and support on their journey. The history of salvation is the history of the covenant of faithfulness of God. As long as a covenant community consciousness is alive, the stage for celebrating life will be vibrant and attractive.

Yahweh's blessings to Abraham are threefold: land, people, and the presence of the Lord (Gen. 12:1-3), a blessing pattern vital and visible throughout salvation history. The Lord, land, and people showcase the covenantal community consciousness. However, the bond of the covenant is interdependent and interconnected: God is the Lord of all; creation belongs to God; people are the children of God and servants unto creation, reflecting the image of God in their daily living. Being the image of God means that the children of God have the unconditional love and the faithfulness of God towards land and people. Being created in the image and likeness of God, people must be the loving and life-giving presence of the Lord in the covenant community. There is peace, prosperity, and bliss when all three players are in harmony. Yahweh is the Lord of all things, visible and invisible. When people respect and respond to this fundamental truth, all things flourish in the land, and people are happy. On the contrary, everything goes upside down when the relationship among these realities is ruptured due to ignorance or forgetfulness. The institutions of Sabbath and Jubilee may be seen as devices to restore and revive the covenantal community consciousness.

The Church is the new covenant community. Covenant community consciousness of the Church imbibes the characteristics of the Trinitarian community, the prototype of all communities on earth. Practically speaking, the Church has to present the image of the Trinity in dispensing the love of the Father, the mercy of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It means being creative like God, the Father, liberating like Jesus Christ, and celebrating like the Holy Spirit. Reinventing the characteristics of the Bride of Christ, the Church has to offer the compassionate face, name, and nature of God to the world through her manifold apostolates.

Covenant community consciousness is conducive to nurturing and fostering life, beginning with family, a church in miniature form, and the Church, which is a family of families. No doubt, family is the way of the future Church. Celebration of life in families is the sure guarantee of the coming Church. Asia, in general, and India, in particular, celebrate family life, though it is undergoing rapid change. Family is the cradle of covenant community consciousness. Playful learning of values and virtues occurs in the family environment, showcasing God's unconditional love and faithfulness through parents' mutual love, sharing, service, and sacrifice for the culture of love and life.

Conclusion: Celebration of Life in Christ[19]

Biocratic celebration – a celebration of life governance – is the Nicene Symbol's overarching theme. Life is the fundamental principle in the world, and all activities are directed towards attaining life in fullness. Taking a cue from the Nicene Symbol, it is an acceptable time to rediscover and rededicate ourselves to the principle and governance of life – the foundation, force, and focus of being and becoming – emphasising temporal and eternal life.

Life is the link that unites and directs our thoughts, words, and actions, ultimately leading us to abundant life through proper relationships with God, creation, and people. When life gains its rightful place in our theological investigation and liturgical celebration, we will become Eucharistic in our outlook – always praising, thanking, adoring, and honouring the Lord of all – for the beautiful and gratuitous gift of life.

As you believe, so you behave. As a result of our Eucharistic outlook, we will think and act following the beatific vision, where the mystery of faith will shed light on our path of covenant community consciousness,

realising the essence of our existence and mission is life as it unfolds on our journey. Life makes the earth and heaven mingle and merge; life becomes sacred, and the service of life is our hallmark. The young man's question to Jesus is still relevant and repeated by many, if not all: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mt. 19:16-21). Responding to the command of Jesus, "follow me," our search for life should go on, and the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, accompanies us on our pilgrimage.

At this juncture, I am fascinated by Jonas Thaliath's description of theology. Following the frame of Saint Anselm, he writes that theology is "faith seeking the harmony of life" (*fides quaerens harmoniam vitae*).[20] According to this Indian theologian, Jesus Christ is the key to theology. This description of theology is Asian in ethos, ecologically sound, and genuinely Christian. Harmony is the heart of Asian thinking and living. The 1700th year of the Council of Nicaea is a grace-filled time to reclaim the spirit of life's harmony and beauty.

The Nicene Symbol was an attempt to bring harmony to the life of the Church. More than ever, the world requires the gospel of life, *Evangelium vitae*.[21] The powerful method of transmitting the principle of life and transforming the world in the light of life, beginning from family through world family – *vasudaivakutumbakam* – was and is its celebration. So, accentuating a couple of elements inherent in the description of theology by Jonas Thaliath, I propose a slightly adapted version: theology is *faith seeking the celebration of life in Christ*.[22] This description of theology weaves a few characteristics of Asian ethos, striking harmony in families and society through genuine celebrations, life, and Jesus Christ. Playfulness immensely contributes to narrative theology – the essence of storytelling. The heart of Asians is inclined to the attraction of beauty, joy, and glory resplendent in the person and mission of Jesus Christ, the Asian.[23]

Celebrating life in the Lord, on the land, and with people, the Nicene Symbol's overarching framework unfolds a broader horizon to address the contextual ecological crisis by embracing life and its governance. At the time of the Nicene Creed's formulation, there were no environmental issues as we confront them today. Nevertheless, the Nicene Symbol respires life, echoing at every decisive stage of salvation – creation, redemption, and the new creation – all these stages brimming with life celebration, indicating the priority of life, temporal and eternal. Does this emphasis on life invite us to recognise, respect, and respond to life? Is

it a sufficient reason to revisit contemporary patterns of democracy? Is it an acceptable time to imagine biocracy as an alternative to remedy democratic governing? Are Asian Christians, blessed by the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Asia, ready to breathe fresh air to respond to the Gospel of Life? As Asians, it is time to begin biocratic celebrations as a sign of being blessed, showcasing the covenantal community consciousness of life and flourishing. Blessed are those who befriend life; they will be God's chosen possession in the world!

Let me conclude this reflection with the angelic hymn at the Nativity of Jesus, which showcases the biocratic celebration assuring the encounter of the Lord, Land, and People, typical of the covenant community consciousness, overshadowing the creation account in *Genesis* 2:4-24 and the projected eschatological scene in *Revelation* 21:1-5:

> Glory to the Lord in the highest, on the earth peace and prosperity, and to people joy and hope in abundance![24]

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[1] Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1990, 122. All references to Nicene Creed will be from this text, which is considered an expanded version of the original Nicene Creed at the Council of Constantinople 381.

[2] See Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth,* San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1990. The author discusses an agenda for an ecological age, 65-69.

[3] Paulachan Kochappilly, *Celebrative Ethics. Ecological Issues in the Light of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1999.

[4] Saint Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise,* V, 2, Introduction and translation by Sebastian Brock, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1990, 102.

[5] Saint Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise,* VII, 21:126-127.

[6] Syro-Malabar Bishop's Synod, *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* Major Archepiscopal Curia, Mount St Thomas, Kakkanad, 2005, 45.

[7] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 51.

[8] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,*15.

[9] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 17.

[10] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 50.

[11] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 51.

[12] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 61.

[13] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 54.

[14] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 62.

[15] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 57.

[16] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 67.

[17] *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana,* 77.

[18] Paul Kalluveettil, "The Transcending and Transgressing Man," *Bible Bashyam* 12 (1986): 85-99.

[19] Paulachan Kochappilly, *Eastern Perspectives on Christian Ethics,* Bengaluru, Dharmaram Publications,

[20] Jonas Thaliath, "His Vision of Theological Formation," Dharmaram Pontifical Institute, Annual Jubilee Souvenir, 1957-1982. Reprinted in Paulachan Kochappilly, ed., *"Let My People God!" Bishop Jonas Thaliath CMI: A Legendary Leadership in the Church*, Dharmaram Publications, Bengaluru, 2020, 201-2004.

[21] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, Rome, 1995.

[22] Paulachan Kochappilly, "Theological Formation in the Multicultural Context of Asia," *Third Millennium. Indian Journal of Evangelization* 12/4 (October-December 2009):06-27.

[23] John Paul II, *Church in Asia,* given at New Delhi, India, on 6 November 1999, § 1. The apostolic exhortation opens with these words, "The Church in Asia sings the praises of the «God of salvation» (Ps 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of that continent. It was in fact Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning. . . . In «the fullness of time» (Gal 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian! Exulting in the goodness of the continent's people, cultures, and religious vitality, and conscious at the same time of the unique gift of faith which she has received for the good of all, the Church in Asia cannot cease to proclaim: «Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures forever» (Ps 118:1)." Is this affirmation, often ignored by several Asian Christians, not a wake-up call to rise to the occasion of the Gospel of Life?

[24] This text of the angelic hymn is in tune with the *Peshitha* and the Liturgical text of the Syro-Malabar *Qurbana.* It is rendered in Sanskrit by the author adding the element of joy to it, depicting the hallmark of Jesus' birth in *Luke* 2: 10 and the essence of his teaching in *John* 15:11.

Embodying Sacred Cosmic Solidarity in the *Itneg* People's *Tadek*[1]

Ma Glovedi Joy L. Bigornia

Introduction

This paper explores the nexus between Indigenous worldviews, spirituality, and eco-theology as embodied in *Tadek*, a cultural dance of the *Itneg*[2] people in the Cordillera Region, Philippines. The discussion of *Tadek* is situated within a broader theological discourse that resounds with the Nicene Creed's affirmation of God as the "maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." *Tadek* is one of two dances of the *Itneg* people.[3] For the *Itneg* people, *Tadek* is not only a dance of cultural expression but also a reflection of an interconnected philosophy of life in honour of the sanctity and unity of all creation.

Similar to other Indigenous communities in many parts of the world, traditional dancing is a performative act symbolic of culture. Yet more than a performance, *Tadek* takes on a dynamic meaning as an active revelation and a living expression of the *Itneg's* cosmovision, religious worldviews, and spiritual wisdom. In a period where modern and technological activities occupy and distract people, including those from Indigenous areas, *Tadek* weaves *Itneg* people back to that which is sacred and spiritual. As a living repository of *Itneg's* collective memory and identity, it is a reminder and reaffirmation of their inseparable relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. Amidst the overwhelming power of modernity that threatens to break Indigenous theo-philosophical traditions, *Tadek* is an insisting, resisting, and integrating cultural practice and artistic-spiritual force that sustains the *Itneg* lifeworld. Further, *Tadek* is a physical embodiment of the sacred interconnectedness of life between humanity, nature, and the divine. This represents a cosmic solidarity that is life/creation-centred and aligned with the theological affirmation of creation's wholeness. This creation-centric/biocentric/cosmic solidarity is activated in every moment of *Tadek* dancing.

Persistent coloniality, in my view, is a formidable nemesis and presents a continuous quandary to the re/appearance of cosmic integrity. Coloniality is the ideology that spreads Western-centredness further beyond the life of colonialism. Enunciating the distinction between coloniality and colonialism, Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains:

> Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.[4]

It is accompanied by its corresponding self-sustaining values and principles of binaries, dichotomies, and hierarchies. Along this line, Arturo Escobar explained coloniality's core characteristic, "the central feature of which is the categorisation and hierarchical classification of differences, leading to the suppression, devaluing, subordination, or even destruction of forms of knowledge and being that do not conform to the dominant form of modernity."[5] It is coloniality's hierarchical taxonomy and ideological elevation of one group over others that is mirrored in the hierarchisation of creation in lieu of anthropocentric gains. Colonial structures and systems, including ethical systems, have historically caused nature to be instrumentalised and exploited. Coloniality strategically recreates the biblical narrative of egalitarian stewardship into human domination over nature. This creates a disconnect between humanity with its ecological and spiritual contexts. With decoloniality as a framework, this paper attempts to disrupt the disconnection and unravel the decolonial potentials of *Tadek* as a site for the affirmation and practice of cosmic wholeness and bio-affirming theology—a holistic theology of interconnected creation. As coloniality places human development in an infinite dialectical opposition with the flourishing of the rest of creation, *Tadek,* as an embodied manifestation of *Itneg* Indigenous wisdom, challenges this inverse binary relation and the ideological separation of the human biosphere and eco-spiritual spheres.

Through the decolonial lens, I am arguing for *Tadek* as a critical and creative resource for contemporary eco-theological reflection and praxis in view of destabilising asymmetric conceptualisation and practices towards creation. In an ongoing struggle for ecological justice, *Tadek* serves as a dance of interrelation and solidarity that subsequently evokes

a sense of moral and sacred responsibility to the world. As a solidarity dance, *Tadek* is a communal affirmation of the *Itneg's* commitment to this responsibility and their recognition and demonstration of the covenantal bond between God, humans, and nature. By exposing and recentring *Tadek* as an embodied solidarity practice of interconnectedness of all creation, this paper aims to contribute to a global discourse on creation spirituality/theology, eco-justice, decoloniality, and Indigenous culture, knowledge, and practices.

Theological Discussions of Sacred Interconnectedness and Solidarity

Many Indigenous bodies of knowledge and practices are life-nurturing precisely because they are informed by the notion of sacred interconnectedness of life, clearing ways for cosmic unity. *Tadek*, as a cultural performance, underpinned by *Itneg's* view of interconnectedness, collapses the boundary between natural and spiritual. This means that the very act of *Tadek* dancing is an inherent recognition of the divine presence in everything and the constant entanglement of the human, natural, and supernatural. *Tadek* is both a symbolic and lived expression of the intermingling of worlds and cosmic unity that can be found in theological frameworks.

That there exists a presence of divine imprint in all of creation is conveyed by the Nicene Creed's proclamation that God is the "maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." This endows all forms of life/creation (human, nonhuman, living, non-living) and all worlds (natural, supernatural, and in-between) with an immutable sacredness as they exist in a relationship with the Creator. This interrelationship with divinity creates sacrality in creation that should act as a deterrent to anthropocentric manipulation and exploitation. The Nicene Creed's annunciation lends theological credence to a symbiotic relationship between and among creation and towards mutual care and respect.

Historically, however, theological hermeneutics and biblical exegesis have been skewed in favour of anthropocentrism. This is the case even though, according to Kim Junghyung, "modern scientific developments have very effectively broken down several ancient anthropocentric prejudices."[6] In the context of Christ's work of redemption, many theologians were preoccupied with the notion of human salvation, designating the rest of creation as an accessory if not the backstage of its actualisation. This is elaborated by Kim when he states, "I concede that many of traditional theological representations of Christian faith have focused on Christ's

redemptive/salvific work for the wretched human condition understood primarily in terms of moral sin. In this redemption-centred theological paradigm, creation is regarded merely as a stage for God's saving history with the human beings and thus recedes to the background of theological discussions."[7] Kim instead pushes for a creation-centred framework to construct what he calls a "theology of cosmic hope."[8] A theology of cosmic hope encourages a movement away from religious anthropologising toward embracing a more expansive and comprehensive creation theology. In Kim's thought, this is moving away from "theo-anthropology"[9] and stepping into "theo-cosmology."[10] He proposes, "If what Karl Barth called 'theo-anthropology,' according to which the proper subject of theology is confined to God and humanity almost to the exclusion of the nonhuman created world, has dominated much of modern Western theological discussion up until now, it seems that this is the opportune time to consider a paradigm shift from theo-anthropology to what I call 'theo-cosmology,' according to which the proper subject of Christian theology is conceived as the relation between God and cosmos as creation."[11] From this backdrop, it is possible to rethink and conceive of the interconnection and solidarity of all creation. It is also within this theological stance that *Tadek* is reimagined as a living symbol of cosmic solidarity.

Colonial Ethics and the Disconnectedness of Creation

In my view, the disconnection between creation is tied to the perpetuation of entrenched coloniality. Coloniality is "a power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design"[12] that survived and extends beyond the life of colonialism.[13] It is a "global power structure that sustains asymmetrical power relations between the Euro-American World and the Global South."[14] Coloniality reconfigured the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and dimensions of human relations and existence that have been didactically redesigned and co-opted, in a self-perpetuating manner, the socioeconomic, political, religious, and ethical systems.

The onset of fragmentation in creation, which comes in the form of hierarchisation and ideological separation, is critical for the colonial agenda of expansion. This same logic of division is a requisite for preconditioning and acceptance of the colonial definition of human development as modernity. The modern colonial perspective of development is linked to an ethical grounding that packages modernity as the greater good, which requires sacrifices and offerings. According to Mignolo, coloniality is "an

embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernisation, and being good for everyone."[15] As such, "Coloniality is indeed the hidden weapon behind the rhetoric of modernity justifying all kinds of actions, including war, in order to eliminate 'barbarism' and overcome 'tradition'. Thus, coloniality is, like the unconscious, the hidden weapon of both the civilising and developmental mission of modernity."[16] In reality, it advances the centrality and dominance of Western interests. In this sense, the underpinning ethical frame of development becomes hegemonic, which pushes for the necessity of sacrifices in the name of progress. It became apparent that the goodness brought by modern developments has to be paid for through the creation and subsequent negation (and obscuring) of victims. This is the ethics of the modern-colonial world-system that reverberates in the contemporary context. In this ethical system, hierarchical division is validated, and some groups of humans and the whole of the nonhuman realm are placed at the bottom rung of the modern-colonial taxonomy.

Enrique Dussel talked about the ethics of a modern-colonial world-system that legitimises the existence of victims.[17] In his work *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, Dussel formulated his antithesis to the oppressive ethical framework of the modern-colonial world system. Dussel's ethics of liberation takes the position of the victims whose physical reality was cancelled by the goodness claim of modern ethics.[18] As such, liberation ethics becomes an ethical critique that exposes the problem created by the modern–colonial world system. In the Dusselian philosophy, the universal material principle of ethics is an affirmation of life. For Dussel, the content of ethics (how the musings of the mind are understood in the physical reality) is the "principle of the obligation to produce, reproduce and develop the concrete human life of each ethical subject in the community."[19] In this sense, the aim of decoloniality to produce the right conditions for human living is aligned with this principle. However, the ethical demand to produce and reproduce would soon exhaust and destroy the lives of living and non-living things. Due to the irrational commitment to the ethical demand, the victims are negated and the evil is concealed[20] for the sake of the greater good. Particularly, the greater good arising from economic growth as a by-product of modern developments is the ethical demand of the modern-colonial world system at the expense of those who are violated. From the vantage point of the dominant, the victims are always the other. The problem arises from the ethics of modernity that demands

hierarchies of lives to be produced. For a certain dominant group to live, some groups need to be sacrificed. Human life is hierarchised since the sacrifice would always come from the margins, the Indigenous and coloured people, and Indigenous and coloured women. These hierarchies are imposed to promote and maintain the colonial agenda of power. Making way for these hierarchies necessitates the retention of dichotomy relations – human versus non-humans/nature, civilised versus primitive, superior versus inferior, core versus periphery, etc. With these hierarchical classifications come the promotion of modern values such as individualism, competition, materialism, consumerism, and other bottom-line-driven values.

Expanding the argument from the perspective of human victims is taking the position of the nonhuman victims. Although the victims are primarily humans in the Dusselian philosophy, this paper argues for the inclusion of the rest of creation as a major victim of the hegemonic Western-centric, economic-driven colonial ethical system. The main argument is that the victimised other is not just human. Looking at the hierarchy from a different angle, human life is on top while others, the nonhumans, and non-living things like the land, rivers, and natural resources are at the bottom. The same oppressive ethical system demands that all things be created to foster human life. For humans to live, nonhumans and non-living entities must pay the price, thus creating a dichotomous relationship and binary opposition between humans and the rest of creation. From a modern ethical standpoint, the violation and harassment of other creations are justified for the sake of an anticipated greater economic good. Within colonial ethics, the idea of the good life or the well-being of humanity broke up its sacred bond with the ecosphere and the spiritual world.

This ethical principle, permeated by coloniality, is also tied to the theological thinking that places humans at the centre of God's work of salvation. The logic of human centrality in God's redemptive work engenders an exploitative theology that positions the rest of creation as passive instruments for the well-being/development (salvation) of humans. As coloniality has also been spread through civilising missions, the same principle is at work in the interpretation of biblical passages, privileging humans over other creations. In this view, human well-being is placed in an inverse polarity with ecological flourishing. This also extends to the privileging of Western categories and their opposite relationship with Indigenous knowledge. On this note, Kaunda spoke of how colonial hegemony is tied to the violence against Indigenous culture and environment in the African context. He argues, "The

colonial conception of the environment was based on cultural injustice as they sought to replace African Indigenous worldview with European concepts and categories. The colonialist did not seek to understand how African worldview functioned in relation to environmental conversation because of a preconceived claim to European cultural superiority."[21] The continuous performance of *Tadek* in the *Itneg* community remains a pocket of resistance against any form of cultural erasure or injustice. As such, I posit that *Tadek* represents a contra ontology, epistemology, and axiology to the coloniality of being, knowing, and valuing that constantly reproduces the self-serving ideology of a good life. As *Tadek* holds possibilities to reverse or dismantle coloniality's ontological and epistemic disconnections in creation, I argue that it is a decolonial space and a decolonialising act from which a theo-cosmology (borrowing from the work of Kim) or a theology of interconnected and united cosmos can be grounded, re/constructed, re/imagined, and re/enacted.

Decolonial Embodying of Sacred Cosmic Solidarity in *Tadek*

Invoking decoloniality as a critical framework in countering the coloniality-infused ethical demand of development means unearthing and reclaiming the viewpoints of the subalterns, those whose knowledge and practices have been historically marginalised. Decoloniality is a critique of a world system that strategically promotes Western-centricity and privileges colonial knowledge production that ascertains asymmetric power relations (human-human and human-nature relations). In the words of Maldonado-Torres, "By decoloniality it is meant here the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world."[22] It seeks to dismantle colonial imposition on ways of being and knowing and "disobeys, and delinks from [the colonial matrix of power], constructing paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living."[23] It involves an active reclamation of Indigenous cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies that have been eclipsed by coloniality of being and knowledge. This runs counter to the internalised oppression of the colonial subjects by externalising mimicry of the dominant, which Grosfuguel aptly described. He writes "[…] the success of the modern/colonial world-system consists in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions."[24]

In this paper, *Tadek* is conceived as an Indigenous decolonial dance that allows for the living and active practising of the *Itnegs'* onto-epistemic and cosmic spirituality/theo-philosophy of interconnected and cohesive life. In the context of *Tadek*, a decolonial approach involves recognising the dance as more than a folkloric or monolithic cultural artefact. Instead, it is a dynamic and fluid site of Indigenous practice and knowledge production that aims at re/constructing, re/enacting, and re/centring holistic and interlinked modes of being, thinking, imagining, relating, valuing, and becoming. It is a creative resource that opens up toward a decolonial option. A decolonial option "starts from the principle that the regeneration of life shall prevail over primacy of the production and reproduction of goods at the cost of life."[25] The principle of regeneration of life parallels *Tadek's* underpinning philosophy of a balanced and harmonious relationship of all creation. It is a practice that embodies an alternative worldview that resists any form of hierarchisation and colonial binaries between humans and nature and between the material and spiritual world. *Tadek* stands as a counter-narrative to colonially induced divisions as it expresses a relational mode of existence that recognises humanity as part of a broader cosmic order. By re-centring Indigenous spirituality and cosmology, *Tadek* disrupts the colonial logic of domination and reasserts a holistic understanding of human flourishing—one that is inextricably entangled with the well-being of the entire cosmosphere.

As an embodied dance of cosmic solidarity, *Tadek* is a disruptive intervening force to the colonial reformulation of development (the good life) that prompted the human-nonhuman divide. This is reflected by the spiritual, ecological, and communal elements embedded in a unified, sacred performance. In the *Itneg* community, *Tadek* is always performed in communal rituals and religious gatherings so that it is imbued with spiritual significance that is reflective of the *Itneg* people's cosmological worldview. In the very act of *Tadek* dancing, participants acknowledge and celebrate the divine presence that permeates every aspect of life—natural, social, and supernatural. This sacredness transforms *Tadek* into more than an aesthetic expression. Rather, it becomes a liturgical offering, an embodied prayer, and a communal invocation of the divine. Historically, *Tadek* has been central to *Itneg* communal rituals and gatherings that mark significant life events such as harvests, weddings, deaths, and religious ceremonies. These events are seen as opportunities and avenues to honour the divine forces that guide and sustain life. During *Tadek*, the dance movements, rhythms, and communal participation symbolise a harmonious relationship with their environment and the

divine. This alignment fosters a sense of gratitude, reverence, and spiritual grounding within the community and reminds the people to value mutual respect and oneness. The dance often incorporates elements such as chants, traditional instruments, and offerings, which further underscore its function as a medium for divine communication and connection.

The *Itneg* belief and knowledge system is grounded in the idea that the divine is not distant but intimately present in every aspect of existence—seen and unseen. *Tadek*, in this context, serves as a lived expression of this immanence. The dance movements and gestures that mimic natural elements, such as the flow of water, the rustling of leaves, or the flight of birds, are reflections of the belief that the natural world is a manifestation of divine creativity and presence. The collective nature of *Tadek* highlights the spiritual unity of the community, which is symbolic of how the divine works through and within human relationships, but these relationships are not confined to humans alone. *Tadek's* movements, location, purpose, participant, and overall structure point to the daily communion of people and nature. This makes *Tadek* an embodiment of the everyday patterns of thinking and acting of the *Itnegs*. As *Tadek* is in touch with the everyday realities of the *Itneg* people, it is a powerful decolonial pathway for re/animating a holistic and interconnected cosmological spirituality. This way, *Tadek* becomes an "everyday-life based approach"[26] decolonial resource. This focus is imperative for a more practical response to colonial and neocolonial continuities. Chammah Kaunda expressed the same sentiment when arguing for the need to engage the everyday decolonial gestures in the African context. He argues, "Without engaging everyday decolonial gestures, academic decolonial talk is an impractical solution to global coloniality. The continent is bombarded with decolonial theories that not only do not arise from everyday life but also have no bearing on concrete experiences and social problems."[27]

Being grounded in everyday experiences, *Tadek* becomes a repository of Indigenous ecological knowledge and cosmological spirituality that are also reenacted in every performance of *Tadek*. Performing *Tadek* is not only a reenactment of traditional practices but also an invocation of sacred memory—a way to renew and reaffirm the *Itneg* people's covenantal bond with the divine.

The dance is a vessel for the stories, prayers, and beliefs of the ancestors, which make it a conduit for spiritual continuity and cosmic solidarity. Each performance is a reenactment of the interconnectedness of all creation that aligns the dancers and the community with the divine order

of the universe. However, the remembrance and then the reaffirmation and renewal affected by *Tadek* dancing are in no way a nod to cultural revivalism, romanticism, or essentialism. The thoughts of Tlostanova and Mignolo on decolonisation as de-modernisation clarify and expound this idea. They state:

> Decolonial thinking is already about thinking otherwise and assuming from the start a de-modern thinking as well. To de-colonise means at the same time to de-modernise. And de-modernising means de-linking from modern, Western epistemology, from the perspective of which the questions of 'representation' and 'totality' are being constantly asked. De-modernise does not mean going back in time, which is the typical misunderstanding made by proponents of modernity's vector models who refuse "to go back to the dark ages". We mean something completely different here, and to understand what is de-modernisation, one has to forget the generally accepted juxtaposition of modernity and tradition as its 'dark other'. To do this would already be a de-colonial step.[28]

To follow up on this point, I resonate with Kaunda in his discussion about decolonial theology in relation to a cultural past. He points out, "Decolonial theology is not about reclaiming cultural past but redesigning the present by re-conceptualising how some cultural values could have developed on their own terms through assimilation and interaction with other global cultures if they were not estranged through negative encounters with colonialism."[29] This is instructive, especially in a context where cultural practices such as *Tadek* embody the everyday values and beliefs of the people.

In performing *Tadek*, the *Itneg* people practice and embody their everyday theology, which affirms the sacredness of life and all of creation and the divine's pervasive presence. This lived theology is a stark contrast to colonial frameworks that often de-sacralised Indigenous practices and knowledge. By grounding their theology and spirituality in *Tadek*, the *Itneg* people resist colonial erasures and reaffirm their sacred worldview. In a modern context, the continued practice of *Tadek* is a way for the *Itneg* people to renegotiate their position in the world. It integrates worship, ecological respect, and communal solidarity into a holistic expression of sacred cosmic interconnectedness. Through *Tadek*, the divine becomes tangible, present, and celebrated in the shared rhythms of the whole creation of life, nature, and community.

Concluding Thoughts

By continuing to perform *Tadek*, the *Itneg* community asserts the value of their worldview and resists coloniality's forces and power that seek to sever their connection to the environment, nature, and their sacred traditions. Therefore, *Tadek* offers transformative insights into how humanity might rethink its relationship with the cosmos in ways that embrace and protect the interconnectedness of all life, one that is urgently needed in the face of global ecological injustice. With its transformative gifts, it is important to rethink how the church and faith organisations make way to integrate Indigenous and traditional dances, such as *Tadek*, into their ecclesial or missional programmes. This self-reflection is done in consideration of the daunting challenge of reinvigorating Indigenous traditional dances, especially amongst the younger generation. Faced with the growing indifference towards rediscovering and exploring these dances due to overwhelming modern-day distractions, it is crucial for churches to interrogate and reassess their engagement with the youth concerning *Tadek* and other Indigenous dances.

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[2] The *Itnegs* can be classified into eleven (11) ethnolinguistic groups - *Inlaud, Adasen, Maeng, Masadiit, Banao, Binongan, Mabaka, Gabang, Balatok, Belwang,* and *Muyadan*. See Elizabeth Valera and Red Marian Antonette Valera, "Preserving the Tinguian Culture Heritage: Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education as Tool," *Sampurasun e-Journal* 2, no. 1 (June 2016): 79–89.

[3] Fay-Cooper Cole, *The Tinguian: Social, Religious, and Economic Life of a Philippine Tribe* (Project Gutenberg, 1922), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12849/12849-h/12849-h.htm#d0e10080.

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[6] Junghyung Kim, "Christian Anthropology in an Age of Science: Between Anthropocentrism and Non-Anthropocentrism." *Expository Times* 129, no. 12 (2018a): 549, https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524617753327. Junghyung Kim wrote a more comprehensive discussion on scientific challenges to anthropocentric prejudices in the same article.

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[8] Junghyung Kim, "Toward a Theology of Cosmic Hope: From Theo-Anthropology to Theo-Cosmology," *Neue Zeitschrift* für *Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 60, no. 4 (2018b): 518–30, https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2018-0031.
[9] Kim, "Theology of Cosmic Hope," 530.
[10] Kim, "Theology of Cosmic Hope," 530.
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[24] Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn," *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 213.
[25] Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 3.
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[27] Kaunda, "SAWUBONA," 46.
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Biocentric '*Sangsaeng*' Ministry and the significance of the Nicene Creed in Korea

Hong Seung Man

1. Introduction

The year 2025 marks the historic 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. It addresses a pressing issue that we collectively face as humanity—and especially as the Church in Asia—the climate crisis. We must ask whether we can bequeath a healthy planet to the following generations. This concern demands a shift in our thinking, as the climate crisis is fundamentally an issue of climate justice. The deeper root cause of this crisis lies in the broken relationship humanity has historically maintained with the Earth, its ecosystems, and the created world. The actions of humankind have caused harm, and the vulnerable—both our neighbours and other creatures—bear the brunt of this damage. In other words, millions of the world's poorest people suffer the most direct consequences of climate change. God's created world and its order do not revolve around humans; rather, they are centred on God and the entirety of creation. In light of the first mandate given to humanity in Genesis 1:28, we must fulfil our responsibilities as stewards of the Earth and all living creatures. It is not enough to simply preserve nature and the environment; we must understand humanity's place within creation. Moreover, we are called to hope for the restoration of creation (David 2021:9). Therefore, we must view God's creation not from an anthropocentric perspective but from a life-centred perspective. This compels us to work in solidarity for the care and integrity of creation.

Why do we, as we approach the 1700th anniversary of the Nicaea Council, seek to reaffirm the significance of the Council and the Nicene Creed? Why, at the CCA Congress of Asian Theologians, which is part of the Ecumenical Mission, do we strive for the visible unity and life-centred solidarity of the Asian Church? Why, here and now, do we emphasise the value of caring for creation and preserving its integrity, to foster transformation? We believe the Asian Church can initiate efforts to address the climate crisis through ecological justice, working toward visible unity and life-centred solidarity. In doing so, the Asian Church will become an interconnected and sustainable entity. This is the appropriate ecumenical response of the Asian Church. The Asian Church is diverse in terms of religion, culture, history, language, environment, climate,

and people. Nevertheless, we all confess the Nicene Creed weekly. The Nicene Creed is a crucial document that affirms the faith in the triune God. This confession of faith has manifested in various ways through the missional work of the Triune God, particularly in efforts to care for creation and preserve its integrity.

This study explores the missional significance of the Nicene Creed adopted at the Council of Nicaea and examines five key characteristics of transformational discipleship that align with the collaborative missional work of God. It then introduces Ssangsaem Natural Church, a representative "green church" of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK). It evaluates the church's ministry of mutual prosperity through transforming discipleship. Through its green ministry, Ssangsaem Natural Church seeks to cultivate mutual prosperity with God, nature, the local community, and the broader Korean Church. The final section will assess how this church's ministry aligns with the efforts of the Asian Church to participate in God's mission and life-centred solidarity. The study concludes by drawing connections between these efforts and proposing an ecumenical response from a missiological perspective.

2. The Nicene Creed (325) and Biocentric Solidarity

In AD 325, the Council of Nicaea was convened in Asia Minor. The central issue of the Council was the divinity of the Son, Jesus. The debate, which centred on whether Jesus was both fully divine and fully human, was fiercely contested between Alexander of Alexandria and Arius. Arius, who denied Jesus' divinity and claimed He was merely human, was ultimately declared a heretic (Kinzig 2024: 213, Olson 2017: 127-45). The Council concluded by affirming that Jesus is truly God and truly human. The core of the theological debate between Alexander and Arius centred on the nature and identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Logos, the Word who became incarnate. Arius sought to prove that the Son of God, also known as the Logos or the Word, was not of the same essence as the Father, but was the greatest of all creatures, created by the Father. In contrast, Bishop Alexander strongly believed in the eternal nature of the Son and firmly defended the divinity of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God (Olson 2017: 127). Additionally, the debate touched on the nature of the Trinity, with Arius and Athanasius representing opposing views at the Council of Nicaea. Arius claimed that if the Son were God, Christians would worship two Gods or believe in one divine person manifesting in three distinct forms. Athanasius, on the other hand, argued that God

is one glorious and worshipful being, and the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, with the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father. Thus, Christians believe in one divine being who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Olson 2017: 132-34).

The Nicene Creed, formulated at the Council of Nicaea, is one of the most significant creeds in the history of early Eastern Christianity (Kinzig 2024: 242). The creed reads as follows (Kinzig 2024: 246-48):

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things, visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth.
Who, for us humans and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate, and was made human.
He suffered, and the third day He rose again, ascended into heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead.
And in the Holy Spirit.
But those who say, "There was a time when He was not," and "He was not before He was made," and "He was made out of nothing," or "He is of another substance or essence," or "The Son of God is created, or changeable, or alterable" — they are condemned by the Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Given this, which parts of the Nicene Creed are particularly relevant to this paper? Two sections stand out. The first is the confession of belief in "one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things, visible and invisible." This acknowledges God as the Creator of all things, both seen and unseen. The second significant part is the confession that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." This affirms that Jesus, the Son of God, shares the same essence as the Father, was incarnate in human form, and never ceased to be God.

These confessions provide a theological foundation for "life-centred solidarity," particularly in the effort to care for creation and preserve the integrity of creation (CCA 2024: 3). Specifically, the belief in God as "the Creator of all things, visible and invisible" calls us to move beyond an anthropocentric view of ecology towards a life-centred perspective. This implies recognising the interconnectedness of all creations and

committing to a life of mutual flourishing (CCA 2024: 3). It is a shift from seeing the natural world as something to be exploited, to understanding it as sacred and intrinsically valuable—a web of life ordained by God. Psalm 24:1 reminds us, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." Human beings, as stewards of creation, are called to care for the earth, recognising that everything on it, including the land, belongs to God and possesses intrinsic value (CCA 2024: 3). The confession of God as the Creator points to the covenantal bond that unites God, humanity, and the rest of creation (Genesis 9; Exodus 19). God's promise to preserve creation and his commitment to never again destroy it reflect his deep relationship with creation, and his intent to make humanity and creation his treasured possession and a kingdom of priests.

3. Shalom and 'Sangsaeng' Ministry in the Transforming Discipleship

In this context, what is the significance of the Asian Church's collective profession of the Nicene Creed? In an era of climate crisis, the Asian Church must transition from an anthropocentric faith and lifestyle to an ecocentric one, emphasising the necessity of solidarity in ecocentric living. The pastoral and missional endeavours of Asian churches should pursue *shalom* and must achieve interconnectedness that links ecological, social, and spiritual well-being. In short, the Asian Church is called to deeply recognise the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and spiritual well-being, and to demonstrate this care for creation and stewardship in concrete actions. This is why the Christian Conference of Asia's 15th General Assembly, held in Kottayam, India, from September 27 to October 5, 2023, focused extensively on the theme, "God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation" (CCA 2023).

Asia, along with the rest of the world, has experienced the pain of the disruption of *shalom* during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023. However, the four years of the pandemic not only heightened awareness of the ongoing crisis in creation but also provided an opportunity to contemplate alternatives to the continued threats posed by climate change and ecological destruction. What, then, does *shalom* and *sangsaeng* (mutual life-giving) ministry entail in God's mission? In the Bible, *shalom* refers to a state of wholeness, peace, and fullness that comes from belief in the one Creator God, encompassing all creation. The biblical vision and ministry pursuing this *shalom* can be described as the pursuit of "cosmic wholeness." This pursuit of cosmic wholeness is grounded in a vision of harmony among all living beings under God's sovereignty, symbolising the

ultimate restoration of creation (CCA 2024: 3). However, this pursuit of cosmic wholeness presupposes that such wholeness has been fractured. The *shalom* that should encompass all creation has been disrupted, and Christians are called to work toward the restoration of *shalom* and present the eschatological hope of a new heaven and a new earth where justice and peace prevail throughout creation. The breakdown of *shalom* with creation, that is, the destruction of harmony and relationship with creation, has the potential to lead to large-scale human atrocities and environmental devastation. Therefore, any concept of mission as *shalom* must include social and economic justice and ecological justice. In this sense, the Asian church must expand its understanding of God's image to go beyond anthropocentrism, incorporating a broader concept of justice. Thus, the mission as *shalom* has the goal of liberation and salvation for the entire universe. "We believe in the Triune God who is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all life. God created the whole *oikoumene* in God's image and constantly works in the world to affirm and safeguard life" (Keum 2013: 4).

Furthermore, this study explores the missiological significance of *sangsaeng* (mutual life-giving). The biblical terms for peace, *shalom*, harmony, and reconciliation have similar counterparts in East Asia, particularly in China and Korea. While the concept of peace in China may resemble the biblical understanding of *shalom*, it is often limited by its focus on social equality. In Korea, the concept of peace is also related to *shalom*, with reconciliation being central to its understanding due to the reality of the nation's division (Keum 2022:193). Peace signifies a state of reconciliation and restored relationships—achieved when God, humanity, and creation are united or reconciled. This is the biblical ideal of reconciliation, and a newly reconciled community maintains this sense of peace. According to Keum, the ultimate goal of achieving and maintaining this peace is *sangsaeng* (mutual life-giving) (Keum 2022: 194).

But what does *sangsaeng* mean? *Sangsaeng* is one of the core philosophical principles of Jeungsando, a new Messianic religious movement in Korea (Flaherty 2004). This study aims to connect the concept of *sangsaeng* with the Christian idea of *shalom* and creation care. The term *sang* means "mutual" or "together," and *saeng* means "life." In Jeungsando, the term *cheonji gaebyuk* refers to a cosmic transformation in which heaven and earth open and change. It refers to the end of the Anthropocene, with the transition from summer to autumn in the cosmic

cycle, a time of maturity, unity, and harmony, involving the transformation of nature, society, and individuals (Keum 2022:194). Because the ruling principles of Early Heaven and Later Heaven differ, *sangsaeng* is necessary. In Early Heaven, the principle of *sanggeuk* (mutual conflict and competition) governs all life, leading to suffering and conflict among all beings. Therefore, Jeungsando teaches that liberation from this suffering, known as *haewon* (resolution of grievances), is necessary to achieve *sangsaeng* in the movement towards *cheonji gaebyuk*. The pre-Cosmic Year history is one of *han* (deep sorrow or resentment) caused by gender discrimination, racism, the caste system, social exclusion, economic inequality, political oppression, religious persecution, violence, and war. However, in Later Heaven, the principle of *sangsaeng* (mutual life-giving) will be fully realised among all beings in the universe. Thus, the purpose of *sangsaeng* is harmonious life and the great transformation of heaven and earth during *cheonji gaebyuk* (Keum 2022: 194).

This study argues that the concept of *sangsaeng* in Jeungsando, which envisions reconciliation and liberation from *han* during cosmic transformation, shares similarities with the biblical spirit of *shalom*, reconciliation, and peace in Christianity. In a world where *shalom* has been broken—marked by conflict, division, war, gender discrimination, racism, the entrenchment of the caste system, social exclusion, economic inequality, political oppression, and religious persecution—*sangsaeng* speaks to the restoration of relationships among God, humanity, and all creation through transformation. This concept of mutual life-giving amidst the brokenness of *shalom* is worthy of consideration. Furthermore, describing the suffering, sorrow, and grief of the marginalised as *han* and calling for its resolution through cosmic transformation aligns with the researcher's proposal of *sangsaeng* ministry through transforming discipleship. However, while Jeungsando focuses on a cosmic, Messianic transformation, the concept of *sangsaeng* ministry emphasises its realisation in the relationships between God, individuals, church communities, local communities, nature, and the universal church. It argues that the concept of *sangsaeng* holds important implications for the Asian church. Specifically, the ministry of *sangsaeng* can be expanded to include mutual life-giving relationships with God, nature, the local community, and the universal church. Building on this exploration of the concept of *sangsaeng*, the following section introduces Ssangsaem Natural Church, and it examines its ministry in light of the five characteristics of transforming discipleship and the concept of *sangsaeng*.

4. The SSANGSAEM Natural Church in PCK: the Case of the 'Sangsaeng' Ministry in the Perspective of the Transforming Discipleship

In this section, this study introduces Ssangsaem Nature Church, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) and located in Boeun County, Chungcheongbuk-do, and analyses its ministry from the standpoint of transforming discipleship, seeking points of contact that can be shared with other Asian churches as well. Ssangsaem Church held its inaugural service on July 12, 1992, in Ssangsaemgol, Mochung-dong, Cheongju, Chungcheongbuk-do, South Korea. Cheongju, situated in the southwestern part of Chungcheongbuk-do in central South Korea, is known as the "city of education" due to its strong emphasis on educational development. The name "Ssangsaemgol" means "a village with two springs." The church was founded as a social ministry for the poor in the area. The senior pastor, Young-Gi Baek, began a small church for the urban poor, simultaneously running a "Salim Study Room" for local children (Baek 2022: 27-39). In October 1995, the church relocated, providing a separate space for the study room and the library named "Neutinamu" (Zelkova tree). The study room was run for underprivileged children, while the library served as a space for the adults in the community (Park 2024: 635-36). From its inception, Ssangsaem Church pursued a sangsaeng ministry with the local community, aligned with the needs of the poor and vulnerable.

By 1999, significant changes took place in Ssangsaemgol. As the area was designated for redevelopment, residents began moving elsewhere. During this time and 2002, Ssangsaem Church embarked on a journey into the "wilderness," relocating from downtown Cheongju to the rural village of Nangseong in Boeun County (Baek 2008: 61). Despite significant challenges, Pastor Baek and the congregation overcame them and began transitioning to a "nature church." In 2002, Ssangsaem Church relocated to Nangseong in Boeun County and changed its name to Ssangsaem Nature Church, setting three core directions: "spirituality," "nature," and "culture." These became the church's three pillars (Baek 2022:100, Park 2024: 638).

Ssangsaem Nature Church began to expand its ministry of spirituality, nature, and culture, building a foundation of "sangsaeng" with the village through regular interaction with its residents. The church resolved not to separate its identity from the village but to exist with and for the village. To implement the three pillars of "spirituality," "nature," and "culture,"

Ssangsaem Nature Church established three committees: “the Faith and Spirituality Committee, the Life and Nature Committee, and the Culture and Society Committee.” All church members are required to participate in one of these committees actively.

First, the Faith and Spirituality Committee is responsible for helping members grow and mature in their faith, while also discerning how the church can fulfil its missionary calling. This committee seeks to ensure that the church remains true to its identity and that faith does not remain merely an abstract doctrine but becomes a lived reality. The committee fosters holistic spirituality and life ministry, focusing on the fullness of life both now and in the afterlife (Baek 2022: 103-110, 2024: 610, 619-21; Park 2024: 641-44).

Second, the Life and Nature Committee focuses on experiencing and sharing God’s creation both within the church and in the wider world, emphasising the importance of nature and ecology. Through education and programmes, the committee promotes a life lived in harmony with the natural world. This reflects the theology of nature-based ministry, which highlights that the entirety of creation proclaims the glory of God and calls for a life of connection with nature (Baek 2022: 110-14, 2024: 620-21; Park 2024: 644-45).

Third, the Culture and Society Committee focuses on fostering a healthy and diverse cultural life within the church community, with a strong emphasis on community engagement. This committee promotes a communal form of ministry that not only builds a good and beautiful community within the church but also facilitates communication and solidarity with the wider society. The committee also considers how to understand, interpret, and respond to social issues from a faith-based perspective. It emphasises the importance of building relationships and community life (Baek 2022: 114-120, 2024: 621; Park 2024: 645-47).

The success of these three committees and the voluntary participation of the congregation can be attributed to the consistent sharing and integration of the senior pastor’s clear pastoral philosophy. Bo Kyoung Park explains this well from the perspective of missional leadership (Park 2024: 628-635, 647-654). Ssangsaem Nature Church is a church that lives in harmony with and responds sensitively to the needs of the local community, witnessing the Gospel as a missional community. This missional posture cannot be separated from Pastor Baek Young-

Gi's leadership. First, his leadership is based on implementing the core philosophy of missional ecclesiology within the local church, helping the congregation consistently embody this philosophy. Second, his leadership is one of authenticity, openly revealing his own vulnerabilities and valuing the support and cooperation of the congregation. Third, Pastor Baek's leadership is horizontal and team-based, where, while his authority as a leader is acknowledged, spiritual leadership flows through equal relationships with the congregation. Fourth, his leadership is one of cultivation. Pastor Baek's 30 years of ministry have been a natural theological, pastoral, and communal journey of maturity for himself and his congregation (Baek 2018: 112-14). His three guiding principles for ministry—being a church that transcends numbers and size, being a church that transcends individual recognition, and being a church that thirsts for life—have been woven into the congregation's life through the cultivation of a learning community. As a result, Ssangsaem Nature Church, which has grown into a community of spirituality, nature, and culture, has continued pursuing ministries of sangsaeng—with God, with creation, and with the local community.

As the church's diverse ministries of *sangsaeng* continued, Ssangsaem Nature Church began to gain wider recognition throughout the Korean church after being designated a "Green Church" in 2009. This award, jointly judged and awarded by the Life and Culture Committee of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) and the Korean Christian Environmental Movement, is given annually to churches that exemplify environmental stewardship (Baek 2022: 128-30). Being selected as a Green Church marked a turning point for Ssangsaem Nature Church, allowing it to extend its influence beyond the local community. This recognition also led to greater interest in the Green Church movement within Korean Christianity, with more and more churches becoming involved in environmental efforts, climate justice initiatives, and ecological activities aimed at preserving creation. Additionally, general assemblies, presbyteries, and environmental and ecological mission groups have increasingly held climate crisis-related seminars and grassroots environmental education programmes, often visiting Ssangsaem Nature Church for ecological retreats. International churches and ecumenical partner denominations have also visited Ssangsaem Nature Church, further extending its reach beyond the local and national level to become a church that contributes to the wider Christian community through *sangsaeng* ministries.

In 2022, Ssangsaem Nature Church celebrated its 30th anniversary, declaring it the "Year of the Green Exodus" and organising a variety of commemorative events. This theme was chosen not only to mark a new era but also to recognise the urgency of the climate crisis and the dangerous state of the ecological environment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee 2020). To mark its 30th anniversary, Ssangsaem Nature Church also published *The Story of Ssangsaem Nature Church* and organised special anniversary lectures from April to October, focusing on spirituality, nature, and culture (Baek 2022: 182-84, Park 2024: 641).

Finally, the 30 years of Ssangsaem Nature Church's *sangsaeng* ministry through the lens of transforming discipleship identifies the five key characteristics of transforming discipleship. Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry can be evaluated from a missional theological perspective. As outlined earlier, the five characteristics of transformational discipleship are as follows:

Living as a missionary disciple who proclaims reconciliation, standing in solidarity with the weak in Christ, witnessing the Gospel of love and justice, resisting the power of death while singing the hope of life, and engaging in citizenship in public life (Hong 2022: 155-56).

First, Ssangsaem Nature Church's 30-year *sangsaeng* ministry is an example of transforming discipleship, centred on living as a missionary disciple who proclaims reconciliation. One representative practice is the preparation of the "1 Proclamation, 1 Connection, 1 Compassion" practice card. Each year, every member writes down their commitments on the card: "1 Proclamation" refers to standing firm in faith and spirituality before God, making concrete efforts to pursue reconciliation with God, and bringing about God's shalom in daily life. "1 Connection" signifies reflecting on one's life in nature, making specific commitments to reconcile with creation and protect it over the years. "1 Compassion" involves reconciling with neighbours and brothers, determining how to live responsibly towards them, and committing to these actions for a year (Park 2024: 643). Through its holistic pastoral philosophy of spirituality, nature, and culture, Ssangsaem Nature Church seeks to shape its members into missionary disciples who proclaim reconciliation with God.

Second, Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry of coexistence reflects transformational discipleship's call to stand in solidarity with the weak in Christ. In interviews with members featured in *The Story of Ssangsaem Nature Church* published for the church's 30th anniversary, one member

reflects, “Ssangsaem has always stood with the pain of the times, and you can sense in the faith confessions of its members a youthful spirit, a commitment to justice, and a desire to stand with the poor.” Another member comments, “Mission is about deciding with whom to be a neighbour, and if Ssangsaem’s mission in Mochung-dong was to serve the poor children of the neighbourhood, its mission in Nangseong is to care for the suffering earth through environmental mission. Standing with the most vulnerable and caring for them is both justice and peace” (Baek 2022: 191-92). Thus, Ssangsaem Nature Church’s faith confession involves acknowledging God in the lives of the poor and the pain of creation, confessing the God of life and salvation. Their faith confession is to “listen to the groaning of the world without turning away, quietly but firmly being a neighbour to the suffering, and through these acts, restoring heavenly faith and becoming truly human in relationships of love and sharing” (Baek 2022: 192).

Third, Ssangsaem Nature Church’s ministry of coexistence reflects the characteristics of transforming discipleship by proclaiming and embodying the Gospel of love and justice. This is seen in the missional leadership of Pastor Young-Gi Baek. Having grown as a true disciple of Jesus’ Gospel, Pastor Baek has served Ssangsaem Church for 30 years with the heart of Jesus, ministering to the church community as if serving Jesus Christ Himself. He also deeply recognised the church’s responsibility to the village, participating in the life of the village with a sense of public duty and love for the local community (Baek 2024: 602-5, 2022: 83-90). In Ssangsaemgol, the church identified and responded to the needs of the poor, and even after relocating to Nangseong, the church demonstrated its commitment to the community by signing a written pledge stating, “Ssangsaem Nature Church will not do anything that harms the village, and if the villagers do not want us here, we will leave” (Baek 2022: 84). Through this act, the church showed its willingness to invest time, resources, and wholehearted effort into spreading the Gospel and engaging in mission, expressing love for the village and an eagerness to work together.

Fourth, Ssangsaem Nature Church’s ministry of coexistence demonstrates transformational discipleship by resisting the forces of death and creating life through the power of the Holy Spirit. Despite the challenges of societal changes, Ssangsaem Church transitioned into a nature church, entering the living creation of God where the vitality of life breathes. In its new form as a nature church, it professed faith in creation and

ecological stewardship. Through the establishment of the Faith and Spirituality Committee, the Life and Nature Committee, and the Culture and Society Committee, the church practised holistic life ministry in partnership with the Holy Spirit, fostering voluntary dedication among its members. As a result, in 2009, the church was recognised as a "Green Church," establishing an ecologically harmonious and natural space both inside and outside the church (Baek 2024: 609-11). Additionally, the church established the Ecological Library Spring Snow, which fosters Jesus' disciples by following the logic of life and the Kingdom of God. The church also developed various ecological and cultural programmes to continuously share God's grace and providence. Furthermore, in 2022, Ssangsaem Nature Church marked its 30th anniversary by declaring it the "Year of the Green Exodus," committing to practising green grace and working towards caring for and coexisting with the creation made by the Triune God. Just as Jesus' primary concern was life, and His ministry was centred on the preservation and fostering of life, Ssangsaem Nature Church has shaped its ministry around preserving and nurturing life. In this way, Ssangsaem Nature Church seeks to be a church that thirsts for life and takes on various life-giving ministries.

Lastly, Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry of *sangsaeng* also exemplifies transforming discipleship by practising citizenship in public life. As noted earlier, Ssangsaem Church was founded alongside a study room and community library. After relocating to the Nangseong region, the study room ministry evolved into Dandelion School, which then developed into Danbi, an educational and cultural cooperative operating as a social cooperative, offering rural village schooling and alternative education. Although there were plans to discontinue the community library, the church decided to maintain it, driven by the logic of life and a commitment to living as citizens of God's Kingdom. The church converted the library into a specialised library focused on ecology, nature, and the environment. Despite being in a small rural village, the church envisioned the library as the heart of a sustainable, self-reliant community, where people of all ages and generations could live together in harmony. The church also operated Sarangbang Café and a local food market, embodying public values and public-mindedness, with a desire to live alongside the local community in a meaningful way. Through the Culture and Society Committee, the church engages with the community, both in terms of the cultural and social life of the region and the events happening outside the church. The church thoughtfully considers how to understand, interpret, and respond

to social issues from a faith-based perspective, emphasising that such acts of citizenship are rooted in life-centred thinking and interconnectedness. Through the practice of citizenship, Ssangsaem Nature Church carries out its ministry of *sangsaeng*.

5. Concluding Remarks: A missiological evaluation

As discussed above, the ministry of *sangsaeng* at Ssangsaem Nature Church, from the perspective of transforming discipleship, can be summarised as follows: a ministry of missionary discipleship that proclaims reconciliation, a ministry of solidarity with the poor and weak in Christ, a ministry that witnesses to the Gospel of love and justice, a ministry that unites with the Holy Spirit to resist the forces of death and create the hope of life, and a ministry that practises citizenship.

How, then, can Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry of *sangsaeng*, as presented in this study, offer points of connection for Asian churches today as they seek to participate in God's mission and engage in life-centred solidarity work as an ecumenical response?

First, the ministry of creation care is not only a concern for the Korean church but also one that Asian churches must responsibly address. This is because Asian churches, which confess the Nicene Creed as their statement of faith, are also God's co-workers tasked with caring for creation.

Second, Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry of *sangsaeng*, from the perspective of transforming discipleship, is a holistic and multifaceted ministry. Similarly, Asian churches, as communities of transforming disciples called to be true disciples of the Gospel in this era, can engage in holistic ministries of sangsaeng through solidarity and cooperation with God, neighbours, nature, and the universal church.

Third, it is worth noting that Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry of *sangsaeng*, which is carried out primarily by laypeople through the three committees, is not led solely by clergy or ministry leaders but is driven by the congregation. The spirituality, nature, and culture ministries, led by the congregation, embody a "circular table community where there is no centre, no one is excluded, and all exist equally before God." Hidden within these ministries is the vision of shalom that builds the Kingdom of God. This is a crucial understanding for Asian churches engaged in life-centred ministries and ecumenical solidarity in God's mission.

Fourth, attention should be paid to the pastoral philosophy and missional leadership of Pastor Baek of Ssangsaem Nature Church. His pastoral principles of "a church that transcends numbers and size, a church that goes beyond personal recognition, and a church that thirsts for life," combined with a pastoral sensitivity that values small things, reflect a leadership of purity and humility modelled after Christ. His leadership fosters voluntary commitment and service from the congregation through a learning community, working as a team with the members. This thirst for life and missional leadership has been consistently maintained since the church's founding (Han 2022: 301).

Thus, as Asian churches today seek to engage in life-centred solidarity ministry from the perspective of God's mission, Ssangsaem Nature Church's ministry of *sangsaeng*—with God, the local community, nature, and the universal church—serves as a valuable ecumenical theological response. The ministry of *sangsaeng*, carried out by both the pastor and congregation, offers the joy of discovering the hidden shalom of God's Kingdom in a circular table community where no one is excluded, and all exist equally before God.

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Incarnational Theology and E-cclesiology: A complex discourse in engaging digital technology

Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras

"*Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind*"

Introduction: Logos vs. *Tekhnē*

Since the fifth century BC in Ancient Greece, philosophers have distinguished *logos*, the reasoning, from *mythos*, the narratives, particularly the narratives of the gods. *Mythos* explained the movements of the universe through the personalisation of these forces, naming them "gods and goddesses." Ancient gods like Uranus explained the sky, Gaia, the manifestation of the earth, and their children, Kronos, representing time, and the Olympian gods as new powers controlling thunder (Zeus), the ocean (Poseidon), warfare (Ares), beauty (Aphrodite), and others. The mouths of genius poets such as Hesiod and Homer narrated these gods.

Socrates and his students, including Plato and Aristotle, changed the paradigm of *mythos,* which viewed the universe intimately and personally, into an impersonal view measured by reason, the *logos*. *Logos* became a supra-historical power that pursued the fulfilment of human autonomy through scrutinising the universe.

However, what occurred was not only a separation of *logos* and *mythos* but also of *logos* and *tekhnē*. *Tekhnē* was associated with skill and considered lower in quality than *logos*. In the times of Hesiod and Homer, *logos* and *tekhnē* were intertwined, so there was a god of artisans, Hephaestus. For people of that time, knowledge was practical, and practices strengthened knowledge. That was before the time of Socrates.

Bernard Stiegler, the French philosopher, observed that due to the separation between *logos* and *tekhnē*, technology, as a manifestation of *tekhnē*, became alienated in the process of self-formation (2010, pp. 136–137, 2015, pp. 26–31). *Tekhnē* was sidelined from human autonomy. For Stiegler, *tekhnē* is a part of the formation of human selves. Yet, concurrently, *tekhnē* in the form of technology that has grown incredibly fast is also *pharmakon*, both a remedy and a poison. Technology advances humanity, but also destroys it. Thus, Plato (through the mouth of Socrates) considered the technology of writing as deadly to human memory. Also, Stiegler critiques contemporary human technology, especially media that is bound to capitalism, and points out that it kills the community's

capacity to become mature and adult by edging out social and relational functions.

The attitude of alienating technology, the manifestation of *tekhnē*, especially digital technology, directly or indirectly, is also adopted by theologians, philosophers, and those who view technology as dangerous to humanity. One often hears it said in these circles that one needs to keep a distance from digital technology if one wishes to preserve the dignity of humanity. In the Indonesian context, the work of F. Budi Hardiman (2021) can be described as a satire about the power of technology to subdue humanity.

The main challenge of this view is that it is persistently anthropocentric, still placing humans as the centre of the universe, including the universe in which technology is an element. Its construction is presumably Cartesian, creating an epistemological and even, in a sense, an ontological distance between *logos* and the world and idealising/romanticising human relations that are "face to face".

In Stiegler's observations, it is true that technology, whatever it is, is *pharmakon*. It brings both good and triggers evil, and vice versa, but from this line of thinking, the remedy for evil supposedly lies within the technology framework. The challenge became even greater at the beginning of digital technology development, where humans surrendered information to be processed by it. Now, humans have even surrendered their reason and their intelligence to artificial intelligence (AI). However, it is crucial to consider that technology is also a part of humanity. It is equal to *logos* and spirituality.

The rapid advancement of digital technology, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, has sparked widespread debate about its impact on human relationships. Some fear a technological singularity, where AI surpasses human capabilities, echoing anxieties about humanity's diminishing role in a technologically dominated world. This is no different from the divine's anxiety when God found that the first humans ate the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, and they have "become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22, NRSV).

Scepticism and criticism abound regarding digital technology's influence on interpersonal connections, especially concerning the rise of social media (Web 2.0). Critics lament the perceived loss of authentic human connection due to our increasing reliance on technological devices. Sherry Turkle's observation that we desperately seek companionship

from inanimate objects encapsulates this concern (2015, cf. 2011). Others critique the structural impact of technology, highlighting the manipulative algorithms that shape our choices and preferences, as depicted in the film *The Social Dilemma* (2020). These narratives often portray a single, deterministic outcome: technology's inevitable victory over humanity.

Hence, we need to move beyond, on the one hand, the enthusiasm and euphoria surrounding digital technology and, on the other hand, the scepticism towards it. More precisely, the insights offered here transcend the prevailing vision of singularity in discussions about technology in the wake of AI popularity.

From Face-to-Face to the Interface

The vision of singularity borrows from the discourse on AI. In AI, singularity is the projection that AI will surpass human intelligence at some point in the future. Becoming more intelligent implies that a new form of intelligence will supersede humanity (Boden, 2018). This vision evokes a sense of both hope and anxiety: hope for a better future free from human limitations and anxiety about the potential loss of human control and even the extinction of humankind.

This vision, however, tends to be overly simplistic and deterministic. It assumes a linear trajectory of technological development, culminating in an inevitable point of singularity. It overlooks the complexities and contingencies of technological evolution, the intricate interplay of human and non-human actors, and the ethical dimensions that shape the future of technology.

With the rise of LLM-based (large language model) AI such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and others, we testify to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and agency in the digital realm, not as a threat to human existence but as an opportunity for rethinking human and non-human relations. Since ancient Greece, thinkers and practitioners, from Thales to Spinoza and Whitehead, have grappled with the discourse of *panpsychism*. This discourse explores the presence of interiority and soul within non-human objects (Edwards, 2005, p. VII: 82-83; Roelofs, 2019, p. 163). There is a belief that humans are organically connected to a broader consciousness beyond themselves. Figuratively, even the Psalmist, for example, in Psalm 19, has sung of the capacity of non-human elements to "… declare the glory of God."

Panpsychism also suggests that human consciousness is a composite, a fusion of various subjectivities constructed through our interactions

with the environment. The Zoom platform, for instance, indirectly conditions overlapping relationships and, consequently, a diffused model of consciousness, such as when conducting a meeting concurrently with other meetings. This also explains the frequent complaint that humans often project their feelings and thoughts onto external objects as objects of attachment. The phenomenon of spirit dolls is merely the latest phase of this tendency. In the digital world, this phenomenon is called the ELIZA effect, which ascribes human-like behaviour to computers (Turkle, 2005, p. 287).

In his technology exploration, Colin Koopman observes the emergence of a new subjectivity that he terms the "informational person." He concludes that digital data is not inanimate but rather "active participants in the process of our self-formation … even this 'informational person' is our true self" (Koopman, 2019, pp. vii, 170).

Thus, in this non-anthropocentric reality, humans are positioned "merely" as one subject or actor within a vast network of human and non-human subjects. Following Bruno Latour's suggestion, social meaning is no longer confined to human relations but becomes an associative assemblage of subjects, which he calls *actants* (Latour, 2005). The ongoing process of association and re-association through networks is more decisive in shaping social character than the "static" assumptions of social status embedded in the discourse of communalism, community, *gemeinschaft*, *gesellschaft*, and so forth. In the terminology of Indonesian Gen Z, the fluid and unstable "circle" is more realistic than the "community."

This presents an ethical challenge, particularly when engaging in dialogue with Martin Buber. In the tension of the I-Thou relationship, as a symmetrical dialogue between humans and between humans and God, Buber sees this situation as being in opposition to and challenged by the I-It relationship. The relationship between humans and objects often hinders relationships with others, objectifying and reducing the Other to an It. Even the ultimate It is oneself, and instead of creating dialogue, the I-It relationship is a monologue, a form of narcissism for oneself and a toxic relationship for others (Buber, 1937).

This also implies that the material It outside the human self cannot be equivalent to the Thou. Shouldn't the relationship between humans and technological mediators be strictly limited to an I-It relationship? However sophisticated a gadget Zoom and other communication services are, they cannot be dialogue partners. Technological mediators cannot create concrete and authentic encounters. It is merely an intermediary

that facilitates dialogue between humans. Buber implores us all to spend more time building I-Thou relationships and as little time as possible on I-It relationships (Seeskin, 2001, p. 195). This plea continues to haunt us, mainly when discussing the relationship between humans and technology and between humans and AI (Epafras, 2023a, pp. 283–284). In the Indonesian context, this is even more of an issue when the digital divide is a persistent challenge, and AI could further marginalise the marginal social groups, such as the indigenous religious community and other minority groups (Epafras, 2022).

The powerful metaphor of these positions is the idealisation of human interaction through "face-to-face" engagement. Zoom interaction may problematise this metaphor (Epafras, 2023a). Zoom and other video call technologies have raised complex questions about online behaviour and the nature of virtual presence. The expectation to "show one's face" reflects a prevailing belief that visual presence signifies respect and authenticity. The adage "No pic = HOAX" among Indonesian netizens underscores the cultural emphasis on visual confirmation of identity. This emphasis is further amplified by the participatory panopticon and life-streaming culture of social media, where individuals constantly perform their lives for a digital audience (Cascio, 2005; Marwick, 2013).

The Hebrew word *panim* ("face") carries rich symbolic meaning in the Old Testament, representing identity, relationships, encounters, attention, and care (Wolff, 1973, p. 74; Gravett, Bohmbach, Greifenhagen, & Polaski, 2008, p. 174). The plural form suggests the multifaceted nature of the human face and the potential for deep understanding. Biblical accounts of face-to-face (*panim el panim*) encounters with God highlight the intimacy and significance of such interactions. The priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26, often used in Protestant church services, links God's face with peace and well-being (*shalom*). Conversely, God "turning His face away" represents the ultimate calamity.

While face-to-face encounters are symbolically important, other forms of communication, such as voice, also signify presence and connection (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:12; Exodus 33:18-23). However, the importance of face, appearance, gaze, and voice in human relationships, and even our relationship with the divine, remains undeniable. Yet, the reality is more complex.

Faces and appearances are never neutral or transparent (Miller & Sinanan, 2014). They are subject to interpretation and influenced by ideology, culture, power relations, and social constructs. Postcolonial discourse

highlights the "gaze" of the coloniser upon the colonised, where faces are ranked according to perceived truth and humanity (cf. Said, 2003; Fanon, 2021). Freud recognised the "face" as a mask, a persona concealing the complex layers of the psyche. Even Descartes questioned the reliability of visual perception, suggesting that true knowledge might be found through a neutral observer rather than through sight. The pandemic has further complicated matters, with masks and social distancing becoming essential aspects of social interaction. *Noli me tangere* ("Do not touch me"), Jesus's words to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, take on new meaning in this context (Žižek, 2020). Social bonds are no longer defined solely by line-of-sight but have transcended into social solidarity, mediated by both direct and technological means.

The "face" in the context of Zoom is also not innocent. The self-reflection in the Zoom window, reduced to an "account," creates a strange duality. We become performative, consciously adjusting our appearance and demeanour to present a particular, often idealised, version of ourselves. This performativity highlights the mediated nature of online interaction, where technology constantly shapes our presentation of self. The "corporate" feel of Zoom, with its protocols, waiting rooms, breakout rooms, and other features, further contributes to this sense of mediated experience. The consequences, such as Zoom fatigue, are already apparent (Epafras, 2023a, p. 291).

To a point, Levinas helped us escape this "technological singularity" (Epafras, 2023a, pp. 294–297). Levinas explored the "desire for the invisible" (Levinas, 1979, pp. 33–35). He asserts that "the invisible, the non-appearing does not mean unrelated; it is only that the relation is not immediately given…." (Levinas, 1979, p. 34). In this scheme, we can insert "technology" as part of the total whole of communication, not only among humans but also in human and non-human relationships. Currently, some technology might not be a conversational partner like a human because its relationship is not transparent and organic. Yet, ChatGPT and others are active in a way that animates and drives relationships between humans and others. It is not only face-to-face but might include interface-based relationships that cannot ignore the presence of subjectivity and agency in digital technology products.

Intercarnational Theology and E-cclesiology

E-cclesiology, an *electronic ecclesiology*, a complex discourse of the church embracing and engaging with digital technology, might offer a realisation of the incarnational and intercarnational presence of the

Word in this technological world. It bridges the dualistic path criticised by Stiegler above. He even cautiously claimed that this dichotomy is fluid and returned one to the pre-Socratic era, when *mythos* and *logos* were encountered once again through listening, attending, connecting, and engaging (abbreviated LACE). That is when digital technology mobilises LACE to build the spirituality of the digital church.

It provides an intercarnational ground when bodily Christ transforms into virtuality of his presence, and divine virtuality might appear through digital technology in different modes of presence and rhizomatic iterations. As suggested by Keller, the intercarnational aspect indeed encourages us to testify to the larger manifestation of non-Christian religions and beliefs (2017). Again, digital technology might accentuate interreligious fluidity through, for instance, social media engagement.

However, the challenge itself is manifold, not only in the manifestation of the technology but also in intergenerational issues, as the primary users of this technology are inevitably mostly the younger generation. I recalled one of my informants in research saying, "My ID card is Christianity because I am going to marry, but I am a Muslim, but my heart is Buddhist" (Epafras, Suleeman, & Yasmine, 2023, p. 56). Many youngsters, as digital natives, declared *omnism* as a religious preference. Another challenge is the research of digital culture, whose social practices influence the development of ecclesiology and the mode of church affiliation.

In a far more immersive, intrusive, profound, and interconnected stage, we reside in a world where embodiment and disembodiment move in synchronous oscillation. Serres and Sauer say virtuality is "an aggregate and vector of imagination, memory, knowledge, and religious experience" (quoted in Grieve & Heston, 2012, p. 291). This condition is most dramatic in the metaverse, online games of the massively multiplayer online (MMO) genre, Pokémon Go, and augmented reality educational services like the Muslim Children's Encyclopaedia. Digital watches, such as the iWatch, offer immersive and intrusive engagements.

Indeed, it is a theological and ethical challenge when thinking of human identity to embrace a cyborg body (created through a system) that is easily transformable (fluid), multiple, and distributed, but also a manipulated body and identity that appears in Deepfake. The meaning of "wholeness of a human" is at stake at the level of the digital system.

Digital technology also radicalises mediation within human culture. Culture, including the process of theologising, is always in a state of

mediation, a "material framework of social practices that evoke and yet conceal meaning" (Epafras, 2023b, p. 206). This means that any meaning in culture can only arise through mediation. Many mediators are required to create meaning. Jesus Christ is the one whom Christians believe is the mediator of God's presence her-/himself.

However, in the era of second modernisation or postmodernity, mediation is sharpened through the condition of mediatisation, which is the meaning born from the mediation process reaching the point of taking over traditional social functions. This process is inseparable from the forces of capital and capitalism that facilitate the growth of technology as a lubricant of mediatisation. In the religious context, this condition of mediatisation occurs with the scattering of "locations of production and reproduction of religious meaning" (Epafras, 2023b, p. 206). Simply put, people no longer refer only to the priest's authority in their church but also through social media related to *Pastorgram* on Instagram or YouTube. Religious messages are also spread and disseminated by content creators and influencers, buzzers who have not studied theology but have many more followers than traditional religious figures. This mediatisation modifies ecclesiological images, such as the meaning of the sacramental body, which must be analogous but also ready with a virtual or digital body or a body mediated by digital technology.

The condition of the widespread cultural meaning, even religious authority, does not mean the absence of authority, but people refer to different and tiered authorities. Not merely *hierarchical*, vertical with a command line from top to bottom, but also *heterarchical*, with flexibility in referencing various other authorities. An informant in my research stated, "In the morning, I worship at my church, in the afternoon at JPCC online." She came from a mainline "ecumenical" church membership, while JPCC (Jakarta Praise Community Church) is an independent and charismatic-leaning church. Yes, indeed, this phenomenon is strong among young people. In this regard, e-cclesiology projects an egalitarian and participatory condition of its church members.

Mediatisation accelerates the abundance of information, the communicative abundance that confines us. In such a context, the culture of communication changes and shifts. Interhuman relations and human relations with the biotic and abiotic world also change. Recalling Latour above, he criticised the social meanings traditionally understood as manifestations of interhuman relations. For him, the social world also includes the biotic and abiotic worlds. In such social relations, every

agency and actant can initiate action. This means digital technology manifestations such as gadgets, LCD projectors, Play Store and App Store applications, and ChatGPT are part of the social world embracing church ministry.

However, everything begins with micro-relations between humans and actants in this social world. In Latour's construction (and his colleagues in Actor-Network Theory, ANT), we trace and explore relationships to understand a type of social and socialisation. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the construction of e-cclesiology. If ecclesiology cannot realise LACE, ChatGPT, or similar services, as indicated by its name, chat, "chatting" will replace conventional communication between congregations.

ChatGPT-4o (omni) has already achieved what was once imagined by the film *Her* (2013), where the chat partner of a lonely man is his voice assistant. Or does e-cclesiology provide space to embrace ChatGPT as an actant and active agency in building the digital church? Maybe it is still too wild to think that when *sapiens* must compete with *sentience*, the generative AI can think like humans. Even time and temporality are not just folded but also run non-linearly. We can bring Jesus of Nazareth, a figure from two thousand years ago, to the present. In contrast, conventional ecclesiology is linear and solidifies time as an eschatological model.

In this mode of thinking, primarily through tracing, I encourage the construction of theology based on empirical observation and research. Through this tracing process, we recognise the formation of the world and social imagination, and finally, ecclesiology as a manifestation of the dynamic collective faith experience.

In various writings, I claim that the formation of identity and belonging of its adherents in a digital context is associative and rhizomatic. Tracing helps detect how agencies associate, disassociate, and reassociate, connecting to something, disconnecting from something, and reconnecting with something. Among these three processes, there is continuous negotiation at the frontier. For example, the manifestation of church music and songs among the Indonesian youth who might be "bored" (disassociate) with traditional songs considered 'so yesterday', prefer worship songs from Hillsong that they watch on YouTube. But they could return (reassociate) with symphony music repackaged by the Trust Orchestra. Or even all these genres are present together in one person, multiple belongings, because of the rhizomatic condition born from endless encounters at the

frontier. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), the growth of this identity is a *disconnected becoming*. This identity is born not in a one-way and hierarchical process but rhizomatically, that continuously processes at the frontier.

Such a construction underscores the immersive condition of digital experience, as in the explanation of virtuality above. Its influence is even stronger because this technology positions itself on access, efficiency, and maximum performance display logic (Nunes, 2012, p. 163). "Access" emphasises the presence of the subject in the digital network. "Exist" because of access. "Efficiency" shifts discourse to information so that, in the context of folded time, it is not possible for people to engage in lengthy discourse, which must be condensed into brief information. This opens up space for intense communication but, on the downside, is fertile soil for hoax activism, producing, spreading, and consuming hoaxes, as well as digital bullying (cyberbullying). Maximum performance spells charm in appearance and looks that are optimal and attractive (Epafras, 2023b, pp. 207–208).

The development of ecclesiology should not let itself be subjugated to these logics but constantly criticise and open alternative pathways. According to Zizioulas, ecclesiology moves towards an eschatological moment; in Jesus Christ, there is the future of the created world (2011, p. 18). Therefore, we can embrace the digital dimension of humanity as a form of eschatological vision. Although I argue that church ecclesiology cannot be too sophisticated in adopting technology, the church cannot be *so tomorrow* because it must embrace the various temporalities experienced by its members. There is a folded and hurried time for some of its members and a patient time for others. The church is always in a condition for *tomorrow*, heading towards tomorrow because its leading pace is *koinonia*, fellowship with all members of the body of Christ towards the eschaton. Citing an African proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."

We are anxious about whether generative AI like ChatGPT, especially its latest version ChatGPT-4o (Omni), which is becoming more "human," will be part of our e-cclesiology. The novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, a Nobel laureate in literature from the United Kingdom, titled *Klara and the Sun* (2021) or Baymax in *Big Hero 6* (2014), may help us think about the possibility of AI, the robotic AI, becoming part of ecclesiology. The novel tells the story of an artificial friend (AF) named Klara whose logic, awareness, and feelings grow due to interactions with the humans she accompanies. Are

we ready for AF, generative AI, and sentient beings to become 'fellow' for us, even to be loved?

With the development of AI, especially machine learning and natural language processing (NLP), e-cclesiology has ample room to explore possibilities. Collective intelligence in the form of big data will force e-cclesiology to wrestle with the meaning of the body of Christ. A dream once put forward by Teilhard de Chardin and Vladimir Vernadsky on Noosphere, a platform connecting the collective consciousness of humanity and nature. If it is challenging for churches to realise this, hopefully, collective intelligence driven by AI and big data will open paths for church denominations to collaborate humbly. Though in the Indonesian context, what is visible is that digital technology emphasises competition between churches and denominations and increasingly emphasises "economic caste" and digital gaps (digital divide).

The construction of ecclesiology requires understanding new techniques and a new psychological attitude. Suppose the above conditions have permeated our digitally mediated social interactions. In that case, they form a new technique and new psychological condition that I call, in Javanese, *manunggaling kawula lan mayantara*. A citation from the expression of Javanese mysticism is *manunggaling kawula lan gusti*, which is the ultimate goal of a spiritual journey towards unity of mind, feeling, and action within a divine framework. An *unio mystica*. Which, of course, can be connected and tweaked with the mystical depiction of ecclesiology, the unity of the congregation, and Christ. The immersive and digital virtuality experience leads to *manunggaling kawula lan mayantara*, the deepening of humanity's union with technology. Certainly, this can be debated and must be debated.

But hopefully, this signals the building of a new e-cclesiology that is more relevant. Technology zealously pursues order, "*cosmos*" for itself, but is greatly tempted to produce *chaos* for others. It is imperative to build a digital theology that embraces *chaosmos* (a term coined by Irish novelist James Joyce). E-cclesiology works within the tension of an ordered world and *cosmos* and continues to respond and provide space for various participations, aspirations, and dynamics of the congregation, including those that might be considered "dissidents."

Digital technology has become a core force in criticising injustice and initiatives to realise shalom for this world. Because the image of *ekklesia*, as the root of ecclesiology in itself, is participatory, even in its original scheme in the *polis*, the ancient Greek city-state of the time of Solon (5th or 6th century BCE, Before the Common Era) was participatory for adult

male citizens in resolving common problems. This tension of *chaosmos* must be lived through e-cclesiology and intercarnational theology.

In the Bible, of course, various technologies are implied, such as the technology of building cities and the Tower of Babel, the technology of making the ark by Noah, the construction of the Temple, Apostle Paul using the technology of pen and paper to write letters, which implies the existence of communication and transportation technologies, including Jesus, who was the son of a *tektōn*, often translated as a carpenter, although more accurately "craftsman," including wood and stonecraft. The term architecture originates from this word, *arkhitéktōn*, which means boss of the craftsmen. Jesus was an active user of technology! Even spirituality is built through technology, and we are *tektōns* over spirituality, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (Matthew 7:24, NRSV).

When humans failed to fulfil their mandate not to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, it is said, "And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them." (Genesis 3:21, NRSV). This verse could lay the foundation for the relationship between spirituality and technology. Leather garments are a cultural and technological product created by humans to face the forces of nature. They provide warmth as well as protection from powers outside of themselves. Garments also refer to identity and dignity. The Hebrew word used in the above verse is *ketonet*, which refers to Joseph's outfit with the "lovely robe" (Genesis 37:3, Indonesian Bible Latest Translation). God restored the shattered dignity of humans by providing the garment and taking the initiative to clothe them. God offers technology to restore human dignity. There is a similarity in the motif of this story with the Greek story of the god Prometheus, who bestowed fire on humans. Hence, the story of Genesis implies that God is the source of technological initiative. There is a divine dimension to embracing technology. It contradicts the common aspiration epitomised at the beginning of this article, quoted from the Orange Catholic Bible, "*Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind*."

In the coming years, we will probably see informational and spiritual personalities created in the sense of a "confederation of souls," as Italian poet Antonio Tabucchi might call it. These personalities would live in a noosphere of the collective consciousness of the interpenetration of *mythos*, *logos*, and *tekhnē*. *Manunggaling kawula lan mayantara*, par excellence. Is this a fearful future, an exciting utopia, or only happening in a parallel universe?

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Human Nature as a Sign of Transcendence and Faith in a Neuro-Cybernetic Era

Jason Lam

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead:
Does it include microbiomes and cell signals?

1. Introduction: Is Bodily Resurrection Believable?

The Christian Century recently published a short article titled "Jesus Resurrected Gut Biome," where the author, Melissa Florer-Bixler, raised an interesting question: The Gospel of John describes the resurrected Jesus eating fish with his disciples by the sea, a story well known to Christians. From a modern scientific perspective, Jesus would need to digest the fish he ate. If his digestive system was like that of a regular person, it would contain countless microbes that aid in digestion, including those that convert proteins into amino acids to be transported to various tissues of the body.[1] So, did Jesus' resurrection include the various microbes within his body? Some of these microbes had accompanied Jesus' growth since Mary's womb, and without them, no one could survive. Did the microbiome that constituted Jesus' body also resurrect with him? If so, they would have conquered death and entered eternity ahead of the eschaton. This indeed is a difficult question to answer and is certainly not one that the biblical authors and the early church could have imagined. However, it is a legitimate question for those living in the age of science.

I have also heard in Australia that some believers, particularly church members involved in scientific research and especially those related to the medical field, deeply doubt or even outright deny the belief in the resurrection. Sometimes, this scepticism comes from senior members of the congregation. However, Paul clearly confronted his Corinthian congregates saying, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). Despite being surrounded by Greek culture, the early church professed belief in the resurrection of the body and eternal life, as the Nicene-Constantinople Creed affirms. Pastors may easily reproach them and outright deny their ideas. However, since these individuals are professionals, they are likely not pursuing some subjective imagination wishfully. This is an even more serious issue for Asian diaspora churches because many members have moved abroad due to their professions. Therefore, addressing their doubts is a significant issue in evangelism, apologetics, and pastoral care.[2]

I do not know the specific questions that the scientific researchers in the aforementioned church have exactly, but I can imagine that there are thousands of questions similar to the one raised by Florer-Bixler. Modern conceptions of Jesus' resurrection are bound to cause confusion. On the contrary, it is precisely because we have gained more and more understanding of our bodies and the world that it becomes increasingly difficult to understand and affirm the belief in resurrection. It is no wonder that there has been a tendency throughout history to separate life after death from earthly life. Therefore, this essay seeks to engage in dialogue with various disciplines to clarify some of the modern confusions and misunderstandings about resurrection, the body, and human nature. It also aims to point out from biblical theology and dogmatics why the "resurrection of the body" was a firm belief in the early church and why it still holds significance for believers today. We will discover that although the body, identity, and personhood are different concepts, they are interconnected. Therefore, the belief in resurrection involves not only the physical body but also our whole human nature. An appropriate soteriological reflection must be based on a proper Christian understanding of humanity.

2. The Immortality of the Soul or the Resurrection of the Body?

We cannot deny that our understanding of the resurrection is very limited; Paul also pointed out that the resurrection comes first from Christ, and everyone else is still waiting for their order (1 Corinthians 15:23). Therefore, throughout the generations, there have been many unclear and even erroneous concepts about the resurrection and human nature. However, we can also ask in reverse: if there is life after death, is it a stage with no continuity with our current embodied life? If so, calling it a "resurrection" is indeed inappropriate, and it would be more accurate to use the ancient Greek philosophers' term "the immortality of the soul."[3] In fact, Paul also explicitly acknowledged, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 15:50). Yet, how should we understand this traditional concept? How can modern people inherit it, or should they abandon it?[4]

The confusion mentioned above is somewhat related to a presupposition: the resurrection of the body means the resuscitation after death of the physical body that lived the earthly life,[5] whereas the immortality of the soul rejects this possibility. However, both believe that the life living within the individual continues in some form after death,[6] which is also the cause of the confusion. Does the Christian understanding of the

resurrection necessitate choosing one over the other? In fact, the Bible does not speak much about the events after Jesus' resurrection. They are mostly from the final parts of the Gospels, which are often scattered stories. From a narrative perspective, we often focus on the differences in his body before and after the resurrection, such as familiar people not recognising him (John 20:14; Luke 24:15-16), his ability to pass through closed rooms freely (John 20:19, 26), and even his ascension to heaven (Acts 1:9). Yet, despite this, we can still affirm that the resurrected Jesus had a body of flesh and bones like any ordinary person (Luke 24:39-40), could converse and eat with people (Luke 24:42-43), and bore the wounds from the crucifixion, which served as a sign for the disciples to recognise him (John 20:20, 27). From an academic perspective, the above passages involve authors and audiences from different periods and backgrounds, making it difficult to provide a simple, comprehensive analysis.[7] Therefore, the above summary is constructed from a narrative perspective, aiming at the general modern understanding within the church. From this perspective, the resurrected Jesus not only had a body but also shared many aspects with ordinary people. Resurrection does not imply living apart from the body; although this body seems to have transcended some previous limitations, it still bears some past (injury) marks, indicating continuity with the past life rather than a complete break.

From the New Testament to theological discussions, partly influenced by the Age of Reason, modern scholars' understanding of resurrection can also be categorised into different types.[8] The first view holds that the accounts in the Gospels should be seen only as the disciples' subjective experiences, intended to show that the actions initiated by Jesus continued even after his death. Conversely, the other side argues that Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection cannot be reduced solely to the disciples' experience. The account of the empty tomb is a significant counterargument, and even the Jewish council that sent Jesus to the cross did not deny the fact that his body was missing (Matt. 28:11-15).[9] Of course, even the latter perspective, which emphasises the connection between the Nazarene Jesus and the resurrected Christ, cannot deny that the body of the resurrected Christ differs from its previous (perishable) state. Thus, there is not only a continuity but also some changes, and it is not limited to a revival of the old flesh and blood.[10] If this is the case, then the hope for a universal resurrection at the end, led by Jesus' resurrection, cannot be viewed in exactly the same way (Phil. 3:21 indicates that the resurrected body will be transformed to be like the Lord).[11] This has

important implications for our reflection on the belief in resurrection and its dialogue with the scientific age.[12]

3. Identity and Interaction within a Community

The human body and nature are certainly closely related, but they are not equivalent. If we focus only on the latter and affirm that the resurrected body is not completely the same as the current one, can we say that the human body is unimportant, even if the Christian tradition affirms the resurrection of the body? Can human identity and nature be separated from the body? Or, conversely, is the body indeed a constraint on human nature, such that without it, we might attain greater possibilities?[13]

British philosopher Bernard Williams (1929-2003) proposed a thought experiment fifty years ago that is still worth considering today:[14] If Person A and Person B will be placed into a machine where their memories are swapped, and then Person A's body will be tortured while Person B's body will receive a $100,000 reward, it seems that Person A should be quite willing to enter the machine (while Person B would be the opposite). However, if we think from another perspective, if Person A is told that he will undergo torture tomorrow, which would naturally cause great fear, and then informed that before this, all his memories will be erased and another person's thoughts will be implanted in his mind, would this alleviate his anxiety or make the situation worse? (Conversely, would Person B agree to the arrangement?)

Mentioning this thought experiment is not to ask us to choose between Person A or Person B, but to illustrate that we cannot reduce a person to merely a body carrying memories (or a soul). Human consciousness and identity are certainly related to memory, which is a result of the organisation of individual life experiences. Memory cannot be easily separated from bodily experiences and is even a crucial element in shaping personal identity and personality. Individuals with schizophrenia or delusional misidentification syndromes sometimes believe that their own bodies or those of people around them have been invaded or altered by external entities, making it difficult to affirm past life experiences.[15] From this perspective, we might more easily understand another layer of meaning in the resurrection of the body.

As mentioned earlier, the body of Jesus after the resurrection seemed to be different from what it was in the past, to the point that people did not recognise him. However, he still bore the scars from the crucifixion, which even became a sign for the disciples to recognise him (John 20:20, 27).[16]

On one hand, as mentioned above, past experiences cannot be separated easily from the participant's bodily experiences, especially witnessing the brutal events of the Passion story, which created indelible memories for the disciples. This is a key focus for all the Gospel writers and defines the new relationship between God and the world (a God who became incarnate and actively participated in human suffering, connecting with the sufferers in this world).[17] The resurrected Jesus also returned with a body, travelling with the disciples to Emmaus, participating in their fishing activities by the sea, and even eating and drinking with them. If the resurrected Lord had no body and was merely a spirit, all these actions would be unimaginable and even impossible to achieve, and at least the Gospel accounts would be very different.[18] Of course, we are not saying that the resurrection must involve an exactly identical body to the previous one (as Paul says, it has at least been transformed into an imperishable state), but rather to highlight the significant meaning of bodily resurrection for the continuation of life.

We can even hypothetically consider that God could create a completely different body for Jesus and everyone else at the universal resurrection, but how could our consciousness and those around us confirm that "this person" is truly me?[19] This is not only a focus of the resurrection narratives in the Gospels but also a common theme in modern films and dramas about out-of-body experiences and role-swapping. In this sense, the body is not only related to psychological issues of individual consciousness and experience but also a crucial element in shaping personal identity within a community. Conversely, identity or personality often needs to be demonstrated through concrete actions, which is why if we acknowledge Jesus Christ as the incarnate God who participates in human history, it means that God's nature can be expressed through what His Son says and does, impacting us. Therefore, the resurrected Jesus is not just an intangible spirit but remains a flesh-and-blood presence among the disciples, influencing them and the church for future generations. This influence must occur through personal interaction within the community. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) believed that Christology is ultimately not a question of how (do the two natures connect) but a question of who (is Christ), and that "the Christological question can only be asked, as a scholarly question, within the sphere of the church."[20] From one perspective, personal identity can only be fully expressed within a community, and thus faith in Christ can only have an impact through a believing community.

From the resurrection of Jesus' body and his subsequent activities, it seems that God affirms the positive role of personal interaction and

identity formation within the community. Of course, we should not overlook that since Augustine, the Latin Christian tradition has tended to emphasise the dark side of human nature and views original sin as having widespread effects among fallen human beings. But although Paul said that "sin came into the world through one man" (Rom. 5:12), "so through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). Both the Catholic and Protestant traditions commonly think of the process of justification and sanctification through the lens of the Latin doctrine of substitutionary atonement. However, if we focus on the role of Jesus' resurrection, 1 Cor. 15 may be more relevant for this discussion.[21] Paul contrasts the resurrected Christ, the "last Adam," with the "first Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45),[22] stating that Christ is "the first-fruit of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20).[23] The question is how this effect operates within the new creation. Bonhoeffer's view on Christ and the church is worth considering, as he notes that the incarnate Christ reveals God's divine image and draws close to the human race, calling people to open their closed selves and restore true fellowship with God and humans. Since the church is the body of Christ, it manifests His reality within this faith community, allowing people to encounter Christ through their connection with fellow believers and participate in the new creation, restoring human nature distorted by sin.[24]

4. The Driving Force behind the Body

As seen from above, from the perspectives of science, philosophy, and psychology, we can affirm the significance of the resurrection of the body, as it involves the formation of identity within the community and the interaction between persons and God. However, we must admit that our knowledge of the resurrected body is limited. Apart from the accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection activities in the Gospels, the most significant reference is undoubtedly found in 1 Cor. 15.[25] Returning to the bodies of the "first man Adam" and the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), Paul's descriptions are indeed challenging for modern people:

> So it is with the resurrection of the dead… It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body (σῶμα ψυχικόν), there is also a spiritual body (σῶμα πνευματικόν) (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

Modern people, even of Asian descent, much like those immersed in ancient Greek dualism, often put the soul and the body in opposition, making it easy to perceive the "spiritual body" mentioned here as something separated from reality.[26] However, Paul's reference to both

"physical" and "spiritual" points to the "body," which is a concrete entity, also serving the function of connecting one's own body and person with those of others.[27] Moreover, even though both Greek and modern people often adopt a dualistic view of soul and body, there is a significant difference between the two perspectives. Modern people tend to consider the material world as real and matters of spirit or soul as fictitious, hence the need to prove many aspects of faith (such as the existence of God or life after death). In contrast, Greek culture regarded the mutable and perishable world as deceptive, with spiritual matters considered eternal, thus more real and valuable. The former was often seen as a temporary imitation of the latter, intended to realise its essence and potential. Of course, this is not to say that Paul fully embraced Greek cultural understanding; on the contrary, it is generally believed that his concepts remain quite Hebraic (Pharisaic) in tradition.[28] When we read it this way, we can understand what Paul is saying here: he is not only pointing to the transformation of individual lives but also to the metamorphosis of the entire world and age.[29]

After contrasting the mortal body and the spiritual body, Paul continues, "The first man, Adam, became a living being (ψυχὴν ζῶσαν); the last Adam became a life-giving spirit (πνεῦμα ζῳοποιοῦν)." (1 Cor. 15:45) Here, (human) being and spirit are indeed contrasted, but since it has been explained above that both have bodies, the contrast is not between spiritual and physical, but rather between whether the driving force within the fleshly body is "spiritual" or "natural."[30] Doesn't this align with the traditional view of the spirit versus the flesh? No, because both aspects point to the physical body. What is emphasised here is the source of the body's power – the former being natural, the latter being (Holy) Spirit. The focus, rather, is on the essential difference in the body before and after resurrection, which is brought about by the Holy Spirit.[31] No wonder Paul believed that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 1:4).[32] He even equated the Holy Spirit and Christ with the Lord (2 Cor. 3:16-17), laying the foundation for the early church's confession.[33] The body and human nature are not to be despised, but they are related to the constitution of identity and personhood. The key to their quality lies in whether they are driven by the Holy Spirit. Even if human nature is bound by sin after the fall, whether it can be delivered depends on this.

In this light, although the human body and human nature bear flaws after the fall, as many early Church Fathers believed that God's image within them had been distorted, sin and death have since entered the world.[34]

Yet, the last Adam also uses the same channel to bring humans from death to life, into the fellowship of the new creation, to enjoy eternal life.[35] Believers are sent into the world for this purpose, to restore human nature through connection with the last Adam and to recover the lost image of glory. Therefore, the body and human nature cannot be seen merely as prisons or shackles to be discarded, but also as instruments that can be used by the Lord to transmit salvation. Although the body and human nature have their limitations, they are not flaws (God's creation was deemed good!). The true shackles should be sin, not human nature.

5. Human Nature itself as a Sign of Transcendence

More than twenty years ago, there was a movie called *The 6th Day*. Adam, the protagonist, is illegally cloned, but later he and his clone work together to save his family. In the story, the clone asks Adam if he counts as a human, as he is being cloned and lacking a soul. Adam responds that if he can risk his life to save others, how could he not be considered a human? Bringing up this movie plot is not to delve into whether a clone has a soul, but to point out that what makes a human cannot be measured solely from a biological or psychological perspective. Throughout history and across cultures, religious traditions have always defined humanity or human nature beyond these standards.[36] Connecting to the earlier topic about the driving force of life, if we consider human nature in this way, then the starting point of resurrected life should not be viewed merely in terms of physical changes, but rather in terms of the power that brings about resurrection.[37]

If the initiation of resurrection lies in the power of the Holy Spirit, the distinction in the essence of life does not wait for the body and universal resurrection to begin. Besides separating body and soul, believers, regardless of Eastern or Western descent, often isolate this life from the next, which is clearly problematic from this perspective.[38] Paul explicitly states that the Spirit that raised Jesus and everyone else from the dead now lives within believers (Rom. 8:9-11:23). Indeed, it can be said that the Spirit is external to the natural person; but if anyone is in Christ, they are within God's new creation, where everything is made new (2 Cor. 5:17).[39] In this sense, while Christ's resurrection certainly comes from the power of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the body ultimately belongs to the spiritual. As mentioned above, Paul is not suggesting that this is fictional or unfulfilled; on the contrary, it is more real than the material world we dwell in![40] This calls us to view the world with a completely new perspective – not by adding a spiritual dimension to the material

one and devaluing the latter, but by recognising that the spiritual world encompasses the entirety of human nature and everything around us, as it all belongs to the realm loved by God.

Some scientists, such as Francis Crick (1916-2004), who discovered the DNA double helix model, indeed once stated:

> You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. …You are nothing but a pack of neurons.[41]

The unsettling aspect of this statement is evidently the attempt to reduce immaterial things, such as identity and even human nature, to purely material categories. In the current rapid development of biotechnology and cybernetics, it is not hard to imagine that one day technicians might indeed be able to fully replicate the physiological information within the human body into computer components. The experiments envisioned by Williams fifty years ago and the cloning actions depicted in *The 6th Day* twenty years ago could be achievable; immortality through technology may even come true.[42]

Even so, we can still ask Crick or anyone else: Would you be willing to swap your thoughts or body with someone else's, or back them up to give it a try? After all, this is just like copying and transmitting data from biological hardware as we do with computers! Regardless of the answer, it is likely that anyone considering this would not only think about the purely material and technical aspects but must also include the subjective will of the participants – their own considerations and those of the people and things around them, as well as thinking from emotional, cultural, ethical, and religious perspectives. In other words, even if certain operations could be technically successful, the decisive factor does not lie within them. Crick's reductionism cannot provide a solution for this. Human consciousness and nature certainly have their limitations, but their very existence is a signal of transcendence beyond the material body and should not be understood as bondage. From a faith perspective, on the contrary, this should be seen as a gift from God, enabling people to break free from the confines of the physical body and engage in relationships with others and with God.

In discussing Williams' experiment, we have already pointed out that humans cannot merely be seen as combinations of memories or

consciousness loaded into bodies. Thus, as Crick suggested, reducing the former to the latter naturally leads to problems with biological information. Consequently, we find that it is impossible to separate the soul, memory, and consciousness from the body, just as it is impossible to believe that they are merely products of the physical shell. We have always found it difficult to define what humanity is – it certainly has its limitations and dark aspects – but salvation must also be related to it. God was not ashamed to take on its form (Phil. 2:6-8). It is no wonder that the Old and New Testaments regard both "the first Adam" and "the last Adam" as the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; Col. 1:15-16), and the two are also connected.[43]

6. A Final Remark with Ecological Concern

So, after a comprehensive discussion, we have not yet resolved the original question: Did the microbiome within Jesus also resurrect with Him? Have they entered into glory as well? We must admit that, from a scientific perspective or from the viewpoint of the natural human body, it is difficult to have a definitive answer. The resurrected Jesus possessed an imperishable spiritual body, which is essentially different from our current one, yet there is still a certain continuity; at least the disciples ate and drank with the resurrected Jesus. From this perspective, it can be inferred that the resurrected body might also have a gut biome![44] However, whether these microorganisms are the same as those at the time of His crucifixion is something we cannot answer. We only know that this belongs to the realm of spiritual matters. Nevertheless, this also carries significant implications for modern people.

In the above discussion, we connected the concepts of body, identity, and personhood, largely staying within the interpersonal perspective. However, if the human body not only forms interpersonality but also links species, as indicated by the digestive tract of Jesus, then the incarnate Lord's participation extends beyond the human world to encompass all visible and invisible through whom are created. If the resurrected Lord's body must contain other biological groups, this signifies that His salvation is not limited only to humans but includes all of creation that He loves and cares for.

This should not be surprising, as the New Testament's depiction of the new heaven and earth includes the tree of life and the river of life (Rev. 21:6; 22:1-2, 14, 17). Did Isaiah not already proclaim that "The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isa.

11:6)? Of course, we can understand these as symbolic portrayals; but if large animals are included, why would the microbiome be excluded? The ancients lacked knowledge in this area, so they did not describe it. However, for modern people living amid ecological crises, this might carry significant implications, as God never confined His salvation plan to humans alone. Humans and other creatures have always been interconnected within God's grand and beautiful creation blueprint.[45]

If the resurrected Jesus still has a microbiome, it means that the scope of God's love and care is always far greater than we have imagined. How can humans then disregard all that the Creator cherishes? Thus, the belief in bodily resurrection is not, as many think, a negative form of escapism, but rather calls for us to actively participate in and transform the world that the Lord aims to renew through the Holy Spirit.

Is our existing body and human nature bondage that separates us from God? From the discussion in this essay, it is absolutely not the case. Although human nature has its limitations, it is not a shackle; what truly restricts freedom is sin. Body, identity, and personhood are interconnected. They might have been channels through which sin and death entered the world, but the incarnate Lord has also transformed them into bridges of His grace. It is not the body or human nature that stands in opposition to the Holy Spirit; rather, the Holy Spirit is meant to work through them, allowing people to enjoy freedom and enter into God's new creation. The narratives after Jesus' resurrection provide us with some images, offering a glimpse of the goodness of the end times and their significant implications for the present. We are sent to be God's ambassadors and to cherish everything that God cares for.

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[1] Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Jesus Resurrected Gut Biome," *The Christian Century* April 2023, *https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/jesus-resurrected-gut-biome,* accessed on 5 June 2023.

[2] In fact, since the Enlightenment, scepticism about the belief in the resurrection has not been uncommon. For an overview of this topic concerning 17th-century English Enlightenment thinkers cf. John Henry, "The General Resurrection and Early Modern Natural Philosophies: A Preliminary Survey," *Zygon* 58:4 (2023), 905-927.

[3] Not all ancient Greeks reject the idea of bodily resurrection, cf. John Granger Cook, "Resurrection in Paganism and the Question of an Empty Tomb in 1 Corinthians 15," *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017), 62-74. Besides, it is noteworthy that the New Testament authors employed the term "resurrection" rather than "rapture", "ascension", "transformation" and the like, cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 866-870.

[4] For a dogmatic discussion cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1996), 58-76.

[5] This seems to be the basic meaning of the verb ἐγείρω, cf. James Ware, "The Resurrection of Jesus in the Pre-Pauline Formula of 1 Cor 15:3-5," *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014), 492-497. However, this does not rule out the possibility that the quality of the resurrected body is different from before. See the following discussion.

[6] Whether the resurrection involves a physical body or not can pose cognitive difficulties, which is one of the traditional topics in the philosophy of religion that we cannot discuss comprehensively in this article. Cf. P. W. Gooch, "On Disembodied Resurrected Persons: A Study in the Logic of Christian Eschatology," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981), 199-213. The New Testament authors also had their concerns. For an analysis from a Corinthian perspective, cf. Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 115-117, 127-129.

[7] For an analysis from a Lukan perspective cf. Alexander P. Thompson, "The Risen Christ and Ambiguous Afterlife Language: An Examination of πνεῦμα in Luke 24:36-43," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 38:4 (2019), 809-827.

[8] This categorization referenced Michael Welker, "Resurrection and Eternal Life," in John Polkinghorne & Michael Welker eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 279-290.

[9] The empty tomb is indeed a significant topic in the studies of the New Testament and early church, and it is connected to many backgrounds cf. Cook, "Resurrection in Paganism and the Question of an Empty Tomb in 1 Corinthians 15."

[10] James Ware, "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133:4 (2014), 809-835 offers a detailed analysis in recent years, while affirming the original meaning of bodily restoration, it also recognizes that the resurrected body, due to the power of the Holy Spirit, possesses a fundamentally different nature.

[11] Brian Schmisek, "The Body of His Glory: Resurrection Imagery in Philippians 3:20-21," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43:1 (2013), 26-27.

[12] Cf. Robert John Russell, "Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology," in Ted Peters, Robert John Russell & Michael Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), 8-15; Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 91-112.

[13] Cf. footnote 6 above.

[14] Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-73* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 46-63.

[15] Cf. Nancy Murphy, "The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity," in Peters, Russell & Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 210-

211; this phenomenon can also be related to theological reflection, cf. Harvey Cawdron, "Divided Minds and Divine Judgement: Dissociative Identity Disorder, Heaven and Hell, and the Resurrection of the Body," *TheoLogica* 7:1 (2023), 168-193.

[16] For a related theological and pastoral reflection cf. Robert H. Smith, *Wounded Lord: Reading John Through the Eyes of Thomas* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009).

[17] This is a major issue in contemporary theology, particularly since World War II, and we cannot elaborate on it in detail here; cf. the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, etc. However, this is actually a traditional topic and has been extensively discussed from the early Church Fathers to St Thomas Aquinas; cf. Charles Pope, "Why Jesus' Resurrected Body still had Wounds," *https://blog.adw.org/2017/04/jesus-resurrected-body-still-wounds/,* accessed on 23 June 2023. For discussions connecting from the New Testament to theology cf. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Christian Stettler, "The Resurrection of the Body. Its Place in Biblical Theology and Its Meaning for Christian Life and Witness," *European Journal of Theology* 32:1 (2023), 26-59.

[18] Cf. René A. López, "The Nature of the Resurrection Body of Jesus and Believers," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170 (2013), 143-153; for the implications of the Lukan narrative cf. Thompson, "The Risen Christ and Ambiguous Afterlife Language."

[19] Cf. footnote 6 above.

[20] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, DBWE 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 303; For the contribution of this discussion to Christology cf. Rowan Williams, *Christ, the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 169-217.

[21] This essay does not intend to be a contribution to New Testament studies, although we will explore some related scriptural passages. For academic commentaries cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2003); Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interp; Louisville: John Knox, 1997); for topics related to these scriptures cf. Cook, "Resurrection in Paganism and the Question of an Empty Tomb in 1 Corinthians 15"; James D. G. Dunn, "How are the Dead Raised? With What Body do they Come? Reflections on 1 Corinthians 15," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 45:1 (2002), 4-18; Andrew Johnson, "Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15: Apocalyptic Epistemology, the Resurrected Body and the New Creation," *Evangelical Quarterly* 75:4 (2003), 291-309; Jerry L. Sumney, "Post-Mortem Existence and Resurrection of the Body in Paul," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 31 (2009), 13-21; Ware, "The Resurrection of Jesus in the Pre-Pauline Formula of 1 Cor 15:3-5"; Ware, "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54"; Joel White, "'He was Raised on the Third Day according

to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:4) A Typological Interpretation based on the Cultic Calendar in Leviticus 23," *Tyndale Bulletin* 66:1 (2015), 103-119; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 312-361.

[22] Concerning the concept of Adam Christology cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980), 98-128; Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Bakers, 2023).

[23] For a related discussion cf. White, "'He was Raised on the Third Day according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:4)."

[24] This is the central idea of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's doctoral thesis; cf. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, DBWE 1; trans. Reinhard Krauss & Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

[25] Cf. footnote 21, 22 above.

[26] This perhaps relates to the mind-body dualism initiated by René Descartes, but the resurgence of virtue ethics over the past half-century has brought renewed attention to personal identity, character, and communication; cf. Murphy, "The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity," 212-218. For the meaning of the New Testament vocabulary cf. Ware, "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54"; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 282-286.

[27] The translation also creates confusion here, because when Paul later mentions "flesh and blood (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα) cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 15:50), he uses a completely different set of terms. The "mortal body" (σῶμα ψυχικόν) in 1 Cor 15:44 might be understood as the "natural" body. In Paul's thinking, the body (σῶμα) and the flesh (σὰρξ) have different connotations and values. Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 51-73; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 282-284.

[28] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 277-311.

[29] Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 317-333; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 370-374.

[30] Similarly, in these verses, the terms ψυχὴν/ψυχικόν can be understood as "natural," referring to a living person, contrasted with πνεῦμα/πνευματικόν; cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*,76-78; Johnson, "Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15," 292-296; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 282-286. Besides, James Ware compellingly pointed out that, from the perspective of Greek grammar, the aforementioned contrasts all indicate that these terms are adjective phrases of the fleshly body; cf. Ware, "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54," 821-825.

[31] Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 347-356; Ware, "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54," 827-835 offers a fantastic analysis of this paragraph; besides, Johnson, "Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15" relates the discussion to 2:6-16, clearly shows that the difference is due to whether the driving force is from the Holy Spirit.

[32] As mentioned above, we should not exaggerate the contrast between spirit and body. The body still plays an important role in the created order. An interpretation of this paragraph cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8 (Word Biblical Commentary 38A)* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 13-16.

[33] Cf. Jason Lam, "Lingen tiyan yu chuantong xinyang de fuhe [The Reconciliation of Charismatic Experience and Traditional Faith]," in Justin Tan & Peter Tie eds., *Spirit Wind: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Global Theology- a Chinese Perspective* (Wantirna: Melbourne School of Theology, 2022), 182-185.

[34] Irenaeus and the concept of recapitulation are the representatives; cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 170-174.

[35] This is also based on Adam Christology. For a New Testament overview cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 199-204.

[36] This discussion centred about the movie is inspired by an essay: Pan-chiu Lai, "Renleide weilai [The Future of Human Being]," in Jason Lam, Pan-chiu Lai & Yuen-tai So, *Friend or Foe? The Pluralistic Relationship between Science and Religion* (Hong Kong: Ming Feng, 2012), 213-242.

[37] James D. G. Dunn, "The Spirit and the Body of Christ," in *The Christ and the Spirit: Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 329-342.

[38] For an analysis from New Testament studies cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 461-472; for a discussion connecting resurrection with finite life cf. Ernst M. Conradie, "Resurrection, Finitude, and Ecology," in Peters, Russell & Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 277-296.

[39] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Magaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 83-98.

[40] Another short article from *The Christian Century* is noteworthy: Ross M. Allen, "Do We Need a Raised Body?", *The Christian Century* 6 April 2022, 28-31.

[41] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner's, 1994), 3.

[42] Needless to say, this is different from the concept of bodily resurrection discussed above; cf. Noreen Herzfeld, "Cybernatic Immortality versus Christian Resurrection," in Peters, Russell & Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 192-201.

[43] Cf. footnote 22 above.

[44] This is also the answer of Florer-Bixler, "Jesus Resurrected Gut Biome."

[45] There have been theological reflections from this perspective, cf. Michael Kunnen & Clayton D. Carlson, "Deeply Connected to God's Good World, the Human Microbiome," *Christian Scholar's Review* 46:2 (2017), 113-126; Aaron M. Hill, "The Other Within: Rethinking Theological Anthropology in Light of the Microbiome," *Christian Scholar's Review* 50:1 (2020), 39-59.

The Nicene Creed as a Living Text : Pedagogic Possibilities for Fullness of Life

Shiluinla Jamir

Introduction

The theological and Christian ethical approach in this paper is lived theology and everyday Christian ethics. Lived theology is the process of theologising (understanding and experiencing God) shaped by people's experience in everyday life. According to Knut Tveitereid, "Lived theology is an attempt to make everyday life theologically meaningful—or to flip the phrase—to make theology meaningful in everyday life."[1] Lived experience, on the other hand, would mean everyday lives that live entangled and shaped by one's geographical location (borderlands, uplands, peripheries of nation-states, etc.), spiritualities, kinship, religion, and the deployment of these entanglements to affirm life.[2] The turn to the quotidian is helpful because, as Luke Bretherton noted, "the ordinary and everyday world is the site at which forms of domination, the precarity and oppression they produce, are most acutely displayed."[3] In other words, it helps one grasp a realistic, intimate, and specific view of the context. Everyday Christian ethics here will mean reconfiguring life as intentional ethical agents. Michael Banner defines everyday Christian ethics as: "[A]n ethics which Christianly imagines the fundamental moments of the human life course and in dialogue with alternative imaginations of human beings (combines moral theology and social anthropology)".[4] This approach is helpful because of the way in which our lives are situated. Where are our Asian lives situated? When I am talking of Asia and Asians, I am imagining people who live crushed between rocks and boulders, yet from the cracks and crevices, life still sprouts forth.

Through the political, military, and technological power of its foremost societies, European or Western culture imposed its paradigmatic image and its principal cognitive elements as the norm of orientation on all cultural development, particularly the intellectual and the artistic.[5] The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, or to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitutes the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.[6]

Our lives are suspended between these two stones. Some have compared them with "zones of social abandonment,"[7] "state of exception",[8] and as places where "judicial order can be suspended."[9] People that occupy these places are those whose lives have been marked as expendable and whose death is not grieveable because, as Judith Butler states, their lives have not been apprehended as living in the first place.[10] Their lives are uniquely held because they must seek protection from the very institution that renders them stateless.[11] Butler explains this irony very well:

> To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection from violence is to precisely exchange one potential violence for another.[12]

This is an extraordinary place to be, and it is from this place that we are talking of a vision and an idea of flourishing, moved by the Nicene Creed that we profess. As we reassess the Nicene Creed, it is therefore important for us to see how people as targets of the sovereign power (state) and imperialism, as persons made of flesh and bone that hunger for truth and righteousness, assess the Nicene Creed. Or how do the Kuki-Zo communities, produced as illegal bodies by the state and whose ancestral lands were nationalised overnight, understand the Creed? What is someone suffering from terminal illness and grieving making sense of the Creed? Keeping these everyday realities in mind, the overarching question that is sought to be addressed here is: In what ways does the reading of the Creed enable people to make sense of their personal and ecumenical world? By employing the IPA method, these questions are addressed. M.D. Chapman, in his article, "Why do we still recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist," observed that there is a vacuum that lies between the theological commentaries that theologians produce on the Creed and what really goes on when the Nicene Creed is recited in liturgy. He writes: "What theologians are doing when they expound the creed is very different from what goes on when the Nicene Creed is recited in liturgy."[13] In this article, I undertake the slippery task of ascertaining how ordinary people interpret and make sense of God, incarnation, passion, and the resurrection with a view to flourishing life in a world so *loved* by God.

Framework/Method

George Poulet's work, *Phenomenology of Reading,* claims that when one reads a book, the barrier that exists between the reader and the text

evaporates and the book no longer remains an object but a subject, a rational subject. And when one reads, the consciousness of the author, in our case, the Creed, intrudes into the consciousness of the reader. The Creed is a life, therefore, speakable and translatable. Poulet writes: "I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, with unheard-of licence, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels."[14] Because of the invasion of the person by the thoughts of another, "my consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another."[15] Poulet's work helps us understand the way Creed overtakes our mind, emotions, and body when we read it. The Creed invades our consciousness, and we begin to move along with the Creed and absorb its tenets into our mind and in our attitude and the way we sense the world. However, as Poulet notes, this taking over of the consciousness through reading of literature does not totally replace the consciousness of the reader; rather, there is a co-enrichment: "I give it not only existence, but awareness of existence. And so I thought not to hesitate to recognise that so long as it is animated by this vital inbreathing inspired by the act of reading, a work of literature becomes (at the expense of the reader whose own life it suspends) a sort of human being, that it is a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in me as the subject of its object."[16] How does the change in consciousness form actions? According to philosopher J.L. Austin, when we say, I (we) believe we are doing something, which is a performative utterance. He writes: If a person makes an utterance of this sort, we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something. We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I perform that action. When I say, "I name this ship the 'Queen Elizabeth,' I do not describe the christening ceremony; I actually perform the christening; and when I say, 'I do' I am not reporting on a marriage; I am indulging in it."[17] The opinion of J.L. Austin helps to manoeuvre that the Creed is not a mere recitation in a vacuum but is associated with performances—of living it out or of performing the Creed.

The work uses Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis to capture the lived experience of the readers in their encounter/engagement/recitation/singing with/of the Creed. IPA is a qualitative research method that examines how people make sense of their major life experiences. IPA researchers are interested in exploring what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on a particular significance for the people.[18]

Studies based on IPA focus on examining how individuals make meanings of their life experiences. A detailed analysis of personal accounts, followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes, is typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation, which is an expression of double hermeneutics in practice. IPA draws upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.[19]

Reading of the Creed is not a major event, but the way it impacts the person and engages the mind and body of the person merits a study using IPA to explore their lived experiences while reading the Creed. The case studies are only representative of a model that needs further in-depth and more rigorous study.[20]

Case Studies

Three women between the ages of 35 and 55 were selected for the interviews. Semi-structured questions were provided, which were followed by several conversations. The reason for choosing only women is motivated by feminist epistemology, which implies the production of knowledge from a feminist standpoint with a feminist sensibility that pays attention to affect, embodiment, lived experiences, everyday lives, etc.[21]

Case Study I

Ms A, 35 years of age, is a scholar in a theological college in India and hails from the state of Manipur. She narrated: "It was after I joined a theological college for my studies that I started reading the Creed. When I first read it, I felt very emotional and experienced a sense of awe." When asked how important the Creed was for her faith, she said, "I cannot dismiss the importance it has for my faith and even for my life, despite the exclusive language that is there. When I first read it, I was not even aware of the father language and the hierarchical concept that is there. It was only later, when I became critical, that I realised it, and I changed my tone while reading the Creed. But for me, coming from a small village where communities are closely knitted and rely on community labour for helping each other, denominational differences played a very negative role in my village. I used to see Catholics with much bias and as different from us. Our interaction with each other was very limited. I always wondered why we hated them so much when we are from the same family, village, and share the same blood.

When I started reading the Creed carefully, I realised the inclusiveness that is there—that God created all, that Jesus came not only for me, that

this God I profess is also a God for them whom I always saw as a problem to our community. […] I read the Creed only occasionally, but every time I read it, it gives me happiness and allows me to experience the same feeling that I had when I first read it.

Case Study II

M, 55 years of age from Lamka, Manipur, is a renowned indigenous woman leader, heads an NGO which is also actively engaged in helping people impacted by the recent crises in Manipur. She was a human rights defender for many years and was responsible for mobilising women's leadership in the grassroots. She is also one of the pioneers of setting up Women in Governance—an association of women-headed NGOs in the Northeast of India. When asked what she thought of the Creed and how it impacted her and her life worlds, she narrated: "In my Church, the reading of the Creed happens in a very formalised way. We stand and read. The pastors lead the congregation, and we follow. For me, the Creed is like a pledge, a bond of commitment and allegiance, a term of reference, an MOU with God. Reciting the Creed makes me feel closer to God and gives me spiritual satisfaction, which ultimately leads to physical satisfaction and contentment. […] She also mentioned that the description of God as "Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen," makes her feel small, as only a tiny part of the whole, which in turn creates a sense of humility in her. She also said, "As a Christian, I cannot forget the Creed. Always, in blessing and in grief, I am reminded of who God is and what he is to me. This gives me strength and hope, and even when things are very dark, there is some hope left."

She also explained that the relationship between the Creed and the poor people is like the relationship between customary law and women. Women in the urban areas do not feel the customary law to be binding on them because they live in a different set-up where life is easier, but for women in the villages, the customary law is encroaching on a day-to-day basis because they live in a situation where life is realised in the confines of the customary law. Similarly, the rich people might not feel and know the intensity and the gravity of the creed and the impact it has on lives because they have everything, and they feel they don't need God. For us and for people who live here in the camps, God is the only thing we have. So, the Creed is very meaningful. That's why people who have hard lives, especially those that live hand to mouth, it is much more important for them to draw to God and Creed, is the benchmark. […] She also added that the Creed is read informally by women when they gather for prayer

meetings. She said: "We either read it individually, read it out, together or meditate over it. It helps us prepare both spiritually and politically. The affirmation in the Creed that says God, the Maker and Almighty is both a spiritual and a political source for us."

Case Study III

X, 37 years of age, was going through grief after the loss of one of her loved ones when I approached her for the interview. She said that since Creed is the core faith foundation for Christians, affirming it gives her a sense of being close to God. When I enquired what made her feel so. Unlike case study II, who was fixated with the idea of God as maker and almighty, for case study III, the Good news of the resurrection and the eternal life that is promised were important. This possibility makes her feel close to God. […] She feels that in today's context, we need to reaffirm the creed and think deeply about what it says. […] However, she also cautioned about the exclusive language in the Creed. She said: "The exclusive language is a little bit uncomfortable, but the creed not only provokes me to think profoundly about the core Christian values and foundations, but also makes me feel deeply about what I truly believe in. What is the truth in a world of so much untruth and deception?"

Interpretation and Implications

I. The Creed as a Living Text Having Pedagogic Possibilities

From the case studies, it is very clear that the Creed intrudes into the consciousness of the readers, and there is an experience of change within the person as she reads the Creed. It creates an awareness of her surroundings, including the brokenness that marks one's society, one's life, and inspires them to transcend and form and shape their life in ways that reflect the core values expressed in the Creed. Case study I responded that she feels emotional and experiences a sense of awe, and it gives her happiness every time she reads it. For case study II, reciting the Creed makes her feel closer to God and gives her spiritual satisfaction, which leads to physical satisfaction and contentment. For case study III, the Creed gave her hope. The encounter between the Creed and the reader results in an experience of God. Therefore, we can say that the NC is a living text that is life-giving and pedagogic. The Creed is, accordingly, a profession of faith which patterns our lifestyle. Therefore, the Creed we confess is embodied and results in actions or deeds. This experience debunks the criticism that the Creed is otherworldly, is high theology, and has no connection with people and their ordinary lives. For case I,

the inclusiveness and unifying message in the Creed made her think that the God she professes is the same God Roman Catholics profess. For case II, the Creed makes her feel small, only a tiny part of the whole Earth; therefore, it instils in her a sense of humility. For case III, the Creed is a statement of hope and a renewal for the present as well as the future. The Creed provides her with the image of a world that is possible, and the passion of Jesus Christ evokes in her a sense of compassion and an understanding of suffering. Their experiences and interpretation of the Creed enlighten us about the vast pedagogic possibilities that the NC has for the flourishing of our lives and the whole of the world.

II. Lived Realities and the Creed

The Creed speaks of a 'Parent God, a God who suffers, a Spirit who guides us, and a Motherly Church.' However, from the case studies, it is observed that each of them focussed on the character and nature of God that is closest to their lived experience without losing track of the nature of the Triune God. For case III, as someone going through grief when the interview was conducted, her focus was on the good news of resurrection and the eternal life that is promised. For case I, it was the division in her village that made her focus on the unity and the unifying character of the Creed. The image of God as creator, who created all, is an image that speaks to case II. This does not mean they overlook other aspects of the nature of God, but they pay attention according to the needs and circumstances they find themselves in. Both I and II pointed out the exclusive and hierarchical language in the Creed, but for II, God the Father, Almighty, was consoling and empowering as well. There are cultural and political reasons that explain why she thinks so. The image of God that she has is of a God who creates, provides, cares, and someone who defends them. For someone coming from a context where life is about negotiating violence and is a victim of violence, the idea of God Almighty helps them cope. This image is far from the criticism that has been mounted by feminist theologians and other postcolonial readers on the conception of God as Almighty.[22] Case II also explained the Creed as a pledge, an MOU, and a term of reference. The question here is not whether the words and language that she is using are right or wrong (this needs another paper), but what is interesting is the way words and metaphors are drawn from one's experience of the world. As John Sanders has demonstrated in his work, it is about human beings using images that they are familiar with. He says: "We have no other choice than to use the mental tools available to us to think about God. Our human conceptual

structures are all we have to understand anything, including God."[23] My stress here is on the ability of the people to connect, experience, and interpret the Creed through the themes, languages, and concepts that are readily available in their lives—Sarah Turner and Jean Michaud call this as strategically using home-grown tools (of course, they talk of this in the context of livelihood).

III. Contextualised Reading of the Creed

Christians in Asia are a minority despite the euphoria surrounding Christianity in the Global South and have no political clout. And the rise of right-wing politics has put us in a state of precarity. However, despite these thorny realities, we also know how to flourish within that limited space. We live as neighbours with people of other faiths side by side, we exchange meals and celebrate different festivals together and take care not to speak ill of others' faith. At the same time, we have also adapted and fashioned Christianity in ways that help us create our agency. The Kuki Zo communities in Lamka, Manipur, India, wearing sack clothes and praying along the national highway as a means of citing their plight both to God and to the state (perpetrators of violence) and marking their agency in the face of death is an example of how we strategically use our faith. Such negotiations and performances of Christian identity inform us how much we have evolved as Asian Christians.[24] However, the concern of One God that we profess in the Creed in a multi-religious context persists. Case II has expressed that the Creed that we read is a pledge to our God. Her response solves much of the headache that we have. Every country has a pledge; we read that in schools, on special days like Independence Day. When we read the pledge, we don't bother about what other countries are reading. With full attention, we read that. Similarly, for Christians, the reading of the Creed is an expression of our sense of belonging to the God that we profess. Therefore, our focus ought to be on affirming our faith in the Triune God. A similar idea has been shared by Chapman, who concluded that reading of the Creed should encourage "God-fearing people to live in humble adoration of the one who loves them, but without growing overly anxious about what precisely the other people who are singing God's song "believe" or even whether they believe at all."[25]

The other concern that needs our attention today in Asia is the question of seeking truth amid so many untruths, as shared by case study III. She said, "Creed not only provokes me to think profoundly about the core Christian values and foundations, but also makes me feel deeply

about what I truly believe in. What is the truth in a world of so much untruth and deception?" This question is relevant especially in the face of the contemporary empire. The matrix of the "coloniality of power"[26] continues to persist. The state that we assume should defend its people has become the arms and legs of the empire and the perpetrator of violence. In the face of this, what can Nicaea teach us? Winston Persaud, whose parents were taken as indentured labourers to British Guyana, wrote:

> To believe in "one God," which is confessed in the very opening of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, means that Christians are to reject any allegiance to political realities alongside God or in place of God… In the world of empire, the Christian confession in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, "We believe in one God … We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. …We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life …is a radical, life-giving alternative to the variegated idolatries of creating life and meaning through violence and destruction; through seeking and grasping power over others to reduce them to less than God intended…[27]

When we are confessing the One God, we are not only rejecting all other gods that deny life, but we are also redefining what we mean when we say One God. Our anxiety should not be too much about excluding other gods, but whether we are able to make choices in ways that enhance life.

IV. Living the Creed in Asia

Another important theme that emerged from the case study is our affirmation of the Creed, resulting in action. All three case studies speak of doing and living according to the divine pedagogy they learned from their encounter with the Creed. This implies focusing on demonstrative living: living the Creed in Asia in our everyday lives. However, for the church to live the Creed in Asia or to witness and realise the full potentiality of the spirit of ecumenism mentioned in the Creed, we need to step back and think of ecumenism in the Asian villages and provinces. Case study I has pointed out how denominational differences have endangered decades of community life and kinship. While not forgetting the inter-religious context, we need to pay attention not only to the denominational differences that Christians in Asia experience but also analyse how these differences impact communities and neighbourhoods that live as families. This needs attention because, unlike in the West, where people live on their own, we live very close to each other, sharing a village or

a locality, and many of the decisions must be made collectively. This context calls for serious reflection that results in ecumenical responses that are situated in the lived realities of the Asian Christian communities. It is not about rehearsing how the WCC or the Western churches see ecumenism, but how we as Asians see it. The commemoration of Nicaea can be an opportunity for us to reframe our priorities in order to speak to the potentialities of the Nicene Creed in the language of Asia.

V. Flourishing in the world so *loved* by God

In *Embracing God's Beloved Community,*[28] the author wrote: "To that boy in the Southeast Asian Massif, restitching his single-use disposable mask so that he might live and others might live too." This boy was living with his grandmother in Nagaland in a bamboo-thatched house. One morning, as I passed through their house, I saw him sitting on a wooden bed and stitching (repairing) a disposable face mask. Through this profound act, he was ensuring that he and his grandmother would flourish. The image of flourishing that the case studies render to us is one that is yoked to their determination to claim life in the face of death. This reflects that when we talk of flourishing inspired and patterned by the Creed, we are talking about dealing with life with all its myriad complexities in dignity, keeping the good of all in mind.

Within these complexities, of life being suspended between the empire and the sovereign, the practices of difference based on various categorisations, including church affiliations, we have to fashion our ideal of flourishing and interpret the dynamism of ecumenism and unity with the Nicene Creed as the benchmark. However, in Asia, because of the kind of societies that we are made up of, our idea or vision of flourishing is not some grand narrative but a vision that is intimately tied to everyday life, where small gestures and simple tools like a thread and a needle or a sackcloth can become powerful instruments of flourishing. While the Creed shapes our lives in ways that lead to the flourishing of all, we also need to put into use our home-grown tools—moral principles derived out of our cultures, spiritualities, and even our geographies—to develop ways of living that the Nicene Creed beholds.

Conclusion

If one can think of doing theology through various ways and can interpret Christ through Asian eyes, then we know there is a possibility of reading the Creed through the lived realities of the people. We are also called to step back and re-examine the interdenominational realities and pay attention to them in our ecumenical engagement.

[1] Knut Tveitereid (2022). "Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research* eds., Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (John Wiley & Sons).

[2] The turn to lived theology and everyday ethics is informed by womanists ethicists, *mujirista* theologians and indigenous women theologians "who turned their attention … to the texture of the ordinary…Stephanie Mota Thurston, "Engaging the Everyday in Womanist Ethics and Mujiresta Theology in *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and the Practices of Ordinary* Life, 28.

[3] Luke Bretherton (2019). "The Task of Christian Ethics: Theology, Ethnography, and the Conundrums of the Cultural Turn," in *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology ad the Practice of Ordinary Life* eds, Michael Lamb and Brian Williams (Georgetown University Press), 176: Similar positions have been taken by feminist ethnographers Lila Abu-Lughod, Sabha Mehmood and others.

[4] Michael Banner, (2014). *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722069.002.0003, accessed 20 Aug. 2024.page 6.

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[16] Poulet, G. (1969). Phenomenology of Reading. *New Literary History*, *1*(1), 53–68.https://doi.org/10.2307/468372, page. 59.

[17] J.L Austin, *Philosophical Papers* edited by J. O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 222.

[18] Jonathan A Smith, Paul Glowers and Michael Larkin, (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage).

[19] Igor Pietkiewicz and Jonathan A Smith, (2012) "A Practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology," NP.

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[21] Dana-Ain Davis & Christa Craven, (2016). *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking Through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 9-12; Also see Pranee Liamputtong, (2007) *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (New Delhi: Sage Publication), 9-14.

[22] Piet Naude, Can our Creeds Speak a Gendered Truth? A Feminist Reading of the Nicene Creed and the Belhar Confession," *Scriptura* 86 (2004), pp. 201-209. The author discusses the views feminist have about the use of masculine language however she argues that despite the presence of exclusive language, the overriding message of the NC is unity.

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Echoes of Nicaea: Ecumenical Witness Amidst Existential Threats

Eleazar S. Fernandez

What can the historic Council of Nicaea (325 CE) say, if any, about our current context and the "existential threats" we are facing today? Conversely, how shall our current challenges inform our reading of this historic event and other ecumenical events in the future?

A Brief Postcolonial Critique of the Council of Nicaea

While traditionally framed as a theological gathering aimed at unifying Christian doctrine, I suggest that we also examine the Council through the lens of power dynamics, colonisation, and imperial presence.[1] The event reflected the imposition of Roman imperial authority over religious and cultural practices, particularly those from regions that had been colonised or brought under the dominion of the Roman Empire.

Emperor Constantine's active involvement in convening the Council highlights a central feature of postcolonial critique: the intersection of religion and empire. The Council was not merely a religious event; it was a political event aimed at consolidating the emperor's control over a fragmented empire. At this point, it must be noted that the Roman Empire had extended its reach across various cultures and ethnic groups, from what is considered the Near East to North Africa and beyond. These regions, which had their rich spiritual traditions, were subsumed under the banner of Roman Christianity, and the Council of Nicaea became a vehicle and an opportunity through which Constantine could impose religious conformity and unity across his territories.[2]

Furthermore, the decisions made at Nicaea, especially regarding the divinity of Jesus and the formulation of the Nicene Creed, were not just theological but also culturally significant. These decisions marginalised local Christian traditions, particularly those from Eastern and African Christian communities, many of which had differing Christologies. The postcolonial lens sees this as an act of cultural and theological homogenisation, an imposition of a singular orthodoxy through the Nicene Creed, and a suppression of diversity in favour of Roman ideological control.

Postcolonial critique also interrogates the aftermath of the Council, particularly how subsequent imperial decrees enforced the decisions

made at Nicaea. Heresies, such as Arianism, which had been popular in certain regions, were declared illegal, and those who did not conform were persecuted. This can be seen as a form of religious colonisation, where theological dissent was criminalised, and the religious authority of Rome was imposed upon the diverse Christian traditions. Thus, the Council of Nicaea represents not only a religious milestone but also a moment where imperial power and colonisation shaped the trajectory of Christian orthodoxy.

The Council of Nicaea: A Prototype Event of Our Ecumenical Beginnings

A helpful way of taking account of the Council of Nicaea is to see it as a "prototype" of ecumenism or a "breakthrough event," not an "archetype," which is understood as a culmination. This is the lens I use to make sense of the mixed legacy of the historic Council, if it is to offer helpful insights for us today.[3]

Being the first ecumenical (universal) council in Christian history, the Council of Nicaea offers profound insights into the concept of ecumenism. Bishops gathered from across the Christian world to address issues of doctrine and practice. The Council's significance for ecumenism lies in its attempt to unify diverse Christian communities under a shared theological framework, demonstrating both the challenges and aspirations of achieving Christian unity.

The early Christian church was far from being monolithic. It was composed of various communities spread across the Roman Empire and beyond, each with its theological traditions, liturgical practices, and interpretations of the Scriptures. Not surprisingly, this diversity led to significant doctrinal disagreements, the most pressing of which at the time of the Council of Nicaea was the Arian controversy, which questioned the nature of Jesus' divinity.

The Council of Nicaea exemplifies theological ecumenism—the effort to articulate a shared and orthodox belief that could transcend regional and theological differences. The Nicene Creed became a central element of Christian orthodoxy and a touchstone for future ecumenical efforts. The Council hoped to bring unity to the fragmented Christian world by providing a common doctrinal foundation.

The primary theological issue at the Council of Nicaea was the Arian controversy, which revolved around the nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship with God the Father. At Nicaea, the bishops affirmed the

divinity of Jesus (of the same substance as the Father) through the Creed, a statement of faith that became foundational for Christian orthodoxy. This was a pivotal moment in the development of Christian theology, as it defined the doctrine of the Trinity in a way that would become central to Christian belief.[4]

This trinitarian formulation has a crucial bearing on salvation. By affirming Jesus' divinity, the Council upheld the belief that salvation was made possible through the direct action of God in Christ, who became incarnate to redeem the world.

In addition to theological ecumenism, the Council of Nicaea contributed to institutional ecumenism. It established a model for how the Christian church could resolve disputes and maintain unity through ecumenical councils. Emphasis here is on the importance of dialogue, debate, and consensus-building among Christian leaders to ensure and maintain the unity of the church despite theological and cultural differences.

While the Council of Nicaea is often celebrated as a milestone of Christian unity, it also reveals the inherent challenges of ecumenism. Not everyone accepted the decisions made at the Council, particularly the rejection of Arianism. Even after the Council, some bishops, especially from regions (Eastern and Western parts of the Empire) where Arianism had strong support, continued to promote Arian beliefs.[5] This led to further conflicts and divisions within the church, which tells us that achieving unity is not a simple or straightforward process. Even though the Council aimed to create theological harmony, the enforcement of its decisions sometimes led to new tensions and fractures.

While rooted in the desire for unity, the Council of Nicaea teaches us that ecumenism must grapple with the reality of our global diversity and differences. Bringing different groups together in agreement on fundamental theological issues is a complex and difficult task. The Council demonstrated that unity often comes through compromise, which should not be seen as necessarily negative, as well as through dialogue and, in some instances, conflict. This tension between unity and diversity continues to be a theme in contemporary ecumenical efforts as churches seek common ground amid theological, ideological, and cultural differences.

Global Challenges, Existential Threats

The Council of Nicaea was convened because of challenges and pressing threats to the life of the church. Similarly, we also need to identify and

name our present challenges or threats if we are to respond creatively to the challenges that our churches and the wider society are facing in our times. Maybe they are not simple challenges but existential threats to the church and our shared flourishing.

As a church and as a global community, we are confronted with a range of interconnected and complex threats that span political, social, environmental, technological, and economic dimensions. I articulated some of these existential threats in the context of our globalised world in a previous work.[6]

When global wealth soars to an enormous height but leaves many in squalor and dying in abject poverty, something is amiss. Despite the euphoria of the evangelists of the predatory global market, the promised economic prosperity of the global market has not benefited the largest and poorest segment of the population. Metaphorically speaking, "contrary to the expectation that a rising tide raises all boats, the rising tide raises all yachts."[7] Worse, the world's poor do not even have boats, and they are drowning in the tsunami of corporate profits. We may be facing the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. A few are in luxury ocean liners, but the majority are in their old rickety boats.

Social inequality fuels social unrest, political polarisation, and violent extremism. Social unrest arises when these inequalities persist without effective redress. Similarly, political polarisation is closely tied to inequality. Economic and social disparities are polarising and often amplified in political discourse. Populist leaders capitalise on these divisions, thereby deepening societal cleavages. Extremist ideologies frequently exploit these frustrations. Religion can easily be co-opted by various groups to support their tribal, class, and narrow forms of nationalism.

Ongoing geopolitical tensions, wars, and regional conflicts significantly threaten global peace and stability. War, political instability, environmental disasters, and economic hardship are causing record levels of global displacement. Mass migration creates humanitarian crises, strains social services, generates political tensions in receiving countries, and brings ecological stress.

Related to profit-driven development, unsustainable resource consumption, war, political instability, and massive global displacements, is climate change. We can see the fingerprints and harbingers of global climate change in extreme weather conditions, rising sea levels, loss of

biodiversity, and disruptions to ecosystems. This crisis disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, particularly in the Global South.

As our world becomes increasingly digitalised and connectivity heightens, cyberattacks and information warfare pose growing threats. Cyberattacks can disrupt critical infrastructure (such as energy grids, healthcare systems, and financial institutions), cause economic losses, and undermine trust in institutions. Disinformation and fake news can manipulate public opinion, fuel social unrest, and destabilise democracies. A saying attributed to Mark Twain: "If we do not read, we are uninformed. If we read, we are misinformed."

Advances in automation, artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics are transforming industries and threatening to displace millions of workers. Technological disruptions are widening the digital divide, with those lacking digital skills or access to technology left behind. More challenging is the presence of AI, which has bearings on how we think of the human, especially human agency. Who are we as humans? The ethical use of AI in areas such as surveillance, healthcare, and criminal justice raises concerns about privacy, bias, and human rights.

Technical and Adaptive Challenges

While our challenges are complex, pervasive, and global in scale, the worldview, mindset, theoretical framework, understanding of the nature of the challenges, understanding of how the whole socio-ecosystem works and changes, the notion of power, and assessment of the kind of skills and level of stakeholders' participation as well as the energy/spirit that we bring are not proportionate to the challenges. If not proportionate to the kind and level of our challenges, we cannot expect to win. If we cannot win, can we at least provide holding actions to slow down our unravelling?

The challenges we are facing can be classified in two ways: "technical" and "adaptive." These challenges do not always come neatly packed as either technical or adaptive. In *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Ronald Heifetz and company make a distinction between the two.[8]

Technical problems may be complex, but they have known solutions that are available within the current know-how. In technical challenges, the statement of the problem, solution, and locus of work are clear. The solution to a technical problem lies in the hands of an expert.

Adaptive challenges, however, can only be addressed through a change in people's worldview, self-understanding, beliefs, values and priorities, habits, and loyalties. The solution does not lie simply in the authority and work of experts but in the active participation of the stakeholders. Adaptive challenges require adaptive institutions: institutions that behave like an open living system that thrives on change and is constantly learning. Adaptive challenges demand adaptive leadership and an adaptive governance structure.

We need a new set of eyes so we can frame our reality differently if we are to get out of the ruts of our old habits. Jeffrey Pfeffer contends: "The framework within which issues will be viewed and decided is often tantamount to determining the result."[9]

Standing at the edge of a climate precipice, before this socio-political and ecological unravelling becomes a nightmare, a radical turnaround or *metanoia* must happen, which involves a new way of *seeing*, *dwelling*, and *acting* if we are to move in the direction of our socio-political and ecological healing. To put it differently, this involves having the much-needed three competencies: *knowing*, *being*, and *acting* or attitude, knowledge, and skills. These competencies address the matter of *who we are*, *what we know*, and *what we do*.

Paradigmatic Turns in Ecumenism

The challenges we are facing are adaptive, which calls for adaptive responses, including adaptive thinking, dwelling, and acting. They call for adaptive leadership, institutions, and actions. Concerning ecumenism, a paradigm shift must happen in our theological thinking on how we view and practice ecumenism. The new framework must be appropriate and at par with the challenges we are facing as a faith community and as a global society.

Turn to the World

Beset with conflicts and divisions within the Christian fold, I can see why, for many years, ecumenism's priority has been Christian unity. Whether doctrinal, denominational, or personal, the divisions in Christianity undermine the core message of Christ's love and reconciliation. Given our global challenges, this "church-centred ecumenism," which is also clergy-centred, must give way to "world-centred ecumenism." The church does not just exist for itself or for each other, but for the sake of the world. Its mission is to incarnate God's love in Christ for the sake of the world's

transformation. Hence, our ecumenical efforts, guided by our mission, must be world-centred.

Turn to the Most Vulnerable Beings

However, this "turn to the world" (world-centredness), if it is to truly take account of our historical specificity and away from homogenising generalisation, must "turn toward the most vulnerable of the world." This "world-centred ecumenism" still lacks a prophetic edge unless it addresses the "intersectional" positions of people concerning class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, education, and more, which elevates the socio-political positions of some while relegating others, usually the majority, to the position of "compounded intersectional marginalisation."[10] I pursued in detail these ideas in my account of the "interlocking structures of systemic evils."[11]

We must put the most vulnerable at the centre of this "turn to the world," not because they are morally better than the wealthy, but because they are dying before their time. It is not only what is done to the world or people in general, but what is done to the most vulnerable among us, in particular, that must be the barometer of the success (or failure) of our ecumenical endeavours because it is through the pain of the least that we see in a better light the heartache of God, which serves as the beginnings of our vocation and theological reflection. As pointed out by C. S. Song, theology begins in the meeting of the "anguish of creation" and the "heartache of God" because God cares.[12] The least or the most vulnerable should refer not only to human beings but also to other creatures, to what George Tinker calls "the four-legged, the winged, and the living-moving-things."[13]

Turn to World Christianity and Contextual Ecumenism

Ecumenical movements have traditionally been centred in the Global North and dominated by Western Christianity. With the centre of Christian vitality shifting to the Global South, which warrants the name World Christianity, a paradigm shift must happen in which the voices and leadership from the Global South and non-Western Christian traditions are actively present. Ecumenism should move away from Eurocentrism and embrace a truly worldwide perspective, learning from and integrating the theological, cultural, and social insights of churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other non-Western contexts. This shift to World Christianity, argues Raimundo C. Barreto, Jr., has been the saving

grace of the ecumenical movement.[14] Recognising the rich diversity of Christianity allows the movement to better respond to global issues like migration, economic inequality, and ecological crises, which are often more pronounced in the Global South.[15]

Turn to the Bio-Cosmos

Knowing that our challenges are not limited to the plight of the people but to the wider web of life, another shift needs to happen. Not only must our ecumenical movement take a world-centred turn, but it must also take a bio-centric or "cosmos-centric turn"—a turn that is crucially needed to unsettle or subvert anthropocentrism. We are not only citizens of a particular nation but also of the planet Earth: we are "Earthlings." As "Earthlings," we need to expand our notion of justice, which is not predicated on sameness, and our notion of "democracy" to that of "biocracy," which is concerned with the "right relations" of all creatures.[16]

We need to change the way we see and relate to the world around us. Our self does not begin and end with our bodies. We are a part of a larger body that includes the whole socio-ecosystem and beyond. As we expand our notion of body self, so also must we expand our sense of time: "Our self begins neither with our birth nor ends with our death: Our true self is past, present, and future in interdependence."[17]

It is in line with this idea that we must think of our relationship with the forest, rivers, ocean, and the rest of nature around us. "Nature is not a place to visit, it is our home," a saying attributed to Gary Snider. We are a part of nature. The well-being of the whole ecosystem is our well-being. What befalls nature befalls us and other living creatures.

When Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what we need to do to save our world, he answered, "What we most need to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying." When we think of ourselves as one with the earth, making the earth feel and cry through us is but natural. Moreover, "just as we may feel the *Earth crying with us*, perhaps we can experience the *Earth dreaming* with us."[18]

Turn to Pneumatologic Cybergenic Synergy

We are living in a world that is highly digitalised and with heightened connectivity. In the biblical world, when we think of a messenger, we normally think of angels. Angels were the messengers. Today, what easily comes to mind are the FB Messenger and WhatsApp. More challenging

is the presence of AI, which has bearings on how we think of the human, especially human agency. If we cannot prevent it from coming, we had better be more proactive in guiding it for our shared flourishing. Why not pursue cybergenic synergy? Instead of retreating, why not proactively create ethical platforms to guide technology towards our shared flourishing?

Turn to Interfaith

Considering the enormity of the challenges we are facing, ecumenism, if we want it to be transformative, must move beyond in-house ecumenism, which has sapped our focus and energies throughout the years, to an "interfaith-dialogical-centred ecumenism."

Our society is awash in superficial responses to the matter of religious diversity. The modernist-secularist privatising of religious faith has made us ignorant of the role of religion and, sadly, at our peril. While religious diversity is easily acknowledged, our secular and privatised world has made it possible for people to avoid engaging with people of different religions, partly because it is relatively easy for people to live with each other without reference to their religious identities. There is also the toleration of a non-engaging niceness that borders on indifference. At the other extreme is religious bigotry, which is fed by superficial and harmful stereotypes.

We need to move past superficial and harmful religious stereotypes. The reality of our highly globalised and religiously diverse global village calls for a serious, respectful, thoughtful, and creative response to the issue of religious diversity. If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace among religions. Beyond the practical reality of learning to live together in a religiously diverse world, people of faith, in general, and Christians, in particular, need to respond to the challenge of religious diversity following our faith convictions.[19]

This requires nothing but an in-depth examination of our deeply held theological views, a genuine desire to encounter believers of other faiths with respect, and a humble posture of bearing witness to the faith that is in us in the manner of the One who was humbled and resurrected. Serious engagement with people of other faiths does not require that we abandon our deeply cherished convictions, far from it. It does not require that everyone at the "table" must agree, but it does require a "commitment to being at the table—with one's commitments."[20]

Why do Christians need to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths? What is the theological basis of our engagement? In a cursory manner, here are my basic theological motivations.

First, from a historical and hermeneutical point of view, as historical creatures, we do not see reality from the point of view of eternity (*sub-specie aeternitatis*) but only through our limited socio-historical and geographical location. Historical beings that we are, what we see is a part and not the totality of reality. If our perception is limited by our historicity and circumscribed by our relationship with the world around us, then we should not close ourselves off to other dimensions of the total reality or other expressions of truth that our neighbours may see and experience.

Second, from the theological-mystical point of view, not only is our knowledge of God limited and historically conditioned, but God is also the Ultimate Mystery. Moreover, the Ultimate Mystery is not only ineluctably ineffable, but at the heart of the Ultimate Mystery is plurality.[21] We can discern the Ultimate Mystery's plurality in the manifold particularities. To confine the Ultimate Mystery to one expression is to misunderstand what is at the heart of the Ultimate Mystery: the mystery of plurality—a plurality that at the same time does not deny the mystery of unity. This is not simply "many-ness" or oneness understood as mono, but plurality understood in a non-dualistic way—*the unity* and *the inextricable connection of the many*. There is always a hidden connection between all things (*semper occulta quaedam est concatenatio*).[22]

Third, from an ethical and practical point of view, Christianity does more than affirm that our knowledge is limited and that plurality is at the heart of the Ultimate Reality. It also affirms that the building of a just, humane, and sustainable world demands openness to the claims of other religious believers and to what their religious praxis can contribute to our common life, particularly to our shared well-being. Openness to the truth-claims of others and testing them, considering their contribution to greater well-being, is reminiscent of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom).

Practical wisdom knows that something is "true" because of its "good" effects. If the "true" is the "good," then the true is discernible in the "good" that a person does or what a "good person" does.[23] In short, a particular religious expression that claims monopoly of the absolute truth violates that truth claim when it undermines mutual respect and when it harms the other. Monopolistic claims and the imposition of truth

claims are contrary to the nature of truth. Such actions devour people in the name of the sacred truth.

Transformative Ecumenism: Shifting Focus to Address Challenges

From Inward Unity to Ecumenism for Outward Mission

Historically, ecumenism emphasised unity among Christian denominations, focused on theological dialogue, and resolving doctrinal differences. Today, the paradigm must shift from internal reconciliation to an outward-facing mission that engages with broader societal issues. A world-centred ecumenism shifts the focus from inward unity to ecumenism for outward mission. Ecumenism should become a unifying force for addressing common global challenges.

Ecumenism should reconceptualise itself as an ethical and moral force in political and social governance. This involves not only speaking to internal church matters but also offering ethical frameworks for addressing corruption, injustice, war, ecological destruction, and technological challenges like artificial intelligence and surveillance. Churches and religious organisations must see themselves as stakeholders in shaping policies that affect the common good.

From Hierarchical Leadership to Grassroots Empowerment

Traditional ecumenical dialogue has often been led by church elites or institutional leaders. However, many of today's most pressing issues—social justice, climate change, inequality—are being addressed from the ground up by grassroots movements. Ecumenism should shift towards empowering local communities and grassroots movements that embody ecumenical values in action. Churches should facilitate bottom-up initiatives where ordinary people, not just clergy or theologians, are involved in efforts for peace, justice, and sustainability. I will articulate this further at the end of this paper.

From Doctrine to Praxis: Focusing on Ecumenical and Interfaith Action

Ecumenism has been rooted in doctrinal convergence, but the pressing challenges of today require a shift towards collaborative action across denominations and other faith traditions.[24] In the face of our existential threats, ecumenism must prioritise praxis—working together on real-world issues like poverty, inequality, health, climate change, and technological ethics—over doctrinal agreement. Rather than wait for

complete theological unity, it should foster ecumenical partnerships based on shared ethical commitments.

From Ecological Stewardship to Eco-Justice

While ecumenical movements have acknowledged ecological concerns, the paradigm must shift from basic stewardship to a deeper commitment to eco-justice, which links ecological sustainability with social justice. Ecumenism should incorporate the idea of eco-justice, recognising that ecological degradation disproportionately affects the marginalised. Churches should advocate for policies that address both ecological restoration and social equity, focusing on sustainability, climate justice, and care for creation as a moral and spiritual imperative.[25]

From Technological Hesitancy to Ethical Leadership in Innovation

Historically, religious institutions have often been slow to engage with technological advancements. However, in an age where technology influences every aspect of life—including ethics, privacy, work, and human dignity—ecumenism must develop a proactive role. Ecumenical movements should become leaders in ethical discourse on technology, offering moral perspectives on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital surveillance. This includes advocating for technologies that enhance human dignity and protect the vulnerable while critiquing those that exacerbate inequality or violate human rights.

Ecumenism from Below: Lay People as the Main Agents of Ecumenical Movement

If we are to help address our global existential threats and promote our shared flourishing, our ecumenism must become an ecumenical movement from below.

Theologically, ecumenism from below is rooted in the lived experiences of everyday Christians. It emerges not from formal doctrinal agreements but from the collective, Spirit-led actions of believers seeking to live out the radical unity that Christ prayed for in John 17:21: "That they may all be one." This theology sees unity as a relational and practical call, grounded in solidarity with the marginalised and shaped by the shared mission to serve, heal, and reconcile the world. In this view, the unity of the church transcends denominational boundaries and institutional

hierarchies, blossoming through acts of love, justice, and mercy that bind people together across differences.[26]

From the point of view of ecumenism from below, the marginalised are not viewed as objects of mission but as a site of divine encounter. Just as Jesus stood in solidarity with the marginalised, Christians, regardless of denomination, are called to find common ground in their service to those in need. This unity is forged through acts of mercy, service, and advocacy, reflecting the model of Christ who came "not to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

Reclaiming the Spirit of a Movement

The word "movement" is normally attached to ecumenism; thus, we speak of the ecumenical movement. Movements, in the noble effort to make their vision and mission enduring and find programmatic expressions, move in the direction of institutionalisation. Considering its importance, if not necessity, institutionalisation could be a trap, potentially killing the spirit of a movement. Instead of the institution serving the originating mission, the mission gets subordinated to preserve the interest of the institution and its leaders.

How shall we maintain the spirit of a movement in our institutions? More particularly, how shall we maintain the spirit of a movement in our institutionalised ecumenical ventures?

To resurrect the spirit of a movement in institutions, we must "normalise change" and become constant "learners," both individually and institutionally. The only constant is change. Without change, we die. In a world of constant change, the "learned" will be prepared for a world that no longer exists, while the "learners" will inherit the earth.

It is not only necessary that we resurrect the "spirit of a movement" of our ecumenical movement; it must also become a "movement from below." We cannot journey far in our ecumenical movement if the initiatives continue to be controlled by the church bureaucrat heroes of our churches. As the poet William Stafford said, "[I]t is time for all the heroes to go home." It is not that heroic acts are absent, but that heroic acts have found embodiment in the people's movement from below.[27]

Critical Yeasts, Critical Mass, and Critical Connections

When we think of "critical mass," the default understanding is that an amount or number has reached a certain point ("tipping point") that is

sufficient to generate a significant shift.[28] The term has often been used in "mass movements and mobilisations." This is how I was introduced to the term "critical mass." This focus on numbers has created a misunderstanding and misapplication.

Yes, "critical mass" involves numbers, but it is more than numbers or not simply about numbers. Having its beginnings in the field of nuclear physics, "critical mass" is the quality of something or an event that can generate subsequent reactions exponentially that are no longer dependent on the originating cause. The key is that a self-sustained process has been generated in which one reaction has been produced exponentially, not sequentially.

The "critical question" that we must ask to understand "critical mass" is, what initial, even tiny-fractal-like things/acts, can make exponentially greater things/acts possible?

This question is nudging us to shift our focus from that of numbers to the "quality of the catalyst," "right atmosphere," and the "quality of the platforms." The notion of "critical yeast" offers a lens to a better understanding of the "critical mass."[29] The yeast, the smallest component in bread-baking, when rightly mixed and given a conducive atmosphere, is the critical catalyst for the mass (dough) to grow. Getting a small set of the right people (rightly mixed)—with varied gifts/positions who are strategically connected ("critical connections")—involved at the right places has greater potential for creating social change than a mass who "think alike."

If our witness is to be effective, we need to learn the skills of developing "withness."[30] We must learn the skills of developing critical yeasts. This is a political necessity. Beyond that, it is also a spiritual necessity. Following Thich Nhat Hanh, "If we are a drop of water and would like to get to the ocean as an individual drop, we will surely evaporate along the way. To arrive at the ocean, we must go as a river."[31] Our faith communities are our rivers.

New beginnings are possible! We can sense their coming; we can hear their birthing cries. They do not come, however, by themselves. They come with our participation: from those of us who have caught the vision and have become one with the vision. New beginnings come when we have made the resolve to help midwife their coming! To use the lines of the poet Antonio Machado, "Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino

al andar" (Traveller, there is no road. The road is made by walking). "Solvitor ambulando" (The proof is in the walking).[32]

My hope—active hope—is for our ecumenical movement to become a transformative ecumenical movement with energy and power rising from below that will help us courageously and adequately address the existential threats of our times.

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PART-III

INTERACTIVE SESSIONS

Trinity, Creed, and Apologetic Approaches in Pakistan Contexts

Farhana A. Nazir

Historically, the Nicene Creed was declared when the Council of Nicaea was called to resolve a religious controversy that started dividing the Christian community. Arius believed that Jesus was a created being, but a supreme creation of the uncreated and "timelessly self-subsistent" God.[1] Arius expressed his belief in his song about Jesus Christ, stating "There was a time when Christ was not…" In 325, Constantine called for a council of the Church where bishops from throughout the Empire assembled to settle the issue. Arianism was denounced as heresy, and the first steps were taken toward an authoritative statement of creed that is regularly repeated by the faithful throughout the world to this day:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end. And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. He spoke through the prophets. We believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and to life in the world to come. Amen.[2]

Understanding the concept of the Trinity posed a significant challenge for early Christian believers. Such a period of creedal reforms (325 to 381) brought much pain and suffering, according to Justo Gonzalez.

The Church that inherits the Nicene tradition must remember that we are heirs of those who came limping to the debate. And their wounds were ones inflicted through real and practical faithfulness. Nicaea is the first great debate of the Church, and it is these wounded bishops that are

our Fathers in theological debate. They were strengthened first by costly faithfulness, and real theological debate is forever accountable to them.[3]

The Nicene Creed provided a revolutionary explanation of the Christian faith during this period, addressing the doctrine of God. This debate extended beyond the Christian community to encompass scholars of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The understanding of the Trinity has been a captivating topic of historical Islamic debate among Muslim and Christian scholars.[4] In South Asia, Islam has a rich history of *munazrat* (debates) and Christian-Muslim dialogue, both in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras.[5] These discussions have seen Muslim and Christian scholars engaging in compelling and persuasive apologetic dialogues. Muslims have raised challenging questions regarding the concept of committing *Shirk* (polytheism by associating anyone with God), the authenticity of the Biblical script (*Tahrif*), and the divinity of Christ. Christian scholars have effectively used diverse contextual examples to explain the unity of God within the Trinity. This paper draws not only from the theological arguments of Western scholars but also from indigenous scholars who have passionately defended the Trinity, as outlined in the Nicene Creed, during apologetic discussions. The history of Pakistan provides engaging examples of understanding, critique, and the persuasive defence of the Creed in an apologetic approach.

In 1973, Molana Kousar Niazi, a prominent Pakistani politician and Islamic scholar, came up with his critique of Christian theology. Niazi's analysis ignited crucial debates on the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. By shedding light on the early confusion in Church history and referencing the case of Arius, Niazi prompted a re-examination of these fundamental theological concepts. Niazi argued that the Christian fathers had declared Jesus Christ as the son of God, attributing God's qualities to him, and kept inventing the creed of redemption. He contended that this theological discourse was not originally part of Jesus's teachings and that Christianity had strayed from his authentic message by embracing the philosophy of the Church Fathers and reciting creeds. Furthermore, Niazi critiqued the Nicene Creed as a representation of Greek philosophy that failed to address the profound question of how the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are related to each other. He also challenged the traditional view of the divinity of Christ, asserting that Jesus was a prophet, not a son of God.[6] Molana Niazi handed his research "*Aina-e-Taslees*" (Mirror of Trinity) to Christian scholar Yousuf Jalil, challenging him to engage with its arguments and provide a response.[7]

In response, Yousuf Jalil, a first editor of *al-Mushir* (The Counsellor), presented a compelling defence, not just as a debate (*Munazra*), but

in the form of publishing his research. His response, published over three impactful years—1981, 1982, and 1983—provided a constructive contribution to the discourse. In his culminating article, Jalil eloquently addressed the Trinity and clarified the divinity of Christ as the eternal Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*), leaving a positive impact on theological discussions.[8] Yousuf Jalil's research was sent not only to Molana Kauser Niazi but to indigenous scholars, both Christians and Muslims. Jalil also published his research on Jesus as the Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*) to share the Christian belief of the Word of God and Spirit of God, including in the different references of the Quran. Jalil argued that the Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*), Existence of God (*Wajud Allah*), and Life of God (*Hayat Allah*) cannot be separated from each other. He also gave various Quranic references stating Jesus as the Spirit of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. He also included that the divinity of Christ cannot be approved from external examples but from the teaching of Jesus and careful study of the New Testament.[9]

To Yousaf Jalil, the Urdu translation of the word "*Kalm*" means "coming out like a tender shoot." Therefore, the word "*Kalma*" means a tender shoot coming out from the highest deity (Isaiah 53:2). Since God is not a physical body, Jesus has come out of the divine God; therefore, He is fully divine. The word of God is an image of God. The "*Kalama Tullah*" (word of God) means the light of God that enlightens others and gives life. The word of God has an internal relation with God.[10] Yousuf Jalil said that Christians do not seek salvation through Creed, but they find the procedure of salvation by understanding what Jesus has accomplished in suffering and resurrection as declared in the Nicene Creed.[11]

The ancient *Shema* creed proclaims: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord." In Islam, a believer testifies, "I bear witness that there is no God but the One God and Muhammad is a Messenger of God." This confession of faith in the unseen but the one and only God (*Tawhid*) is fundamental to Islamic worship of Allah.[12] It is emphasised that no one can share any aspect of Allah's divinity, power, and authority, and no one can be associated with Allah.[13] While the majority of Islamic scholars rejected the Trinity, some also recognised that the status of the Trinity in Christianity is similar to the Islamic proclamation "*la ilaha illilah*" (There is one God).[14]

The English translation of the Nicene Creed starts with "we" believe, while the word "Creed" comes from the Latin "Credo," meaning "I believe," representing an individual confession of Christian faith. The Church in Pakistan was founded on the profound declaration of a person reciting,

remembering, and proclaiming the powerful phrase of faith: "*Mien Eman Rakhta/Rakhti Hoon"* (I believe…). This connection mirrors the early church's use of the Christian Creed and its significance in the history of the Church Mission. Tertullian referred to the creed as "A pledge of all allegiance to the banner of Christ." The Creed was also known as a "Symbol," signifying a "password" for entry into the Church or the community of Christian faith.[15] While in English, faith means 'trust', the Arabic and Urdu term for faith holds a different meaning. The Arabic word for faith, "Eman", originates from the root "amn", which means safety. In the Quran, God says, "Allah is the Protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light" (2:257). According to Hamza Yusuf, faith is directly linked to feeling secure, serving as an anchoring element in the human experience.[16] In the early Church Mission, a Christian belief in God was the first step in securing safety. In the context of Christianity in Pakistan, the word "Eman" implies that placing trust in God will lead to finding safety and security, including spiritual safety.

The Nicene Creed serves as a powerful encapsulation of the transformative message brought by Jesus Christ. It eloquently presents the concept of the triune God and the profound purpose of living a Christian life, igniting hope and inspiration in the hearts of believers. Emphasising the shared substance of the Father and the Son, the Creed instils unwavering confidence in the ability to truly know God through Jesus Christ. Drawing from Hebrews 1:3, which declares, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being," the Creed vividly illustrates that gazing upon Jesus is akin to beholding God Himself. By virtue of being united in substance with the Father, believers are assured that Jesus can authentically represent God, extend forgiveness, proclaim righteousness, and welcome the believers as cherished children of the Father.

The question of the divinity of Jesus provided an incredible opportunity for indigenous Christian scholars to bridge the gap with Muslims by interpreting Jesus as the Word of God (*Kalama Tulla*). They emphasised that Jesus Christ is a revelation that unveils the image of God and that he was the Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*) that enabled people to perceive the creator in God's creation.[17] Imad-ud-din, an early Muslim convert and scholar, passionately argued that the *kalima* was not just a simple *lafz*, word or a *jumla*, sentence in writing, but rather a "title" of the second person of the Trinity that reveals the meaning of God in His nature, attributes, and speech (John 1:18). Imad ud-din also asserted that the same *kalima* was with God in the beginning and after His incarnation

is called Jesus. Both God the Father and the *kalima* have *tashakhkhus* "personhood," but their nature is the same.[18] According to Yousuf Jalil, Jesus is a captivating historical figure just as the *Kalama Tullah* Word of God is. Jesus is born, and the Messiah is eternal, as mentioned in the Qur'an.

The Nicene Creed declares that Jesus is the "very God of very God." He is not made or created but is the true God. For Muslims exploring the Christian faith, embracing Christ as God and the Son of God can be challenging.[19] Despite the complexity of understanding the Trinity, scholar Michal Nazir Ali notes that the revealed doctrine of *tauḥid* (one God) must be accepted *bila kaif* (without asking how).[20] Imad-ud-din passionately accepted and argued that his belief in the Trinity stemmed from Christ's self-revelation to him. As a Muslim, Imad-ud-din opposed the idea of the divinity of Christ. He wrote: "When I was not a Christian, I used to say to my friends: if all the teachings of the law of Christ were to be proved correct, it might be possible; but Christ Jesus is God, how can anyone prove this." Following his conversion to Christianity, he fervently testified to Christ's divinity, declaring, "now I testify in the presence of God that Jesus Christ is God. And this mystery has been revealed to me when I drew near to him." For him, the divinity of Jesus Christ became the new '*shahada*' (Witness).[21]

Though understanding the divinity of Christ is difficult, the most powerful theological discourse of the Islamic theology of understanding Allah is to understand His attributes and names (Qur'an, 7:180) and believers "cannot (sufficiently) count Him (His Attributes)" (Quran 73:20). A Muslim scholar, Ghamidi notes that "*Tawhid* is the most important of the attributes of perfection."[22] The debate delves into how Christians and Muslims perceive and interpret the divinity of Christ and the attributes of God. Additionally, the text discusses the difficulty in understanding the divinity of Christ and emphasises the importance of comprehending the attributes of Allah in Islamic theology (*Tawhid-e-Sifati*).[23] The comparison of Christian and Islamic theological approaches adds depth to the discussion, shedding light on the concept of *Tawhid* and *Trinity*. This debate challenges the traditional understanding of divinity and encourages a believer's exploration of the attributes of God.

For Pakistani Christians, the Nicene Creed stands as a powerful gateway to understanding the Trinitarian doctrine, highlighting the shared belief in the Trinity as a cornerstone of an ecumenical Church. Embracing the equality of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father is not just a mere element of confession but rather an indispensable tenet of Christianity.

Therefore, delving into their divine attributes encourages believers to seek careful insights and interpretations. Historically, the apologetic approach and discussions provided a platform to share theological questions in Pakistan. Not only was publishing and dialogue possible, but the judiciary and courts also aimed to maintain a degree of independence to allow freedom to discuss religious contradictions, the divinity of Jesus, and the life of the Prophet Muhammad.[24] A Muslim writer, Habib, praises Christians as "pioneers" in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the history of Pakistan.[25] Kauser Niazi once said about the apologetics discussions in 1973:

The church has the right to praise the freedom of religion as loudly as it can be practised in the mosque, but it should have respective limitations. Both the church and the mosque have the right to reflect on each other without hurting the feelings of others.[26]

Christians gradually became strangers and started seeking their identity. To Jalil, it is crucial to remember the influence of historical Islamic culture.[27] In 1947, Pakistan's creation as a state based on religion sparked high hopes among Christians. However, as Islamisation has progressed, these hopes have dwindled, leaving Christians feeling betrayed.[28] It is essential for the Church of Pakistan to actively engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue, raise awareness among the laity, and train clergy in Christian-Muslim relations. This is a critical step in preserving the Christian mission in the context of Pakistan's increasing Islamisation.[29]

Scholars are raising questions on the limited but ongoing research and apologetics in Pakistan. Paul I. Y. Kim in the insightful research "History and Context of Christian-Muslim Relations in Pakistan" enquired into the intricate tapestry of Christian-Muslim scholarship on apologetics and dialogue. Beyond theological debates, Christian advocates emphasised pressing social and political issues, including blasphemy laws, unequal minority rights, and conversion, e.g. The research reveals that Muslim polemics often overshadow Christian-Muslim relations, leaving Christians struggling to defend their faith as a minority. The study compellingly suggests that Christians should embrace the universality of the Church and work together to devise a comprehensive plan for Christian-Muslim relations. Likewise, it urges Muslims to transcend medieval polemics and sectarian doctrinal debates, and instead engage in modern, constructive discussions to help build a more inclusive and progressive society.[30]

Legal, social, and religious reforms in Pakistan have transformed the approach to apologetics. The defence of the Trinity and faith has been

gradually discouraged since the 1980s. Yousuf Jalil, as the first editor of *al-Mushir*, played an active role in apologetic research and dialogue. However, due to legal restrictions on Christians in the post-1980 era, their freedom of speech, writing, and publishing has been limited, marking a significant shift in the landscape of apologetics in Pakistan. In response, some scholars have shifted their focus to explore apologetics through the lens of social justice and moral values. For example, the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, has revamped its strategy for interfaith dialogue "from theology to sociology" and is now emphasising "social and cultural dialogue" rather than religious discourse.[31]

This shift in focus presents a compelling opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations and bridge gaps in understanding across different faith traditions. *Masihi Ishat Khana*, Lahore (Christian Publishing House), has published a series of apologetic materials aimed at defending the Christian faith in response to misunderstandings and criticisms from the Muslim community.[32] Pakistani scholars attempted to engage in Christian-Muslim encounters through theological-missiological discourse. Nazir Ali passionately calls on the Christian Church to embrace the "normative Salvation History" embodied in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[33] Additionally, Amjad-Ali emphasises the urgent need for Christians to gain a deeper understanding of Islam and to engage with their Muslim neighbours in a way that goes beyond mere debate.[34]

Indeed, these are powerful calls to action that should not be ignored. However, in Pakistan, when Christian students and scholars return from their interactions with Muslims, they are often met with scrutiny and probing questions about their beliefs. Effectively communicating the Christian faith, especially the concept of the Triune God, becomes a challenging task. However, articulating the Trinity in the context of Pakistan is no small feat. Despite this, indigenous Christians have steadfastly upheld the Nicene Creed, a testament of faith established by Church Fathers 1700 years ago. Their unwavering commitment to this historical declaration is truly remarkable.

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3 "Arius and Nicea"

[4] Sara Leila Husseini examines the works of early Christian theologians: Theodore Abu Qurra (d.829), Abu Raita (d.835), and Ammar Al-Basri (d.850) who are known to defend their doctrine in Arabic, and were engaged with Islamic theological thought (kalam), and the divine attributes of God. For more information see "Early Christians Explanations of the Trinity in Arabic in the Context of Muslim Theology" (Birmingham: PhD Research, 2011).

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[16] Hamza Yusuf quoted by Lamya Hamad, "Belief in the Unseen" retrieved from www.whyislam.org on 27 September 2024

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[22] Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, Islam: a Comprehensive Introduction, trans. Dr. Shehzad Saleem (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2012), chap. 1.
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Mosaiclessia: Nicene Creed, Context of Differentiated Unity in Christ

Swarup Bar

Nicene Creed: A historic ecumenical affirmation

The CCA has organised this Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X) in a most significant and opportune time when the world church is celebrating the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. One of the most momentous affirmations in Christian history, the Nicene Creed lays down succinctly the fundamental and core elements of our Christian faith, reflecting on the Trinity, the Church, and eschatology. The Nicene Creed (AD 325), or more specifically the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381), has thus become the most revered document or creed followed by almost all sections of Christendom. Therein lies its appeal and power to continue to influence Christian spirituality and practices and, most importantly, the overall ecclesiology of different traditions. Since this Creed is accepted by most Christians, scholars have argued that this has been and would continue to be one of the significant bases for church unity, cooperation, and dialogue among various denominations. However, the importance of this Creed for ecclesial unity is not a new discovery. Particularly in India, where I come from, this Creed was suggested as a basis for forming a national Church in India way back in the 19th century by Lal Behari Day, a converted Christian from Bengal in India, a pastor and missionary of the Free Church of Scotland, and one who was passionate about indigenous leadership and missions.[1]

Whether the Nicene Creed can continue to be the basis of unity and ecumenism in the future remains to be seen. But it has to be noted that in the first few centuries of the Christian Church, doctrinal disputes over the person of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were the primary motivation behind the establishment of the Nicene Creed. In other words, the Nicene Creed can be said to be an ecumenical effort towards bringing churches together on the basis of common doctrinal affirmations. From an early period, divisions and dissensions were not uncommon in the Church, as it was true even of the New Testament times, as witnessed to by Paul. The Patristic times experienced upheaval in the Church due to various philosophies and doctrines that threatened to break up the Church. There were various heresies and schisms in the early church. The communion of the Church suffered quite a bit due to these heresies, which were based on doctrinal and ecclesiastical matters. But there were theologians of the early church who defended the unity of the Church on

the basis of common faith and the doctrinal deposit. For example, the disputes emerging from Gnosticism and Montanism led Irenaeus (c. 132-200) and Tertullian (c. 155-240) to develop paradigms to provide strength to the Church as "one house", although scattered throughout the world and to hand down the truth through the ages.[2] The Arian heresy was one of the primary Christological heresies, which threatened to split the church. Concerned about the threat to the unity of the empire, Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

It happened to be the first general ecumenical council of the whole Church, attended by about three hundred bishops and others.[3] It declared that the Son is consubstantial with the Father and was not a created being. This was first clearly expressed in the Nicene Creed and established in the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. However, the Arians were not wiped away as there were groups which maintained this position till the 7th century. By the beginning of the 8th century, however, there was a general acceptance of the Nicene Creed. So Arian heresy, which threatened to split the church, actually did not succeed to a large extent, and the heresy died away in the 8th century.[4] Philip Turner, commenting on the importance of Nicene Christianity, particularly the Creed, considering it as a bedrock of new ecumenism, argues that Nicene Christianity anchors the church in those beliefs and practices without which the church can preserve neither its unity in Christ nor its identity as Christian.[5] The creeds serve as tokens of Christian identity. They have been providing the norm for reading the Scriptures, evangelisation and instruction, and a basis for unity.[6] So the Creed has been playing a pivotal role in Christian unity since the beginning of its formulation.

However, the Church was not fully immune from division, and subsequently there were 'heresies' like Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and others which divided the Church; although there were later councils, like the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) and Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which sought to bring them into unity. In spite of these efforts, six churches, commonly known as the Non-Chalcedonian Churches (Oriental Orthodox Churches), rejected Chalcedon and went back to the formula of Cyril of Alexandria: "The one nature of the Incarnate God".[7] Thereafter, the history of the Church saw many divisions, majorly the East-West Schism (AD 1054) due to various factors: theological (*filioque*), ecclesiological, socio-cultural, political, and so forth. Attempts at reconciliation through two councils, namely, the Council of Lyons and the Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence, were made. However, both failed since the ecclesiological differences carried over from the first century into the second, and a mixture of politics and doctrine made matters complicated.[8] The history of divisions in the Church is long and complicated, and is based not only on the doctrinal

but also the social, political, and cultural milieu of Europe and West Asia. Here, the point was to show how the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed continued to be the basis of common affirmation among Christians, although divisions continued.

Problems with unity based on 'oneness' or 'uniformity'

As we have seen, in the early church and even later, the criteria for ecumenical unity were assent to doctrines; this began to change as the movement stressed joint action and commitment to society, leading to the slogan 'doctrine divides, service unites'. However, Faith and Order discussions revealed that behind doctrinal and theological disagreements lie deep socio-cultural and political factors. Moreover, the mission of the Church began to be understood in terms of the whole of humankind, and unity was found to be inseparable from this.[9] In spite of this, the ecumenical movement spent lots of effort on seeking to focus on oneness, or common doctrine, or common activity. However, less effort went into acknowledging and tackling the differences and diversity among the churches in the nature, ministry, and sacraments of the Church.[10] The effort of finding common ground or oneness was also sought through a Christological perspective, wherein churches were supposed to move towards the centre that is Jesus Christ, hoping to bring them closer to each other. However, this Christological method was also found inadequate as scholars showed that there is plurality inherent in all our theological propositions and methods. In other words, there is no common theology or ecclesiology.

Historically, many people conceive unity, or in a broader sense, the ecumenical movement, as a movement for 'uniformity and conformity' among the churches. Beginning with Christian Rome, the local churches within the Empire sought uniformity in matters related to doctrines, structures, and organisation for political stability, and all new ideas and developments were frowned upon, resulting in divisions. However, as Kuncheria Pathil contends, ecumenism is not essentially a movement for uniformity in ecclesial structures, governments, disciplines, customs, ways of worship, or theology. Not even uniformity in doctrinal formulations or expressions. It is a movement for 'unity in diversity', 'unity in plurality'.[11] Pathil further notes that the unity of the early Churches was lost as a result of insistence on uniformity, as they rejected all diversity in doctrinal and theological formulations.[12] However, it is a fact that the diversity of different local churches was an essential part of the original vision of Christianity. The New Testament testifies to different types of Christian traditions (Jewish, Hellenistic, Apocalyptic, Charismatic, Episcopal) existing side by side with mutual recognition and acceptance,

though not altogether free from conflicts, tensions, and controversies. In spite of their differences, they had a fundamental unity in Jesus Christ.[13] Movements of Christian unity have therefore largely subordinated the plural dimension of our existence.

This has continued till the modern period. George Matthew Nalunnakkal shows that most modern thinking depends on the notion of oneness. From missionary conferences in Edinburgh (1910) to meetings of the World Council of Churches, like Harare (1998), from Vatican II to modern times, ecumenism faces the problem of orientation towards a sort of 'monistic unity' of churches. He argues that oneness is not without its inner contradictions. Here, he refers to the question about who is seeking this oneness and for what purpose. The concept of the 'one' can be presumed to be normative in the sense of swallowing up other views and conceptions.[14] Nalunnakkal asserts that the foundation for unity or ecumenism should not be oneness anymore but rather an affirmation of pluriform identities (religious, denominational, ethnic, caste, gender, and so on). The task of the ecumenical movement is to respond creatively to the affirmation of diverse identities by various subaltern communities. His proposal is that of a Trinitarian and Eucharistic theology of ecumenism, which would develop a community of communities. He explains that the Holy Trinity is key to 'Pluriform ecumenism'. It transcends 'oneness' and affirms plurality. Nalunnakkal draws from Abraham P. Athyal to state that Jesus' prayer does not suggest an organic or structural unity as we assume, because it would be anachronistic; rather, Jesus was focusing on the ethical/moral implications of oneness.[15] Moreover, he suggests that the Eucharist can be the basis of unity, which refers to the commemoration of the breaking up of the One body of Christ into many bodies. Hence, a church becomes the Church not in its 'being one' but in its 'becoming broken.' Then the church will be really among the broken people. An unbroken church can become an institution. Only a broken church will grow into a fellowship of communities.[16] While Trinitarian and Eucharistic foundations could be helpful for reinforcing the value of diversity or plurality in ecumenical relationships, the question is how far can these suffice for exploring wider ecumenism, which should include the whole inhabited Earth? In the following, I critically look at Jesus' high-priestly prayer as a basis for ecumenism in the context of diversity, plurality, and wider ecumenism.

Limitations of some ecumenical foundations

From the beginning of ecumenical discourses, Christ's high-priestly prayer has been central to the affirmation of Church unity. The prayer found in John 17:20-23 voices the desire of Jesus for unity so that "all

may be one". But the essence of this oneness has always been debated. For some, the high-priestly prayer represents moral oneness; for others, this has translated into organic unity, or structural unity, or visible unity. For yet others, this seems to be more an ideal unity of ourselves with the will and purpose of God. Biblical scholars hold various views on the interpretation of unity that is derived from this passage. Raymond Brown, one of the renowned Biblical scholars, notes, citing various scholars, that this unity is interpreted differently by different people; for some, it is a question of united purpose; for others, it would mean working together harmoniously; while for yet others, it represents the relationship between a husband and a wife. Others suggest that this is supposed to be a mystical union, or a unity founded upon the paradigm of unity between the Father and the Son. Still others argue that this is a unity founded on love.[17] Whatever the interpretation of the unity envisaged in this passage from John's gospel, one is sure that the emphasis is on unity, but not so much on diversity as such. While many would argue that diversity is implicit in this affirmation, here one can safely say that the aspect of unity overshadows the diversity. However, for generations, this passage has been utilised for ecumenical movements or the unity of churches without realising the fact that it has not much to say about diversity, which should be inherent in the unity.

Diversity of the Asian context and ecumenism

Why is this diversity dimension in our ecumenical discourses very important? It is due to the fact that we live in a world full of diversity. Especially when we speak about the Asian context, it is an epitome of diversity. Speaking about Asian realities which impinge on ecumenism, Wesley Ariarajah lists six features which are common for the whole region. These are diversity and plurality, Christianity and colonialism, Asian poverty, deprivation and oppression, the influence of religious and cultural traditions and revolutionary upheavals.[18] While pointing out the immense diversity and plurality in Asia, in terms of religion, culture, language, society and politics, Ariarajah also notes that this sort of plurality is opposed to oneness embraced in the ecumenical impulses in the western hemisphere".[19] Moreover, Christianity's tryst with colonialism led to churches with denominational differences and rivalries which were imported, and doctrinal problems which were irrelevant to Asia. Colonial Christianity was associated with power and privilege, and this sort of Christianity had little sympathy with the religious and cultural traditions of Asia.[20] So, in essence, the ecumenical agenda of Asia has been vastly different from its Western counterparts. The Asian understanding of the unity of churches or peoples was to overcome the challenges of division, hegemony, power-play and westernising influences brought about

by colonial Christianity. Moreover, since in Asia, poverty, deprivation, and oppression are common, issues of justice, human rights, gender equality, and human and economic developments are among the highest priorities.[21] The Asian context has seen quite a lot of social, political, and cultural revolutions, with international wars, the resurgence of religious and cultural nationalisms—all these have provided the context for Asian ecumenism. Today, the concerns have multiplied in terms of globalisation, social liberation of the marginalised groups, reunification of the Korean peninsula, and challenges brought about by the economic growth of China, India, and other countries.[22]

Keeping in mind this Asian context of plural issues and concerns, Paulos Mar Gregorios states that "Unity cannot be achieved through agreement in dogma and cooperation in mission alone. Unity is mainly a matter of love, in a structure of justice, freedom, and dignity for all.[23] Kuncheria Pathil adds that the churches in Asia may have to take into consideration the following: first, abandon the traditional position of visible unity of the churches and instead seek mutual recognition, intercommunion, and conciliar fellowship; second, move from an ecclesiocentric approach to a commitment towards wider ecumenism focusing on the unity of the whole humankind towards a struggle for justice, peace, and ecological concerns; third, mainline churches to learn lessons from the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and their amazing growth in indigenous churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[24]

Furthermore, he suggests the method of inter-contextuality to achieve these ends, which will take into consideration various contexts and deal with them appropriately.[25] While so far we have been stressing the value of diversity in ecumenism, attention to contexts, limitations of mere visible or structural unity, suggesting we go beyond mere church unity to wider ecumenism, we have also seen the limitations of some perspectives or bases of ecumenism. We need a model which will hold forth the importance of creeds and doctrines on the one hand and also be inclusive enough to appropriate the diverse contexts, issues, and concerns that Asia particularly faces. We need an ecclesiology which engages in church unity to wider ecumenism. We need a model of differentiated unity.

Mosaiclessia: A model for differentiated unity in Christ and the Spirit

Here I put forth the model of Mosaiclessia, which is the church understood as a mosaic. Encyclopaedia Britannica, in its entry, refers to mosaic "as an art, the decoration of a surface with designs made up of closely set, usually variously coloured, small pieces of material such as stone, mineral, or glass, tile, or shell…once disassembled, a mosaic cannot be reassembled

on the basis of the form of its individual pieces."[26] The essence of a mosaic is that it is only when different pieces are put together that a clear picture arises. When the pieces are separate, it does not produce any sensible image. Moreover, the essence and meaning of the picture are lost when the mosaic is disassembled. On the other hand, each piece of material, be it stone, mineral, or glass, etc., has its own unique design, but they marvellously fit into the mosaic to produce a meaningful and beautiful picture. Here, each material used in the mosaic plays its role in filling up the gap and provides meaning and essence to the whole image. One can definitely find parallels in this mosaic model, with Paul's image of the body put forward in the Corinthian passage. 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 speaks about the fact that we are all baptised into the one Spirit so as to form one body and that this one body is made of many parts playing their various roles. This image of oneness is not monistic but explicitly affirms the significance of each part in the body of Christ. Here, people of various churches, denominations, and confessions can still retain their vitality, identity, and uniqueness, without getting dissolved into the monistic oneness sometimes affirmed in these discourses. So, one might argue that if the diversity in unity is already represented in Pauline imagery, what is the need for this new model of the church, coined in the term mosaiclessia?

I can contend that mosaiclessia is more inclusive and diverse than the image of the body that Paul has used to represent diversity in unity in the Spirit and in Christ. How so? While Paul speaks of our unity in Christ's body, notwithstanding the different parts of the body with their different roles, all are essentially flesh. I would like us to imagine that mosaiclessia, in essence, envisages a unity, which is differentiated since it can include stone, clay, glass, shell, or other minerals or materials in order to build up the mosaic. What it implies is that the materials which are joined to form a mosaic image are not all the same. In Paul's body imagery, however, all are part of human flesh. I do not mean to stretch this contrast too far, lest I may be charged with a simplistic understanding of the human body, or the mosaic for that matter. However, I wish to highlight the fact that in the mosaic model of the church, the affirmation of the diversity of its constituent elements is more pronounced.

Another reason why mosaiclessia is important is that through its penchant for diversity, it gives room for the role of the Holy Spirit, which seems lacking in some perspectives and models. Even in Christ's high-priestly prayer, which is universally referred to in ecumenical thought, the role of the Spirit seems minimal.

Therefore, Christ's high-priestly prayer does not adequately express itself as a basis where diversity in Christ's body is affirmed. But this lack is corrected when we consider the event of Pentecost as the basis for mosaiclessia. In the Pentecost event, more than fifteen regional linguistic backgrounds are represented, but they are all united by the Spirit. Ultimately, as per the Biblical witness, around three thousand people were baptised in the name of Christ. What this explicitly shows is the role of the Holy Spirit to bring together people of diverse backgrounds into one body in Christ. This affirmation of diversity is very important as it goes beyond the possibility of unity among people from the same background. The Holy Spirit is understood as the Spirit of unity who brings diversity into the united body of Christ. The church formed at Pentecost is the concrete demonstration of diversity in unity in the body of Christ. Here, of course, Christ is the one who sends the Spirit, and the people become a new community in the name of Christ. So, the diversity in unity envisaged here is both in Spirit and in Christ.

While not neglecting Christ's high-priestly prayers as one of the bases, or rejecting altogether the Trinitarian or Eucharistic models, this model of a mosaiclessia, with its basis on the Pentecost event, can be inclusive of various issues, contexts, and concerns, especially in Asian contexts. This model has traction because of its potential for diversity. It can be declared that this model emphasises diversity while envisaging unity, since in a mosaic, without the diversity of the various elements, the mosaic cannot be created. This model makes it much easier to speak of a differentiated unity, rather than unity in terms of monistic oneness. Mosaiclesia can be a broad platform which can include multiple contexts like ethno-linguistic, religio-cultural, socio-political and so on, especially in the Asian landscape. It can also include concerns of poverty, globalisation, marginalisation, social justice, human rights issues, and so on. When we consider the differentiated unity in Christ and the Spirit in the Asian contexts, we return to the original meaning of ecumenism, i.e. *oikonomia*, which concerns the whole inhabited earth. Fortunately, in Asia, the word 'ecumenical' has gradually begun to recover its original meaning of concern for the whole inhabited earth. In this sense, in Asia, the emphasis has more clearly been on the 'peoples, social movements, economic realities, and socio-political revolutions in the Asian continent'.[27]

Mosaiclessia as a model for wider ecumenism in Asia

So, the question is, how does mosaiclessia hope to deal with these varied contexts and concerns in Asia? Mosaiclessia offers the theological basis, bringing together the role of Christ and the Spirit into our efforts at wider ecumenism, whose character is essentially differentiated unity.

The mosaiclessia model generates avenues to deal with issues of poverty, marginalisation, exploitation, injustice, and so on. This model seeks to reshape the nature, ministry, and mission of the Church. In the Asian context, ecumenism should be able to transcend the divisions of caste, class, gender, religion, and so on. What it essentially means is that it should be able to take into consideration these concerns from an intersectional perspective. This, of course, makes ecumenism more complex, but it specifies the objective of ecumenism in an Asian context.

But how would creed form part of the essence of the church in this? Any mosaic needs a floor, wall, or platform on which it is based or designed. Therefore, particularly the creeds form the platform on which the mosaic can stand. Engaging in wider ecumenism does not mean that we discard altogether the received tradition and doctrines that we cherish.

However, it does mean that through this ecclesiological model of 'diversity in unity', we have the option of going beyond these creeds, reinterpreting them in our own contexts, and engaging them in the diverse issues we face. Based on the foundation of these creeds, the mosaic is being designed, which allows meaningful participation of diverse groups of people with diverse concerns. Here, on the one hand, we hold on to the Christological affirmation, taking seriously the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, and on the other hand, the plural engagements opened up for us through the Pentecost narrative. Here, the Spirit of God works in and through the diversity of contexts and issues to bring unity in Christ. Also, the Christological principle is not against our engagement with people of other faiths, nor the Holy Spirit against our diverse engagements with issues of justice in the context of oppression and marginalisation, but these altogether work towards the common goal of wider ecumenism, which is the transformation of society and the building up of the Kingdom of God.

Let us now look at how mosaiclessia would fare in its responses to some prominent concerns of Asia.

Poverty and gap between the rich and the poor

Mosaiclessia, with its penchant for inclusivity and diversity, would determine that issues of poverty and the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor are some of the serious concerns to be addressed in Asia. As in a mosaic, the constituent elements provide meaning to the larger picture; the poor would be able to determine the nature and mission of the church. The Pentecost narrative as a basis for mosaiclessia would provide the rationale to include people from all different economic backgrounds as participants whose 'Spirit-filled' voices should be heard.

This would include raising our voices along with the poor and marginalised against structures that dehumanise and policies that usurp the dignity of the poor. All voices as part of the mosaiclessia would synchronise into a meaningful song of protest and transformation. These trajectories may not neglect even the Nicene Creed. What it takes is a reinterpretation of our Creeds and doctrinal deposits in our contexts. Jesus, who became human, born of the Holy Spirit, incarnate of the Virgin Mary, very well continues to be our paradigm, who mixed with the poor and the marginalised, towards their liberation.

Religio-cultural, ethno-linguistic conflicts

Mosaiclessia, on the one hand, would appreciate diversity in Asia, which includes religion, language, and ethnicity. Any mosaic art would reject uniformity or the swallowing up of one particular piece of material by the other. Also, the Pentecost event shows that although they were all speaking in tongues in different languages, the crowds could hear them speaking in their own mother tongues. This is countering the oppressiveness of any monistic framework. The hegemony of one religion, one culture, one language, and one ethnicity is never supported in a mosaic formation. So, mosaiclessia would always affirm the identity, uniqueness, and vitality of each culture and religion. This goes against fundamentalism in the culture and religion of all sorts. Wherever there are conflicts due to these religio-cultural, ethno-linguistic factors, the bottom line to begin with is affirming the identity and worth of each. Although conflicts due to these in various parts of Asia are deeply embedded and complicated, this model guides the church that proper methods or approaches need to be integrated into its theology and mission to deal with these situations. Once again, the Creed, which speaks of God the Creator, who created the world in diversity, and the Son and the Holy Spirit working together, gives a picture that diversity in unity is our reality. Here, the Church must be ready to acknowledge diversity on the one hand but also unity in terms of bridging gaps, reconciling groups, and managing conflicts as it faces them.

Discrimination due to class, caste, tribe, gender, and sexual orientation

Mosaiclessia is not only a model, but also a method and an approach. This model has the potential to address issues of class, caste, gender, and sexual orientation mainly because of its affirmative stance towards diverse existence and total rejection of discrimination on the basis of these constructs. While the Pentecost event led to a church or community of diverse peoples from different backgrounds in the name of Jesus, the efforts towards wider ecumenism would take into consideration these

struggles towards the goal of inclusivity and acceptance. In the Pentecost event, all were filled with the Holy Spirit, irrespective of their background or nationality. Here, wider ecumenism in Asia would transcend the borders of class, caste, gender, and sexual orientation. The discrimination against the poor, the atrocities against the Dalits, tribals, and Adivasis by the high caste groups and influential members of the community, and the oppression and subjugation of women and sexual minorities are all realities of Asia. In these circumstances, mosaiclessia motivates the church to struggle along with these communities, to consider them as valuable contributors to society, irrespective of which section they belong to. We must be able to redefine the nature of the church, its ministry, and mission from the perspective of these marginalised groups, as each piece of material determines the mosaic art. The importance of the Creed here is that it speaks of the Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, oneness understood as differentiated unity; being a counter-culture, i.e. being holy, recognising our belongingness to the wider community, i.e. being catholic, and retrieving the good from traditions, i.e. being apostolic.

Communities of peace, justice, and biocentric existence

Mosaiclessia, built on the Pentecost event, can be inclusive of peace and justice concerns since, during this event, the weak and the powerless disciples and others were given a voice through the speaking in tongues. The Holy Spirit, whom Christ sent, became the powerhouse for the downtrodden. The disciples and others were vindicated, and a new community was formed where peace, mutual sharing, and acceptance became hallmarks. As in a mosaic, there are different types of materials from the earth used to create a picture, so also the concerns of the church go beyond human well-being to an integrated existence where God, humans, and the rest of creation develop a biocentric living. Here, concerns of humans are intertwined with concerns of nature, ecological crisis, and our befriending of the Earth. The church is thereby motivated to strive for peace, justice, and well-being for all, including non-humans. This is supported by the Nicene Creed, which affirms that God is the creator of all and therefore the Creation belongs to God, not to be domesticated and exploited by human beings.

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[1] For a detailed study see Ray Burbank, "The Three Self-Model, Christ's Headship and Christian Unity: Bengali Christians seeking and reforming the Nineteenth Century Indigenous Church ideal" in Scottish Church History, October 2023, Vol.52, No. 2, 109-130.

[2] Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, May they all be One: Ecumenism in Catholic Perspective (Bangalore: ATC, 2021), 28.

[3] Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, May they all be One: Ecumenism in Catholic Perspective, 34.

[4] Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, May they all be One: Ecumenism in Catholic Perspective, 34.

[5] Christopher R. Seitz, ed. Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001), 10.

[6] Christopher R. Seitz, ed. Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001), 11.

[7] Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, May they all be One: Ecumenism in Catholic Perspective, 36.

[8] Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, May they all be One: Ecumenism in Catholic Perspective, 42.

[9] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement, 24.

[10] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement, 78,79.

[11] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement, 11-12.

[12] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement, 6,7.

[13] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2017), 5-6.

[14] George Mathew Nalunnakkal, "Ecumenism: Challenges Ahead" in Vinod Victor, Leslie Nathaniel and P. Suryaprakash, eds., Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges: A Festschrift to the Rev. G. Dyvasirvadam (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 115-117.

[15] Nalunnakkal, "Ecumenism: Challenges Ahead", 119.

[16] Nalunnakkal, "Ecumenism: Challenges Ahead", 121.

[17] Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (xiii-xvi): Introduction, Translation and Notes, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 775-776.

[18] Ariarajah, "The Ecumenical Movement in Asia", 229-232.

[19] Ariarajah, "The Ecumenical Movement in Asia", 229.

[20] Ariarajah, "The Ecumenical Movement in Asia", 229-230.

[21] Ariarajah, "The Ecumenical Movement in Asia", 230.

[22] Ariarajah, "The Ecumenical Movement in Asia", 230-232.

[23] Jacob Kurian, ed. Paulos Mar Gregorios On Ecumenism (New Delhi/Kottayam: ISPCK/MGF, 2006), 29.

[24] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement, 33-35.

[25] Pathil, Future of the Ecumenical Movement, 28-33.

[26] Frederick O Waage & Per Jonas Nordhagen, "Mosaic", (accessed on 4th Oct. 2024), https://www.britannica.com/art/mosaic-art

[27] S. Wesley Ariarajah, "The Ecumenical Movement in Asia" in Christian Theology in Asia, edited by Sebastian C.H. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 228.

The Nicene Creed: Responses of Young Christians in Indonesia

Irene Umbu Lolo

Introduction

The confession of faith is part of the liturgy of the Protestant Church in Sumba, Indonesia. There are three accepted creeds, namely the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

The confession of faith that is often recited or sung by the congregation during Sunday worship is the Apostles' Creed. Most church members, both older and younger, can recite the Apostles' Creed well and fluently without a written text. They can memorise and internalise its meaning. Whereas the Nicene Creed is rarely, if ever, recited by the congregation. The focus of this writing is the Nicene Creed as an ecumenical confession and its position in the liturgy. Through this writing, the author intends to address two questions: First, why is the Nicene Creed rarely recited by the congregation during Sunday worship in Sumba, Indonesia? Second, what is the perspective of the youth group on the Nicene Creed?

Credo as an Element of Liturgy

The confession of faith is an element of the liturgy. The worship of the congregation since the early Church has been marked by the act of professing faith. The congregation recites a short and simple statement of faith, namely that Jesus is Lord. This statement of faith is spoken by the baptismal candidate during the baptism service. That brief confession of faith was then developed by the church into a longer formulation, mentioning various aspects of Christ's person, including His life, death, and resurrection. Also, the formulation of the Trinitarian Creed mentions God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[1]

Furthermore, throughout history, churches have recognised and used the trinitarian Creed in their liturgy. There are at least three ecumenical creeds, namely the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. The Apostles' Creed is known as a brief creed, with some of its verses dating back to the second century. This confession of faith is used in the Baptism liturgy and the Eucharistic liturgy. Whereas the Nicene Creed, as a creed produced by the Council of Nicaea in 325 and refined by the Council of Constantinople in 381, is known as a lengthy confession of faith and is used in the celebration of the Eucharist.[2]

In addition to these two creeds, the church also recognises the Athanasian Creed, which is a concise catechetical explanation of the church's teachings on the Trinity and the Incarnation. Nowadays, this Creed is not used in the liturgy.[3] The confession of faith has been an important part of the church liturgy to this day. The congregation that gathers for worship simultaneously is the congregation that collectively professes its faith. The confession of faith becomes a communal act of the church members. That is why churches from various traditions proclaim the confession of faith, both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, in Sunday worship. Besides being spoken, the confession of faith is also sung by the congregation. Even in the 16th century, the Nicene Creed was composed by Christian composers into choral music. The congregation and the choir sang the credo in the liturgy.[4] Reciting or singing the Creed in the liturgy aims to respond to the proclamation of God's word. After the congregation hears the proclamation about God in Jesus Christ, the congregation liturgically has the opportunity to respond by reciting or singing the creed together. The confession of faith is seen as a corresponding response that can be shown by the congregation after listening to the sermon.[5]

Furthermore, the confession of faith in the liturgy is also an expression of the unity of the church throughout the ages and in all places. By reciting or singing the credo, the congregation collectively declares to the world the nature of the church as a single fellowship, even though it exists in many places and at different times.[6] The confession of faith in the liturgy also aims to remind the congregation of the baptism they have received. The credo is a form of recollection or re-experiencing the baptismal event of the past and the faith that leads the congregation to the conviction to receive that baptism.[7] The confession of faith in the liturgy also aims to express the unity of the church's faith. That the church, existing in different places and times, acknowledges and accepts the one faith that is affirmed in the Holy Communion.[8]

Nicene Creed in the Context of Sunday Worship in Sumba, Indonesia

The Nicene Creed, as a Christian statement of faith, is accepted by the churches in Indonesia,[9] including GKS. GKS agrees with the statement contained in the document of the Joint Declaration of the Christian Faith published by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia. In the document, it is stated that churches in Indonesia profess the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. These two creeds are seen as a credo that has emerged from the struggles of faith in the early Church and as a true and complete testimony of faith based on the testimony of the Bible. These two creeds

are also seen as symbols of the unity of the Church in all places and throughout all ages.[10]

As part of the church communion in Indonesia, GKS accepts the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Both ecumenical creeds are included in the GKS liturgical book. This book is used by GKS members to conduct Sunday worship. In the ecclesiastical formula for the implementation of the Holy Communion, GKS includes an explanation that after the Ministry of the Word (sermon), the congregation can continue by proclaiming the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is placed as an important part of the Holy Communion liturgy conducted in GKS.[11]

However, in worship practice, GKS members predominantly profess the Apostolic Creed every week, as well as during communion, baptism, and other church services. In addition to reciting it, the Apostles' Creed is also sung based on the lyrics of the song listed in the Kidung Jemaat hymnbook[12] number 280. This song is a shortened version of the Apostles' Creed.[13] Because it is often sung, this credo song is very familiar to the members of GKS. Church members in Sumba rarely recite the Nicene Creed during Sunday services, church holiday celebrations, and other general worship services. Liturgical ministers rarely invite the congregation to recite the Nicene Creed, including during the celebration of the Eucharist. Although institutionally, the GKS accepts the Nicene Creed, in practice, church members rarely, if ever, recite the Nicene Creed.

Liturgically, this condition raises questions. Why is the Nicene Creed rarely recited in worship services in Sumba? The Sumba Christian Church is one of the Calvinist churches in Indonesia. GKS was formed as a result of the evangelisation by missionaries who came from the Netherlands. These missionaries were sent by the Evangelical Mission Agency of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, which adheres to the Reformed Confession of Faith, and they sought to maintain the Calvinist tradition of the 17th and 18th centuries.[14]

The Reformed characteristics that still remain in GKS include a worship pattern that follows the Calvinist tradition introduced by missionaries from the church in the Netherlands. GKS, on the one hand, inherits the ecumenical credo, but on the other hand, follows the Calvinist tradition that emphasises teaching faith to church members through catechism. The formulation of the Apostles' Creed in the context of the GKS is seen as a source of church teachings. That is why, just like the church in the Netherlands, GKS uses a summary of the main teachings of the Christian faith in the Heidelberg Catechism and the formulation of the Apostles' Creed as materials for catechism, especially for the church's youth and

young adults.[15] Furthermore, GKS seems to follow the worship pattern implemented by John Calvin in the Strasbourg Church in the past. GKS follows the Calvinist church pattern that always uses the Apostolic Creed formulation in the liturgy. GKS is also influenced by Calvin's criticism of the Nicene Creed, which considers the formulation of the Nicene Creed to be long and excessive.[16]

Regarding the place of the credo in the liturgy, GKS places it after the sermon. Theologically, the confession of faith is seen as part of the congregation's response after listening to the sermon. GKS believes that the sermon aims to build the faith of the congregation, so the confession of faith is placed after the sermon. The confession of faith in the liturgy is seen as an act of the congregation expressing faith in God (acclamation) and an act of witnessing to the world (proclamation). In its liturgical book, GKS emphasises the importance of the congregation confessing their faith with an ecumenical awareness that the believers currently in Sumba are connected to the people of God everywhere and at all times. The liturgical sentence that precedes the confession of faith is the invitation from the liturgical minister: "Beloved brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, let us unite with the churches of all ages and in all places by together professing the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (reciting together while standing)".[17]

The Church Youth's View on the Nicene Creed in the Liturgy

The nine respondents are church youth aged 20-24 years. They are GKS members who diligently attend Sunday services at the church. They are also actively involved in church service as singers, dancers, musicians, collectors, Bible readers, and preachers. They even participate in designing the worship services in their respective churches in collaboration with the pastor and the local church council. They serve in a church that is mostly located in the village area on Sumba Island, Indonesia.

The author knows these church youths because the author has previously collaborated with them in preparing and conducting worship services at the church. Methodologically, the author sees that these young people meet the criteria to participate in the focus group discussion and express their thoughts and ideas related to the Nicene Creed. Here are the results of the conversation with them.

The Nicene Creed is Rarely Recited by the Congregation

The church youth admit that the Nicene Creed is hardly ever recited in the Sunday services at their respective churches. It is different from the

Apostles' Creed, which is recited or sung by the congregation every week. They expressed their views on the reasons why the Nicene Creed is rarely recited in the liturgy. The Nicene Creed formula is quite long and contains theological ideas that are difficult for the congregation to remember and understand. Respondents acknowledge that reciting a long formulation of the creed can be boring. As part of the church community, they often feel bored, reluctant, and insincere when reciting the Nicene Creed. According to them, this condition needs to be improved. They propose that the church, through the liturgical team, think about and design creative worship where the Nicene Creed remains an important element in the worship. They believe that creative liturgy using media effectively and efficiently can attract the attention of the congregation.

They see that the local language can also be an effective medium in the liturgy. The use of the local language of the Sumba community can make worship more vibrant and the confession of faith more meaningful for the congregation. Therefore, they proposed that the Nicene Creed, in addition to being composed into simple song lyrics, should also be translated into local languages.

The Nicene Creed is Important for the Faithful

The church youth understand that the Nicene Creed is an important ecumenical confession for church members, just like the Apostles' Creed. Because it is important, this creed needs to be taught to the congregation repeatedly, among other ways, through singing. The Nicene Creed, as an ecumenical confession of faith, needs to be sung in the liturgy by Christians in Sumba. Worship leaders should also focus on the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed, which is already included in the GKS liturgical book and established as part of the Holy Communion liturgy, needs to be adhered to so that the congregation can recite or sing the Nicene Creed. According to the respondents, through the singing of the Nicene Creed, Christians can express their confession about the all-powerful Triune God who created everything and who saves the world. For the respondents, when church members proclaim their faith through singing, they are not only expressing their faith to the local community but also to the global society in a broader context. Therefore, it is important for Christians to proclaim their confession of faith with awareness and sincerity. Liturgically, the congregation needs to stand and proclaim or sing the confession of faith clearly. The standing posture is a sign of the congregation ready to profess their faith, full of conviction in what is spoken or sung. The clear voice of confession serves as evidence that the congregation is confident in their faith and remains enthusiastic about witnessing to the Christian faith.

The Nicene Creed Needs to Be Set to Credal Song

The church youth proposed that the Nicene Creed be composed into simple song lyrics so that it can be easily understood, remembered, and sung by the congregation during worship. The hymn of the creed must be created as the hymn of the congregation. They believe that the Nicene Creed in the form of a congregational hymn can help the congregation to fully grasp its meaning. They stated that the profession of faith through congregational singing is much more helpful for them as young people in living out their faith. According to them, the melody of music and singing brings them to a state where they can better experience their faith in God than when they simply recite the creed.

The Nicene Creed Should Be Used as Material for Catechetical Teaching

Besides being set to music for the congregation, according to the respondents, the Nicene Creed must be taught to all church members. This ecumenical confession needs to be made a central teaching point in catechesis for church members of all age groups. The teaching must be conducted for church members from an early age so that they remain steadfast in their Christian faith. The respondents see the confession of faith as a strong fortress for Christians in the face of misleading teachings. With the confession of faith, the congregation continues to uphold the purity of the Christian faith.

According to the respondents, it is important for church leaders to help church members better understand and internalise the content of the Nicene Creed. Church members need to be assisted in understanding what the Nicene Creed is and why they should recite or sing it in the liturgy. They also emphasised the importance of regular discussions between leaders and church members that delve deeply into the formulation of the ecumenical confession of faith.

The Nicene Creed Must Have Ethical Implications

Another important point conveyed by the respondents is the ethical implications of the Nicene Creed. The respondents emphasised the ethical implications of reciting or singing the Nicene Creed in the liturgy. The confession of faith is the congregation's response to the Word of God. Even in the GKS liturgy, the confession of faith is recited or sung just before the congregation receives the sending and blessing. That reminds the congregation that the confession of faith is not only to be understood but also to be acted upon. The confession of faith culminates

in real actions or concrete deeds that bring about social transformation. Community change begins with the understanding and appreciation of the faithful towards the formula of the creed.

Theological Reflection

The Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed are both important aspects for church members. Therefore, this ecumenical credo needs to be taught repeatedly to the church members so that they can understand the essence of the confession of faith. Through repeated teaching, church members can internalise the credo within themselves and further strengthen their faith.

One method of teaching the credo to church members is through liturgy. In and through the liturgy, church members can learn to focus on the content of the creed. Church members can learn to know the God they believe in and understand the formulation of the creed as a response to the God who speaks. Through the liturgy, church members can learn to confess their faith in the God who has saved humanity and all of creation. In the liturgy, church members learn to confess with their mouths and believe with all their hearts and minds.

To reduce the boredom of the congregation in reciting the credo, the liturgical ministers need to design the liturgy creatively. The Creed is not only spoken but also sung with appropriate musical accompaniment. Music has the power to help church members to be calm and focused. Music has a great influence on the congregation, helping them to internalise the lyrics of the songs. If the Nicene Creed is set to music, it greatly assists the congregation in enjoying it and reaping significant benefits. With music, the congregation sings while also contemplating the Nicene Creed.

In addition, the formulation of the Credal Song can be made shorter and simpler so that it is easy to remember and understand. The Nicene Creed is not only for intellectuals and theologians but also for church members as laypeople. Therefore, it is important to ground the Nicene Creed so that it is easily accessible to church members, becoming an integral part of their spirituality. The views of the youth on this matter are important and must receive the attention of church leaders. The youth in Sumba propose that the local language and terminology of the tribal community be used as a medium for church members to proclaim and understand the Nicene Creed. Of course, this requires keen insight and smart work in choosing the right language and theological terms.

Conclusion

Based on the explanation above, it can be understood that the Nicene Creed is rarely recited by the congregation during Sunday worship in Sumba for several reasons. The Nicene Creed is considered longer than the Apostles' Creed. For the youth, this creed also contains theological ideas that are difficult for the congregation to remember and understand. Furthermore, the historical background of the church shows that Calvin's theological views in the past have also influenced the liturgical practices of Calvinist churches today, which consider the formulation of the Apostles' Creed to be more suitable for recitation in liturgy. Church services, including liturgical services, need to be designed from the perspective and needs of the youth, who see the importance of the credo song as the congregation's song in the liturgy.

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[1] Ralph. P. Martin, Worship in The Early Churc, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,1981),

[2] J. G. Davies, ed. The Westminster Dictionary of Worship (Philadelpia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 156.

[3] Ernest Maryanto, Kamus Liturgi Sederhana (Jogjakarta: Kanisius),

[4] J. G. Davies, ed. The Westminster 156.

[5] The Worship Sourcebook, 151.

[6] The Worship Sourcebook, 151.

[7] The Worship Sourcebook, 151

[8] The Worship Sourcebook, 151.

[9] It should also be noted that charismatic Pentecostal churches in Indonesia do not include the confession of faith as a fixed liturgical element in every Sunday service.

[10] Dokumen Keesaan Gereja PGI

[11] GKS, Tata Cara Kebaktian GKS, p. 56.

[12] The book contains a collection of spiritual songs published by the Church Music Foundation and used by churches in Indonesia during worship.

[13] Alkitab dengan Kidung Jemaat (Jakarta: Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia, 2007).

[14] Th. Van den End, Sumber-sumber Zending (Jakarta, BPK Gunung Mulia, 2004), p. 3-8; H. Berkhof dan I.H. Enklaar, Sejarah Gereja (Jakarta, BPK Gunung Mulia, 1993), p. 312.

[15] Christian de Jonge, Apa itu Calvinisme? (Jakarta, BPK Gunung Mulia, 1988), p. 84, 174-175.

[16] J. L. Ch. Abineno, Unsur-unsur Liturgia yang Dipakai oleh Gereja-gereja di Indonesia (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1986), 81-82

[17] GKS, Tata Cara Kebaktian GKS, p. 56

The Nicene Creed: A Pillar of Faith and Unity in the Syrian Orthodox Church

Anish Kulakkattumadathil Joy

Introduction

The Nicene Creed stands as one of the most significant and enduring statements of Christian faith, serving as a unifying doctrinal foundation across diverse Christian traditions. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed is not merely a historical artefact; it is a living expression of the apostolic faith, deeply embedded in the Church's theology, liturgy, and communal identity. This creed, formulated in the fourth century during the Council of Nicaea and later expanded at the Council of Constantinople, addresses critical theological debates of its time, particularly concerning the nature of Christ and the Trinity. It has since become a cornerstone of Orthodox Christian belief, providing a clear and authoritative articulation of the Church's doctrines.

The Syrian Orthodox Church, with its ancient roots in the early Christian communities of the Near East, places great emphasis on the Nicene Creed as a symbol of continuity with the apostolic tradition. The creed encapsulates the Church's response to theological challenges, particularly those posed by heresies that threatened the integrity of Christian doctrine. It also plays a central role in the Church's liturgical life, where it is recited as both a confession of faith and a communal prayer, reinforcing the unity of the faithful in their shared beliefs.

This paper explores the theological foundations of the Nicene Creed, its role in the development of early Christian faith statements, and its significance in the sacramental and liturgical practices of the Syrian Orthodox Church. By examining the Creed's historical context and its ongoing importance in the life of the Church, this study seeks to highlight the Nicene Creed's role as a pillar of faith and unity within the Syrian Orthodox tradition.

1. Theological Foundations of the Nicene Creed

a. A Transition in Faith: From Polytheism to Monotheism

The transition from polytheism to monotheism forms a significant foundation for understanding the theological underpinnings of the Nicene Creed. In the ancient Near East, where polytheistic beliefs dominated, various deities were worshipped, each representing different aspects of

life and natural phenomena. However, the Hebrew Scriptures introduced a revolutionary shift with the proclamation of monotheism, particularly emphasised in the Shema Israel: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"* (Deuteronomy 6:4). This declaration not only affirmed the oneness of God but also established a covenantal relationship between God and Israel, setting the stage for a monotheistic worldview that was integral to Jewish liturgical life.

For the Syrian Orthodox Church, this shift from polytheism to monotheism is seen as a divine progression in God's self-revelation to humanity, culminating in the Christian understanding of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed, by affirming the belief in one God who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—encapsulates this progression. It is viewed not merely as a doctrinal development but as the fulfilment of the Old Testament's monotheistic revelation, now fully realised in the Trinitarian faith of the Church. This Trinitarian understanding is central to the Syrian Orthodox perspective, where the unity of God is intricately linked to the unity of the Church, reflecting a continuity of faith that spans from the ancient Israelite tradition to the present-day Christian liturgy.

b. Christology and the Development of Early Christian Faith Statements

The Christological affirmations of the Nicene Creed are deeply rooted in the early Christian community's efforts to articulate their understanding of Jesus Christ's divine and human natures. Within the New Testament, Christ is portrayed not only as the long-awaited Messiah but also as the incarnate Word of God, who embodies both divinity and humanity. This dual nature of Christ is a cornerstone of Christian theology and has been particularly emphasised in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, where the mystery of the Incarnation is central to its spirituality and worship.

In the early Christian Church, various creeds and confessional statements began to emerge, reflecting the community's faith in Jesus Christ as both God and man. St Paul, in his epistles, was instrumental in shaping these early Christological declarations. His writings often included hymns and prayers that affirmed the divinity of Christ, such as in Philippians 2:6-11, where Christ is described as "being in very nature God" and yet "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." These early confessions were not only theological affirmations but also served as liturgical prayers, used in the worship and communal life of the early Church.

For the Syrian Orthodox Church, these early Christological statements laid the groundwork for the more formalised creeds, such as the

Nicene Creed, which later emerged in response to various theological controversies. The Syrian Orthodox tradition places particular emphasis on the continuity of these early faith statements, viewing them as expressions of the apostolic faith that have been faithfully preserved and transmitted through the centuries. The Nicene Creed's affirmation of Christ as "true God from true God" and "incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary" is seen as a definitive response to heresies like Docetism, which denied the reality of Christ's humanity. In the Syrian Orthodox perspective, this affirmation is not just a theological rebuttal but a profound expression of the Church's belief in the Incarnation as the ultimate manifestation of God's love for humanity.

The Creed's Christological declarations are thus deeply integrated into the Syrian Orthodox Church's liturgical and sacramental life, where the mystery of Christ's dual nature is celebrated and contemplated in the context of the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy, and other sacramental rites. This Christocentric focus is central to the Church's theology, where the Nicene Creed serves not only as a statement of faith but also as a guide for the spiritual life of the faithful, inviting them to enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ's divine and human natures.

The Nicene Creed in Syrian Orthodox Liturgy

a. Divine Wisdom and the Role of Prayer

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed transcends its function as a mere doctrinal statement, becoming a central element of the Church's liturgical worship. It serves as both a prayer and an embodiment of divine wisdom, reflecting the Church's deep reverence for the Creed as a living expression of faith. During the Divine Liturgy, the recitation of the Creed is a moment of profound spiritual significance, where the entire congregation joins together to affirm the core tenets of the Christian faith. This collective profession is not just a ritualistic practice but a spiritual act that unites the faithful in a shared expression of belief, rooted in the ancient traditions of the Church.

The phrase "soofiya thevo froskumen kum shafeer kulaan basloos wkohano m'yakro nenei vneemaar" (Let us listen to the divine wisdom and stand well in prayer) is emblematic of the Syrian Orthodox understanding of the Creed as more than a set of doctrinal assertions. It is perceived as a guide that leads the faithful into a deeper contemplation of the mysteries of God, inviting them to stand with reverence and openness to divine truth. This emphasis on divine wisdom reflects the Church's holistic approach to worship, where intellectual assent to doctrine is coupled with heartfelt devotion and spiritual insight.

Moreover, the integration of the Nicene Creed into the liturgy reinforces the Church's doctrinal teachings in a manner that is both communal and experiential. The regular recitation of the Creed during worship ensures that the essential truths of the faith are not only taught but also lived and experienced by the faithful. This practice fosters a profound sense of unity within the Church, as the congregation, regardless of individual differences, is brought together in a unified expression of faith. The communal nature of this act is a testament to the Syrian Orthodox Church's understanding of Christian worship as inherently collective, reflecting the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ.

b. The Creed as a Confession of Faith and Dogmatic Statement

In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the Nicene Creed functions as a vital confession of faith that articulates the fundamental beliefs defining the Church's identity. This confession is deeply rooted in the Church's liturgical and sacramental life, particularly in the context of initiation rites such as baptism. During the baptismal rite, the recitation of the Creed serves as a powerful declaration of the new believer's acceptance of the Christian faith and their formal entry into the community of the Church. This practice underscores the Creed's significance as more than just a theological statement; it is a liturgical act that marks the believer's incorporation into the life of the Church, symbolising their commitment to live according to the faith professed by the entire Christian community.

The Nicene Creed also holds a critical role as a dogmatic statement within the Syrian Orthodox Church, providing a clear and authoritative articulation of the Church's doctrinal beliefs. This dogmatic function distinguishes between what the Church believes (doctrine) and how those beliefs are lived out and expressed in the lives of the faithful (confession). In the Syrian Orthodox perspective, this distinction is essential for understanding the Creed's role in the life of the Church. It provides a framework for interpreting and applying Christian doctrine in a way that is both faithful to the Church's teachings and relevant to the spiritual lives of the faithful. Furthermore, the Creed's role as a dogmatic statement is closely tied to the Church's response to various heresies and theological controversies throughout history. By clearly defining the boundaries of orthodox belief, the Nicene Creed has served as a bulwark against doctrinal error, preserving the integrity of the Church's faith. In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the Creed is not merely a historical document but a living testament to the enduring truth of the Christian faith, continually guiding the Church in its mission to uphold and proclaim the gospel.

The Creed's integration into both the liturgical and sacramental life of the Syrian Orthodox Church exemplifies its dual role as a confession of faith

and a dogmatic statement. It is through this integration that the Creed becomes a dynamic force within the Church, shaping not only the beliefs of the faithful but also their spiritual practices and communal identity. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed remains a cornerstone of its theological and liturgical life, affirming the unity of faith and the continuity of the apostolic tradition across the ages.

The Nicene Creed and Sacramental Life

a. Baptism: A Trinitarian and Liturgical Connection

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, baptism is viewed as a sacred and transformative sacrament, deeply intertwined with the theology of the Nicene Creed. The Creed's acknowledegement of baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" is more than a doctrinal affirmation; it is a reflection of the Church's profound belief in the power of baptism as a means of spiritual regeneration and initiation into the Christian life. In this tradition, baptism is not merely a symbolic act but a momentous event where the believer is cleansed of sin and united with Christ, becoming a member of the body of Christ, the Church. This union is not just with Christ individually, but with the entire ecclesial community, linking the baptised to the faith and life of the Church as articulated in the Creed.

The recitation of the Nicene Creed during the baptismal rite holds deep liturgical significance. It serves as a public declaration of the faith into which the catechumen is being baptised, affirming the central truths of Christianity that the individual is now professing. The Syrian Orthodox tradition emphasises the Trinitarian formula—baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as articulated in the Nicene Creed, which reflects the practices of the early Church. This Trinitarian emphasis is not merely formulaic but deeply theological, signifying the believer's entry into the life of the Triune God. The Creed's articulation of the Trinity connects the sacrament of baptism to the broader liturgical and doctrinal heritage of the Church, underscoring the continuity of faith from the earliest Christian communities to the present day.

Moreover, the Syrian Orthodox Church views the baptismal rite as an initiation not just into a new life of personal faith but into the communal life of the Church. The recitation of the Creed during baptism reinforces the idea that the newly baptised is now part of a living tradition, bound by the same faith professed by generations of Christians before them. This liturgical act is a powerful reminder that the faith into which one is baptised is the faith of the Church, rooted in the Nicene Creed, and lived out in the sacramental and communal life of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

b. Eucharist: Eschatological Hope and Liturgical Continuity

The Eucharist, a central sacrament in the Syrian Orthodox Church, is deeply connected to the eschatological hope articulated in the Nicene Creed, particularly in its affirmation of "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." In the Syrian Orthodox understanding, the Eucharist is not merely a ritual meal but a profound encounter with the divine, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that believers hope to share in the life to come. The Creed's proclamation during the Divine Liturgy of these eschatological beliefs serves to anchor the Eucharist within the broader theological vision of the Church, reminding the faithful that their participation in the sacrament is a participation in the mystery of salvation and the anticipation of eternal life.

In the Syrian Orthodox liturgical tradition, the Eucharist is viewed as a moment when heaven and earth meet, a participation in the eternal liturgy that is continually offered in the heavenly realms. The recitation of the Nicene Creed within the context of the Eucharist reinforces this connection, serving as a liturgical bridge that links the present worship of the Church with the eschatological future that the Creed proclaims. This connection between the Creed and the Eucharist highlights the continuity of the Church's liturgical practices, which have been faithfully preserved and transmitted across the centuries. The Creed, therefore, is not only a declaration of belief but also a living expression of the Church's hope in the resurrection and the life of the world to come.

For the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Eucharist is also a celebration of the unity of the Church, the Body of Christ. The communal recitation of the Nicene Creed during the Divine Liturgy reinforces this sense of unity, as it binds the congregation together in a shared profession of faith. This act of collective affirmation is a powerful reminder of the Church's commitment to the ancient apostolic faith as preserved in the Nicene Creed. It also underscores the role of the Eucharist in fostering the communal identity of the Church, reminding the faithful that their unity in faith is a reflection of their unity in Christ.

In this way, the Nicene Creed serves as a cornerstone of the Syrian Orthodox Church's sacramental life, deeply integrated into the liturgical practices that shape the spiritual identity of the community. The Creed's role in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist reflects the Church's belief in the continuity of the apostolic faith, the transformative power of the sacraments, and the eschatological hope that defines Christian life. Through its liturgical recitation, the Nicene Creed continues to affirm the faith of the Syrian Orthodox Church, guiding the faithful in their journey

towards the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises in the life of the world to come.

Unity and Tradition: The Creed as a Symbol of Continuity

a. Connection to the Ancient Apostolic Faith

The Nicene Creed stands as a profound symbol of unity among Christians, transcending denominational boundaries and connecting believers across time and space to the ancient apostolic faith. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, which traces its roots to the early Christian communities of the Near East—particularly to Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called Christians— the Creed embodies the unbroken continuity of faith that has been preserved through centuries of theological reflection, persecution, and liturgical practice. The Syrian Orthodox Church regards the Nicene Creed not merely as a historical document but as a living witness to the faith handed down from the apostles, a faith that has remained steadfast despite the challenges and changes of history.

This continuity of faith is central to the identity of the Syrian Orthodox Church. The Church sees itself as the custodian of the apostolic tradition, maintaining the purity and integrity of the Church's teachings as articulated in the Creed. The Creed encapsulates the core tenets of the Christian faith, reflecting the theological insights and spiritual wisdom that have been nurtured within the Church since its earliest days. For the Syrian Orthodox faithful, reciting the Nicene Creed is not just an affirmation of personal belief but a participation in the collective memory and spiritual heritage of the Church, linking them to the ancient community of believers who first professed these truths.

b. Liturgical Continuity and Communal Identity

The recitation of the Nicene Creed during the Divine Liturgy in the Syrian Orthodox Church is a deeply communal act, reinforcing the bonds of faith and identity that unite the congregation. In the context of the liturgy, the Creed is more than a statement of doctrine; it is a prayer that draws the faithful into a shared experience of worship, reflecting the communitarian nature of the Church. This liturgical continuity is a cornerstone of the Church's spiritual life, as it ensures that the faith is not only taught but also lived and experienced in the context of communal worship.

In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the Creed is recited in unison by the entire congregation, symbolising the unity of the Church in both faith and practice. This collective profession of faith is a powerful reminder that the Church is one body, bound together by the same beliefs that have

been professed by Christians throughout the ages. The act of reciting the Creed together reinforces the idea that the faith is not an individual possession but a communal treasure, preserved and transmitted through the Church's liturgical life.

Moreover, the Syrian Orthodox Church places a strong emphasis on the role of the Creed in fostering a sense of continuity with the broader Christian tradition. The recitation of the Nicene Creed during the liturgy serves as a link between the present-day Church and the early Christian communities, emphasising the Church's commitment to the faith as it was understood and practised by the apostles and early Church Fathers. This liturgical continuity is vital to the Church's identity, as it ensures that the faith remains rooted in the apostolic tradition, even as it is lived out in the diverse and changing contexts of the modern world.

c. Developmental Stages of the Creed: From Interrogative to Declarative

The development of the Nicene Creed reflects the Syrian Orthodox Church's response to the theological challenges and heresies that arose in the early centuries of Christianity. Initially, the profession of faith in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, as in other early Christian communities, took the form of an interrogative statement, particularly within the context of baptismal rites. Catechumens were asked to affirm their faith by responding to a series of questions about their belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This interrogative form was deeply rooted in the Church's pastoral practice, emphasising the personal commitment of the believer to the faith of the Church.

However, as theological disputes, particularly those surrounding the nature of Christ and the Trinity, began to intensify, the Church found it necessary to develop a more comprehensive and definitive articulation of its beliefs. This led to the transition from an interrogative to a declarative form of the Creed. The Syrian Orthodox Church, along with other Christian communities, embraced this declarative form as a way to clearly and unambiguously express the core doctrines of the faith, particularly in response to heresies such as Arianism and Docetism, which threatened the Church's understanding of Christ's true nature as both fully divine and fully human.

The final form of the Nicene Creed, as adopted by the Council of Nicaea and later reaffirmed by the Council of Constantinople, represents a culmination of this developmental process. For the Syrian Orthodox

Church, this Creed is not just a reactionary document but a positive and authoritative expression of the Church's faith. It encapsulates the Church's theological reflections and the spiritual experience of the Christian community, offering a clear and concise summary of the apostolic faith.

In the liturgical life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the declarative form of the Creed continues to play a central role. It is recited not only during the Divine Liturgy but also in other sacramental rites, serving as a constant reminder of the Church's commitment to the apostolic faith. This Creedal tradition, rooted in the early Church's response to theological challenges, remains a vital part of the Syrian Orthodox Church's identity, ensuring that the faith is preserved and proclaimed with clarity and conviction across generations.

Conclusion

The Nicene Creed remains a vital pillar of faith and unity within the Syrian Orthodox Church, embodying the Church's unwavering commitment to the apostolic tradition and its theological heritage. As a doctrinal statement, the Creed has provided clarity and guidance through the ages, particularly in the face of theological disputes and heresies that have challenged the Church's understanding of the nature of Christ and the Trinity. Its role in the Syrian Orthodox Church goes beyond mere doctrinal affirmation; it is a living expression of the Church's identity, connecting the faithful to the ancient Christian community and to each other in a shared profession of faith.

In the liturgical life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed serves as a powerful unifying force, recited by the congregation as both a confession of faith and a communal prayer. This practice underscores the Creed's role in fostering a sense of continuity with the early Church, while also reinforcing the communal nature of Orthodox Christian worship. The Creed's integration into the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist, further highlights its significance as a foundational element of the Church's spiritual life.

Through its enduring presence in the life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed continues to guide the faithful in their spiritual journey, providing a stable foundation in a rapidly changing world. As a symbol of unity and a testament to the continuity of the apostolic faith, the Nicene Creed remains a central and cherished element of the Syrian Orthodox tradition, affirming the Church's commitment to the truths that have been passed down through generations and inspiring the faithful to live out their faith in unity with Christ and His Church.

Exploring the Concept of the Church as *'OIKOS THEOU'*: Implications for Church Unity

Karnia Melda Batu Randan

1. Pendahuluan

In general, the use of the word "Church" in the Bible refers to a community of believers who gather regularly at a specific location, known locally as a church.[1] This community, also known as the ekklesia, subsequently forms a congregation of believers who are called out to represent a broader community, in the sense of the universal Church, as the new people of God.[2] The universal Church encompasses all Christians, both living and deceased, irrespective of denominational prejudices, ethnicities, nations, and social statuses (Eph. 1:22; 3:10; 5:23-32).[3] Therefore, the concept of the church includes two aspects: the local church and the universal church, with a relationship existing between the two. The local church is identified within the universal church, and the universal church is manifested within the local church.[4]

The Church is called to construct divine life within the world, encompassing the manifestation of holiness both within and through the lives of believers in their relationships. Logically, this testimony of the Church implies that unity is a critical aspect. Unity is one of the Church's callings that must be realised in addition to witnessing and serving. The unity referred to, as witnessed by the Bible, is the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all (Eph. 4:3-7). Another term for this task of unity is the oneness of the Church, comprising the duties of renewal, building, and unifying the Church.[5]

Renewal means scrutinising the state of the Church by constantly placing itself under the light of God's Word to foster updates and growth, so that the state of the Church aligns more closely with God's will. Church renewal includes updates in theological thought, lifestyles, and institutional patterns creatively and continuously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.[6]

The second task is building the Church. Here, building means the development of the Body of Christ, steadfastly clinging to the truth; the Church grows in all aspects towards Him, Christ, who is the Head

(Eph. 4:13-16). The building of the Body of Christ involves leveraging all positive values, knowledge, skills, and modern experiences to ensure optimal management, while also strengthening the Church as the "Body of Christ." Essentially, it involves earnest attention to the Church's growth, which truly is the work of the Holy Spirit, prompting the Church to use all the gifts within itself for continual growth and self-building.

The subsequent task involves unifying the Church. Unification here, as in John 17:21, is to manifest the oneness already present in God visibly, thus serving as a testimony to the world. Unifying the Church does not eliminate the various graces and gifts received from the Lord throughout the history of the churches. Instead, it places all these within a larger framework of oneness as a witness amid the world. This means that the framework of unity ensures room for diversity. However, within the context of this diversity of the churches, how can the oneness or unity of the Church be interpreted?

This research aims to explore the concept of the Church as 'oikos Theou' (household of God) based on 1 Timothy 3:15 and how this concept can impact the interpretation of the unity of the Church.

2. Discussion

Context of 1 Timothy 3:15

1 Timothy 1:3-3:16 is a cohesive unit that discusses the management and organisation of God's household.[7] This section is framed within the concepts of oikonomia Theou, "the divine pattern" (1:4), and oikos Theou, "the household of God" (3:15), where Paul's focus as the author is on "how one ought to conduct oneself in the household of God" (3:15).

1 Timothy indicates that before this letter was written, Paul and Timothy had been together in Ephesus. Subsequently, Paul instructed Timothy to stay in the city to tend to the congregation while Paul went to Macedonia (1:3). Should he be delayed in returning, Timothy had a letter from Paul containing instructions on how to regulate life within the congregation regarding false teachers and how people should live as members of the family of God, namely the living Church of God (3:15). A source states that verse 3:15 is a key verse in 1 Timothy.[8]

In the context of the entire letter of 1 Timothy, Paul looks beyond Timothy to the local churches entrusted to him. Paul is concerned and, through Timothy, seeks to regulate church life.[9] The overarching theme of

1 Timothy is the need to teach, serve, and lead the church in such a way as to propagate the Gospel and counter false teachings.[10]

Exploration of the Concept of the Church as 'oikos Theou'

The theological perspective of 1 Timothy is indeed framed by the concepts of 'oikonomia Theou' and 'oikos Theou.' The tradition of 'oikonomia' is depicted in the sense that the 'oikos' (household) is "a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious and moral as well as social, political, and economic organisation, interaction, and theology."[11] 'Oikos' is also understood as a microcosm of a state.[12] It serves as a concrete model for believers to live out their calling as members of the family of God (household of God, Eph. 2:19).[13]

'Oikonomia Theou' envisions a way of life organised divinely (God's ordering of reality), where all aspects of life are subject to divine will. As Paul applies this to Christian existence, the term encompasses all spheres of life, including social, political, and religious, in the same way that the emperor would assume for himself the role of a father or householder and regard the empire and its citizens as his household.[14]

The use of such terms implies that Paul views the social structure as continually connected with God's commands. Therefore, on one hand, Chapter 1:4 announces that opponents stand against this divine command. On the other hand, following this divine pattern, the church is called 'oikos Theou', "household of God," in Chapter 3:15. This metaphor creates a microcosm of God's people or a paradigm of a world obedient to God's commands; its mission is to extend this reality beyond the walls so that the way God organises life can be known and adhered to by an increasing number of unbelievers.

The entire world is God's world, and therefore, contemporary social obligations still hold significance within the Christian household. Consequently, men and women, husbands and wives (2:8-15; 5:1-2), widows and relatives (5:3-16), slaves and masters (6:1-2) must disregard the social rules that dictate honour in their human cultural quadrant; but they must also live in full awareness that the presence of God redeems, renovates, and reshapes impulses for behaviour in these relationships. If the church wishes to express the reality of 'oikonomia Theou', it can only do so by engaging in all aspects of social and political life. The Christological expression iterates the recurrence that the fully human Jesus entered the world and surrendered Himself for it.

The prominent implication for the delegation and the churches addressed by the letter of 1 Timothy is primarily missiological. Paul recalls his own example for all unbelievers (1:12-16). The event of Christ becoming human forms the basis for Paul's unique universal mission to the world (2:1-7). Moreover, this divine proclamation into the human realm has borne fruit (3:16). Timothy's task is to communicate Paul's vision of Christian existence as 'oikonomia Theou' at the Ephesian church. This will involve correcting opponents, instructing in doctrine, and handling church leadership and administration, all in an effort to ensure that this church effectively becomes the household of God in society—a visible emblem and physical medium of His redeeming presence in the world.

'Oikos' as the house of God. This concept is also recognised within the Qumran community and relates to the idea of the church as the "temple of God" (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22), similar to the notion of the *"house of Yahweh"* in Hos. 8:1; 9:8, 15; Jer. 12:7; Zech. 9:8).[15] Paul's visionary framework for the existence of Christians as 'oikonomia Theou' (1:4, the divine pattern) within the church at Ephesus aims to ensure that the Ephesian church effectively becomes 'oikos Theou' (3:15, the household of God) within society—a visible symbol and physical medium of His redeeming presence in the world.

Firstly, 1 Timothy 3:15, which discusses Paul's instructions, aims to educate the congregation on how they should live as the family of God, the living church of God. This does not imply a restriction to a home church at a specific time and place, and chapters 2 and 3 evoke the author's thoughts about the church gathering for public worship. There is no discussion of behaviour in the outside world, but only within the scope of the church. Essentially, the authority of the Gospel's instructions and the formal demonstration of an error are mandated not only in public worship in Ephesus but wherever worship oversees conflicts with false teachers. Since 1 Timothy 3:14-16 is the heart of the entire letter, verse 15 is normative in determining the scope of teaching.

Implications of the concept of the church as 'oikos Theou' on church unity

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul refers to the church as 'oikos Theou', or the household of God. As the church is called the household of God, it implies that God is the father or householder, and the church is His household. Thus, the first implication is that the church as 'ekklesia', which is the

fellowship of believers across all ages and places, constitutes a single household unit with God as the head, father, or householder.

Secondly, as a household of God, the arrangement and organisation of the church are framed within the concept of 'oikonomia Theou' or "the divine pattern." 'Oikonomia Theou', understood as a concept aspiring to a pattern of life organised divinely (God's ordering of reality), where all aspects of life are subject to divine will, becomes a visionary framework that can unite local churches across all ages and places to ensure that the church effectively becomes 'oikos Theou' in the world—a visible symbol and physical medium of God's redemptive presence in the world.

Thirdly, 'oikonomia Theou' or the divine pattern of life, depicted as the church as 'oikos' being "a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious and moral as well as social, political, and economic organisation, interaction, and theology," further unites the church in a concrete model of unity where believers can live out their calling as members of the family of God. In the unity of this model, churches in living their calling can realise a life that has an impact on all areas of life; so that shalom can be felt by all creatures.

Fourthly, the metaphor of the church as 'oikos Theou', framed by 'oikonomia Theou' in the understanding that the entire world belongs to God, can unite the church in a shared mission to extend the reality of 'oikos Theou' beyond the walls so that the way God organises life can be known and adhered to by an increasing number of unbelievers.

3. Conclusion

1 Timothy 3:15 is a key verse in the entire letter of 1 Timothy and is situated within the context of 1 Timothy 1:3-3:16, which discusses the arrangement and organisation of God's Household. This contextual unity is framed by the concept of 'oikonomia Theou', "the divine pattern" (1:4), and the concept of 'oikos Theou', "the household of God" (3:15), where Paul's focus as the author centres on "how one ought to behave in the household of God or oikos Theou" (3:15).

As in 1 Timothy 3:15, where Paul refers to the church (ekklesia) as 'oikos Theou' (household of God), the church as 'oikos Theou', framed by the framework of 'oikonomia Theou', constitutes "a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious and moral as well as social, political, and economic organisation, interaction, and theology" in the world,

where God is the head or father of the church, the household with all its organisational arrangements subject to God's will.

How does the church as 'oikos Theou' impact the unity of the church? First, the church universally is a single household of God with God as the head, father, or householder to whom and to whose will the church submits itself. Second, 'oikonomia Theou' framing the church as 'oikos Theou' becomes a visionary framework that unites the church universally. Third, 'oikonomia Theou' that frames the church also unites the church in a concrete model of unity where believers can live out their calling as members of the family of God, which has an impact on all areas of life and can be felt by all creatures. Fourth, the metaphor of the church as 'oikos Theou' has missiological implications, becoming a shared mission of the church universally to extend the reality of 'oikos Theou' beyond its walls.

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[1] Darrell L. Bock dan Jonathan J. Amstrong, Virtual Reality Church: Perangkap dan Peluang, terj.

[2] Amstrong, Virtual Reality Church, 240.

[3] Michael Griffiths, Gereja dan Panggilannya Dewasa Ini, terj. Oloria Silaen - Situmorang (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1995), 10.

[4] Amstrong, Virtual Reality Church, 241.

[5] Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia, Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja PGI: Keputusan Sidang Raya XII PGI Jayapura, 21-30 Oktober 1994 (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1996), 9.

[6] Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia, Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja PGI, 16-17.

[7] Philip H. Towner, The Letters to Timothy and Titus, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 70.

[8] John Balchin et al., Intisari Alkitab Perjanjian Baru (Jakarta: Scripture Union Indonesia, 1994), 103.

[9] John Stott, Guard the Truth: The Message of the 1 Timothy and Titus (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 59.

[10] I. Howard Marshall, The Pastoral Epistles (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999), 32.

[11] Timothy G. Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity: The Function of The Haustafel in Ephesians," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 48 (2005): 213.

[12] Abraham J. Malherbe, Social Aspect of Early Christianity (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 1977), 51

[13] Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity," 322.

[14] Philip H. Towner, The Letters to Timothy and Titus, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 69.

[15] Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "οικος".

Theological Exploration of Nicene Creed in Relation to Creation Care: A Timorese Perspective

Levi Vasconcelos Pinto

This study tries to articulate the Nicene Creed from the Timorese understanding of God in relation to the creation. Following the theme: Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring the faith and embracing unity, and the second sub-theme Biocentric solidarity: Covenantal Bond for Cosmic Wholeness, my response will summarise the theme *Maromak*, You are the Lightening creation, the "Theological exploration of creation care from a Timorese perspective".

1. ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION IN TIMOR-LESTE

The current ecological crisis is seen as an impact of colonialism. During the period of Portuguese rule, we saw very intense exploitation of the natural resources, deforestation, and losses of the primal component of the ecosystem taking place in Timor-Leste. The main natural resources exploited and taken completely by the Portuguese were sandalwood, marble, and others. Later on, the Portuguese imposed its coffee plantation policy, where coffee then became the single commodity being planted. The impact of the policy led to massive deforestation. The policy, applied within the taxation policy, forcefully and strongly demanded every population to pay taxes, which gave no other choice to people but to plant coffee and to work as slaves.

Since the Indonesian invasion, according to George Junus Aditjondro, the national companies of foreign governments played a significant role in deforestation. Aditjondro highlighted the impact of the Indonesian invasion on ecological crises in three parts. First, there has been massive deforestation caused by the Indonesian government through companies exploiting white wood trees (eucalyptus), coffee, marble, and others. Second, exploration for oil, which has been exploited illegally by Australia, who later on shamefully shared the profit with Indonesia. Third, the occupation has caused a decrease in the number of animals and human beings in Timor-Leste.[1]

Since independence, oil exploration has become a major source of income to the state budget. In the context of ecological crisis, it is a pity that the government body often does not categorise oil exploration as a leading factor of ecological crises. Oil and gas have been the main components of

the Timor Sea, which contribute greatly to the harmony of the Timorese island. According to Jonathan Goncalves, the researcher from *La'o Hamutuk,* the exploration has been based on the greed to live a lifestyle of instant gratification.[2] This will lead Timor-Leste to ecological debt, not because of the contribution of consuming oil and gas and its impact on daily life, but greatly because exploration has contributed to the damage of land and forest, which eventually will leave the island deserted and dry.

2. ENCOUNTERING CHRISTIANITY

2.1 Maromak, God of light that liberates and the beginning

In this part, I will describe the interaction between communities of faith in Timor-Leste in adopting the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was recognised as a creed of a community of faith alongside the Apostle's Creed and Athanasian Creed. In IPTL, we have two models of liturgy that are used in the service, that is, Model I and II. Model I adopts the Apostles' Creed and Model II adopts the Nicene Creed. Both are used regularly every month in the community service. I specially trace the use of the word *Maromak* that applies to God, and how far it has been reflected in the core of Christian faith, through the experience of the Timorese people.

In Timor-Leste, the Tetun word for God is *Maromak* (You are Lightening); it is the same word used in translation to the Nicene Creed: Relates to the affirmation of one God= *Maromak ida deit*, the nature of Jesus: God from God=*Maromak husi Maromak*, and the nature of the Holy Spirit: "..Holy Spirit, The Lord= *Na'i*/ has an equal meaning to Lord. The word Maromak is developed from the word *Naroman,* meaning Light/Shine that is used in the phrase: Light from Light (Tetun: Naroman husi Naroman). According to Martinho Gusmão, the Catholic theologian from Timor-Leste, the word Naroman appears in singular and plural form as follows[3]:

- Singular form: *Karoma* (I am that shines/lightens), *Maromak* (You are the Lightening One) and *Haroma* (She/He is the Light)
- Plural form: *Naroman* (We are the lightening, the word we use here is an exclusive form), *Haroman* (We are the lightening, the word we here is inclusive form) and *Raroma* (They are Lightening).

According to Gusmão, missionaries took the word *Maromak* and used it to refer to God in liturgical celebrations, where the word refers to the higher supreme, that is defined as Light, "You are the Lightening". Because for the Timorese, light has played an important role in the way

they identify and understand nature. By observing creation, like the sun and moon, the Timorese are able to understand the way nature works and functions, and to derive ethical and moral messages from the deity.

The Light also has been identified with Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, *"God from God, Light from Light"*. According to Athanasius, the formulation affirms the same/equal essence of Son to the Father. Furthermore, I think it also shows the relationship of God to human history. The prophetic message to the prophet Isaiah identifies Messiah as the Light who shines among the oppressed people, *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2).* The Gospel of John describes incarnation as the Light that shines among us (John 1:5). John then describes that Jesus introduced Himself as the Light of the world; whoever follows Him will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).

More significantly, the Christological dimension of light in connection with the living being has been described clearly by the prominent Asian Theologian Rev. Dr Wesley Ariarajah as follows[4]:

- *Jesus and his life shed light on who God is and how God dealt with us;*
- *Jesus is the light in which we see the nature and purpose of life;*
- *He is the light in which we see the value and goals of the Reign of God;*
- *Jesus is the light in which we are able to see injustice and wrongs that we should confront*;
- *He is the light that shows us the path to the fullness of life.*

In that perspective, light has been very fundamental to describe the Christological correlation to the history of Timor-Leste. Nicolao dos Reis Lobato, the second President of Timor-Leste who organised the resistance for independence, saw the incarnation, birth of Jesus, as the beginning of redemption and as parallel to the history of resistance. This historical experience is necessary to understand salvation as the liberation of the Timorese that embraces both the restoration of human dignity and the restoration of creation.

The primary relationship of God and community is manifested in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the moment where we affirm God's solidarity with human suffering, presenting us with a solidarity that is visible and that enables marginalised people to gain the strength and faith needed to face the challenges of the future.

A Christian hymn that is often sung on the Eucharist celebration is *"Hamlaha hamrok: Hungry and thirsty".*[5]

> *Hamlaha hamrok ami liman ain kolen* (hungry and thirsty, hands and tired feet)
> *Atu ba hasoru Ita Boot* (We walk to meet You)
> *Ita boot nudar isin no ran mak fo nia kbit mai ami* (You are the blood and flesh that gives us strength)
>
> ***Chorus:***
> *Liu husi rai fuik ema hananu* (Through the valley of desert they praise)
> *Liu husi nakukun sira tanis* (Through darkness they cry)
> *Sira hakarak Ita Boot nia naroman* (They want Your Light)
> *Sira hakarak Ita Boot nia hadomi* (They want Your love)

The hymn describes the situation of resistance in the period of occupation, the reality of hopelessness, and Christ's presence in body and flesh has become a source of courage, strength, and hope. There were moments of sadness and sorrow, but there were also moments when the resistance seemed like a joyful journey. However, the journey hungers for the light of God that will restore life. The word *naroman* appears to articulate people's hope for the new beginning, new horizon, and freedom.

The Eucharist has become a central point of meeting between the Timorese and the God of Light, in Jesus Christ. It was not easy because this interaction occurred (took place) in the heart of an oppressed people, in the context where Christianity first arrived under colonial and military occupation. Roque Rodrigues, the first diplomat of Timor-Leste to the African continent around 1975, before the day of Indonesia's invasion, describes that during the Portuguese time, we often found it boring to go to church because what the priest shared about God was very different from what the Gospel says. The message of the Gospel has been polluted with the ideology of colonialism. The resistance and affirmation of the true Gospel that shares the God of the oppressed and of liberation was later developed by Dom Martinho da Costa Lopes and Bishop Carlos Filipe X. Bello, who defined the Gospel as the voice of voiceless people. In the other parts, Protestant leaders Rev. Arlindo Marcal and Rev. Francisco de Vasconcelos have been consistently sharing the gospel good news of *Mauber*[6] people, good news that shines in the darkness of Timorese life.

2.2 *Maromak*: Source of life and the sacredness of creation

According to Tom Therik, theologian and anthropologist from West Timor, *Maromak* was originally considered a feminine deity. It is a supreme

being.[7] Josh Tridade, an academic researcher in the field of anthropology of Timor-Leste, explains that the word *Maromak* was later taken over by Christianity and identified with a masculine form. According to him, besides the word *Maromak*, missionaries also took the word "*lulik*". *Lulik (originally meaning 'Sacred')* was actually used to refer to the Son of God, a woman that is superior to the *Wehali* (Groups of *Liurai feto*/woman 'kings'), which missionaries then adapted to refer to Jesus Christ. Later on, the word "*lulik*" was adopted in religious institutions to refer to clergy, etc., which then became a source of superiority of the Christian faith over the culture. For instance: *Amo lulik*, *Na'i lulik*, and others, referring to Pastor/Clergy as a saint and as a nobleman.[8]

The issue raised by Trindade needs to be taken seriously, because it has become a source of superiority of the Christian tradition over local culture, where Christianity came into contact with the Timorese within the trade and colonial systems. This led to the decline of both the political and cultural systems. Everything coming from nature they tended to consider as negative. In fact, in daily life, our life has been sustained by nature. It is soft power appropriation at work, with a view to erasing the fundamental value of religious life and desacralising nature as the source of imagination and life.

Affirmation of the feminine side of Christ offers a new understanding of the works of Christ related to the whole creation. The salvation of God can only be fully understood in the core love of God towards God's creation. Creation becomes a starting point to reflect God's love and how far human responsibility in the Kingdom of God goes. The affirmation of the feminine side of God (*The Lulik*) in relation to creation leads us to recognise God as Creator and appreciate His creations. In the history of Timorese resistance, the air, rivers, mountains, trees, sea, and fish have all become symbols of resistance and imagination towards the future. This is manifested in songs, poems, and narratives of liberation. Moreover, nature offers balance, harmony, synergy, and mutuality, that is often contrary to the culture of imperialism and the patriarchal system that often relies on the hierarchy and superiority of one over another.

Catherine LaCugna, in her book *Freeing Theology,* made a clear description about the implications of patriarchal ideology in theology and its impact on religious institutions. She then proposed a new understanding about the maleness of God, in much more complementary and holistic ways, where both female and masculine images are embraced.[9] LaCugna offers a new understanding of the Three Persons of the Trinity with feminist

hermeneutics, which for me, expresses the value of who God/*Maromak* is for the Timorese. It becomes clearer to me the way LaCugna used Sophia as an image to describe the Persons of the Trinity. In this perspective, the nature of God (Trinity presented as Creator, sustainer, etc.), is one in which both male and female images are expressed without neglecting or leaving each other out, yet still offers space beyond. Sophia, according to Timorese culture, relates to knowledge which often describes *Light* that becomes fundamental to the word *Maromak*.

For the Timorese, *Maromak*, *the* light becomes an important principle in creation and its sustainability. Light makes things visible; creation becomes visible. Visibility of creation has become the main point to understand the presence of God in its creation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his commentary on the book of Genesis, states that light has to do with form. First, in the primeval domain, light has to do with order against chaos, and it creates and unveils form. Light is necessary because there is formlessness, so the light must create form. Through the light, the formless night becomes the form of the morning. Second, light has reference to the passion of Jesus. Where light has to do with the Light that shines in the darkness. For Bonhoeffer, the contribution of the light in the creation of form is through the Word of Creation. Bonhoeffer's conclusion reminds me that the effective and central aspect of Light relates to the visibility of creation in the resurrection of Christ.[10] According to Moltmann, the risen Christ is identical to the experience of the light of the day. Where we can see three things as Christophanies: First, prospectively seeing the crucified Christ. Second, retrospectively seeing Jesus of Nazareth. Third, reflective recognition of the Christ experience.[11]

Moltmann then says that the central experience of resurrection as light of day is in the Eucharist. The Eucharist offers possibilities for the experience of new creation in Christ. The Eucharist celebrations remind us to recognise the sacramental dimension of creation. First, the experience of the body and blood of Christ in and through the bread and wine leads to an experience of sacramental life in other members of creation. It is Luther who promoted the idea of *consubstantiation*, which later on theologians developed in the same pattern as the psalmist, where he described that creation reveals the glory and holiness of God. Luther, according to Tom Sverre Tomren, emphasised the *ubiquitas* of Divine and Human nature of Christ; it means that the human nature of Christ is present in the sacrament.[12] This conclusion creates the path to recognise creation in a new perspective, where new heaven and earth are not mere sociological entities but indeed are eco-centric. Second,

in the Trinitarian perspective, creation is experienced as living beings sustained by the Spirit of God. It is the same Spirit that created humans as living beings. This is also another dimension of the concept of *Lulik*, where the Timorese recognised that every living being is sustained by the Spirit. Trees, seas, animals, and other living entities are sustained by the Spirit. By recognising the presence of Spirit in living beings, we recognise the *pneumatological* dimension in creation. Where creation is the work of God the Father, through the Son, and sustained by the Holy Spirit.[13]

Moltmann emphasised the *pneumatological* characteristic in the Trinitarian perspective by referencing Hildegard and Calvin, where both of them presented the Spirit's works in fresh fullness, as follows[14]:

For Hildegard:
The Holy Spirit is life-giving life,
mover of the universe and root of all created beings.

He purifies the universe from impurity; he takes away guilt and anoints the wounds. Thus, he is shining life, worthy of praise, raising up and reawakening the universe.

In the same manner, Calvin affirms:
For the Spirit is present everywhere and sustains, nourishes, and gives life to all things on heaven and earth.
The fact that he pours his power into everything
And thereby promises being, life, and movement to all things; this is clearly divine.

Both Calvin and Hildegard provide a rich and full understanding of the nature and works of the Holy Spirit in creation. The presence of Spirit in creation is not only life-giving but also sustaining, healing, caring, and nourishing. This perspective enables us to recognise in more dynamic ways the covenant of the triune God with creation, where the Father is creator through Christ in the Spirit.

3. ETHICAL DIMENSION CARE OF CREATION: LULIK AND *PERICHORESIS*

In this part, I will introduce the concept of *lulik* as the core value of living in harmony with human beings within the creation, by describing the cultural celebration of *Tara Bandu (Hang the Sacred Prohibition,* literal translation*),* as one of the common cultural rituals in ecological preservation. Ritual has been pivotal in the life of the Timorese in relation

to nature and the seas. On the other hand, I will explore *Perichoresis* as a core relationship of living creation.

a. *Lulik: Core value living*

Lulik, meaning 'sacred', refers to the divine entity, a feminine character. For the Timorese, land, sea, air, and inhabitants (or beyond that) are one ecosystem. The core value of the ecosystem is *lulik,* or sacred. In cosmic order, *lulik* is the first principle, while the second is nature (green space including blue space): source or fertility and abundance. The third is a social space- how human beings live and interact with nature (Deity) and one another.

According to Castro, *Lulik* is considered something to connect to patterns, ideas or concepts of preservation in the oral tradition, social practice, ritual, and ceremonies. This shows the importance of Lulik as a core to regulate the relationship between human beings with God/Divine entities, between human beings and human beings with the creation. Later on, *Lulik* also became important in regulating the social political system (democracy) and gender. In practice, in Timor-Leste, religious entities or clergies are referred to as *lulik*, green space: Land and sea are seen as *lulik*. From the gender perspective, some parts of the human body are considered "*sasan lulik*"(sacred parts).

In relation to creation care, *Tara Bandu* has become a common ritual that Timorese practice. *Tara Badu*, literally means *Tara: Hang and Bandu: forbidden. Tara Bandu* is considered a customary law that has been recognised by the government as part of the judicial system.

The practice of *Tara Bandu* is by hanging symbols on trees or on the seaside as a warning not to seize and destroy. The purpose of the ritual is mostly to seek/establish peace, justice, and reconciliation. Through *Tara Bandu*, the harmony and sacredness of life is maintained; *Tara Bandu* sets the judicial system to guarantee justice for ecology, and those who break the rule must accept the consequences. At the end, *Tara Bantu* seeks to establish reconciliation; it has almost similar patterns as those that were introduced by the prophet Isaiah related to the harmony of living beings as core *Messianic* reconciliation.

The ritual has been practised in several cases:[15]

- **For regulating people-to-people relationships**: It is applied within the socio-cultural aspect to prohibit people from violating others' rights. This includes those who commit sexual abuse and violence,

and property destruction in the community. It also prohibits people from committing infractions and from indulging in wasteful overspending that may affect people's lives. In a broader sense, it is also applied to regulate political behaviour related to public issues.

- **Regulating people-animal relationships:** This refers to the way people manage their own animals and respond to others' livestock and wild animals. Essentially, it is about forbidding people to kill animals in the forest, steal animals, and kill fish and other destructive behaviours that cause the death of animals. Animals should be treated in the same manner according to the ethical and moral value that is applied in society and the state.
- **Regulating people-environment relationships:** In the socio-environmental realm, Tara Bandu forbids people to practice the burning of lands, cutting trees, harvesting, taking sand from the beach, stealing stones for construction, and others, and it prohibits the practice of wasting water because it causes reduction of water availability.

The *Tara Bandu* has a great and positive impact on the changing attitude of society towards nature. But it also recognises its small impact on the state institution. The practice of *Tara Bandu* is mostly implemented in the community. The symbols are traditionally hung on palm trees or coconut trees. An important component in the ritual is prayer; we call it *hamulak* (prayer that contains blessings and cursing), along with animal blood, buffalo horn, shell, water, and leaves of coconut, etc. The position of hanging the instruments depends on necessity. At the community level, central areas have played a crucial role in connecting rituals to *lulik*. But it can be practised by any household to protect their field and lands. Traditionally, blood symbolises the covenant, and horn symbolises order; the coconut shell, water, and leaves symbolise fertility, prosperity, and green.

Theologically, *Tara Bandu* has been understood as a way of preserving and as a pedagogy of sacredness. When a Timorese sees the signs/symbols hung on a tree or somewhere, they automatically know the limit of their behaviour towards a living being. It is important to understand the relationship between sacredness and human limits and responsibility. To prohibit is to set the limits, but it also sets the paths of our responsibility towards one another. The famous story of Moses and the burning bush can be seen as, among other things, being about the sacredness of the land (3:1-17), and so can the story of the Prophet Jonah (Jonah 1:1-17b). First, for the story of Moses, the sacred area of the land has been

identified with the presence of a Deity in Mount Horeb. It is similar to how indigenous people believe a mountain is where Deities live and the place where people can offer sacrifice and place their sacred materials. Historically, for the Israelites pitted against empire, the mount of Horeb/ Sinai has been a symbol of national resistance. In Timor-Leste, similarly, we find the importance of Mount Ramelau as a symbol of national resistance and sacredness. The earlier and latter resistance poems and spiritual songs have placed Mount Ramelau as the point of encountering *Lulik*. Defending the land has been understood as defending the sacredness of Mt Ramelau, and ecological degradation and exploitation of the mountain has been lamented as a violation of its sacredness. Second, the story of Jonah is related to the experience of the community in Atauro Island. For the people of Atauro, the sea has become a place ordering justice. For Atauro people, *Tara Bandu* has to do with a motive that is placed in the heart of the human being. They believe that no one can identify and judge your heart on the land side, but you may not escape while you are crossing the sea. Accidents in the sea are always understood as consequential in terms of social behaviour and behaviour towards the biodiversity in the sea. What happened to Jonah has a connection with attitudes towards God's vision of salvation. In the Christian era, the story of Jonah was interpreted as also prefiguring the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus for the sake of creation.

We often reflect *Tara Bandu* in three ways of prohibitions:

- **Do not want:** refers to the motive, indicates the ability to manage your desire (discernment).
- **Do not touch:** refers to the ability to take decisions.
- **Do not take (can be other form):** relates to moral action that has passed the boundary of limits and is considered a crime.

The prohibitions are parallel to the responsibility for ecological justice:

- **Planting:** Planting is an act of gratitude for the seed. The seed becomes an important component in the Timorese faith, representing God's assurance of life. When we plant, we participate in the creation of God. The act of planting should go with the recognition of the faults and the embrace of a new beginning.
- **Caring:** It is a commitment and responsibility of accompaniment. Caring is not separated from planting. It is a responsibility to nourish and be joyful to see things grow.
- **Preserving:** Is an act to let others grow. It is a spirituality of diversity and living in harmony; it is also a struggle against our greed and

tendencies to dominate; it is a commitment to see things grow to their fullness.

It is important to note that *Tara Bandu* often works and is applied through community, helping us to recognise our being as a community. *Tara Bandu* is for seeking peace, justice, and reconciliation in wholeness. People often hang models of the cross on trees. It is an example of contextual understanding of the Christian message within the cultural beliefs, where the cross is seen as being at the core of cosmic salvation. It is important to understand Christ as the core of creation or even, as Rowan Williams puts it, Christ as the heart of creation. The history of civilisation often puts humans at the centre of history, but we will do well to recognise Christ as the heart of creation, as this will open ways to a new beginning.

3.1 Perichoresis as the core of relationship

Perichoresis has become a key concept of the Trinity. I am aware that it is not easy to articulate this concept. The importance of the affirmation of the concept of Trinity is maintained in unity and plurality of persons. Maintaining the balance of unity of essence and plurality of persons has become important to define the Trinity. While reflecting on this, I am focusing on how far the understanding of the relationship between God and His creation is core to the ethical care of creation.

Word *Perichoresis* is a Greek term; according to McGrath, it was earlier developed by Irenaeus and Tertullian.[16] But Gregory Nazianzus is the one who, for the first time, applied this term in articulating and expressing Christian faith. The *Perichoresis* being defined as mutual interpenetration, I prefer "mutual indwelling", since that, for me, is much softer, but at the same time does not neglect the intensity of the communion that is bonded by love. Cathrine Lacugna provided a more imaginative and interesting definition:[17]

> *Even if the philological warrant for this is scant, the metaphor of dance is effective. Choreography suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer expresses and at the same time fulfils him/herself towards the other. In interaction and inter-course, the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.*

> *To shift metaphor for a moment, God is eternally begetting and being begotten, spirating and being spirated. The divine dance is fully personal and interpersonal, expressing the essence and unity of God. The image of the dance forbids us to think of God as solitary. The idea of Trinitarian perichōrēsis provides a marvellous point of entry into contemplating what it means to say that God is alive from all eternity as love.*

Catherine LaCugna uses the metaphor of dancing to help us understand Trinity in more solid ways, where unity and diversity are maintained. Dance has commonly become a cultural heritage of all societies. For Timorese, this is understood in several ways:

- **Dance as self-narrating:** Self-narrating is about being communicative; words and stories intertwine. In dance, we find stories that connect us to the past, present, and future. In dance, our identity is both revealed and hidden. In dance, as a metaphor, we find the unity and communion of the three persons of God. But aesthetically, as well, it brings us to attract the hiddenness of the reality of Trinity that we want to discover. Dance in every society is about the identity of community; we recognise that we are excited to be in relationship with others. Which also, at the same time, opens us up to the exploration of rich and valuable meanings that are still hidden. In Timor-Leste, we can't imagine dancing without wearing *tais* (custom/traditional attire), which identifies with certain patterns of persona and connectivity of those colours which reflect harmonious unity of the cosmos.
- **Bonds of love:** LaCugna uses the word reciprocal for giving and receiving,[18] which is also important to explore about solidarity; sacrifice and self-giving life in the core of communion. More clearly, LaCugna then refers to Boff defining reciprocal as an *"intimate loving relationship, being one for another, by another in another. No divine person exists alone for its own sake; eternally in relationship with another. Father is Father because he has a Son; the Son is Son only because he has a Father; the Spirit is only because of the love in which the Father begets the Son and the Son gives back to the Father."*[19] Similar words are found in the gospel of John, love of the Father and Son, in eternal bonding. Reciprocal love requires no limit and criteria; it is mutual commitment, being with one another. It sets the foundation for love of creation. Naturally, creation was designed for created beings to be with one another or coexist; no one exists for themselves. As human beings, the act

of giving to one another actually is reciprocal, one that is moved by a heart of gratitude. It is not a form of cause and effect, but rather as being loving to one another, the intimacy of communion, which Jonathan Edwards called sweet intimate communion.

Communion in mutuality: Communion in the *Perichoresis*, according to LaCugna, is the reality of unity of divine substance, the principle of unity of three absolutely coequal and reciprocal Persons.[20] For LaCugna, communion of the Trinity criticises the cultural notions of personhood, community, society, and the church; where individualism, isolationism, and asocial personhood are questioned and criticised. Communion is also characterised by mutuality. Mutuality is opposing the hierarchy, monarchy, and superiority over others. Communion in mutuality brings us towards creation openly, being part in the creation of God as an experience of *koinonia*. This model of relationship demonstrates the essence of *oikos* as the household of God, which is what Norman Solomon describes as *diversity in creation and diversity of personality* that identifies with universality, non-exclusiveness, and boundaries, holy and profane.[21] The spiritual value of communion and mutuality can be explored deeper in relation to how dance is performed. It requires a true partnership of movement, symmetricality, and synergy in unity.

Another characteristic of *Perichoresis* has been profoundly described by prominent Indonesian theologian Joas Adiprasetya in his dissertation, which was published and titled "*Toward a Perichoretic Theology of Religions".* Joas points out that the *Perikhoreis* has been developed related to the nature of Christ (two natures of Christ, three persons of the Trinity, and reality *Perichoresis* (Cosmic participation in Triune life)).[22] I am interested in the way he described Moltmann's concerns in *Perichoresis*, where the relationship between God and human creation is being articulated.[23] This theological articulation is necessary to consider the relationship of God to creation. On the other hand, he also points out the important aspect that is often neglected in the contextualisation of Christian faith. Joas offers a very fundamental aspect about *Perichoresis* that embraces rather than merely includes. In very dynamic ways, embracing means to recognise others as part of us without neglecting the freedom and identity of others. When the Nicene Creed was translated and applied in local languages, it affected the understanding of the community regarding faith in God, in interaction within the culture that we live in. Culture has played an important role in our understanding in the same way and helps us develop conceptual frameworks pertaining to language and understanding.

- When the word *Maromak* is applied/referred to God, it is not about ontological meaning; the word is much more understood as an adjective. This becomes complicated when we begin to raise the issue related to the wholeness of God. According to K.M. George, wholeness can be perceived as given and, on the other hand, should be experienced. Because wholeness is an absolute subject, in which all subjectivity and objectivity constantly and gradually merge. To him, Christian belief can provide both because Christian faith is both holistic and *apophatic*.[24] The ontological meaning of *Maromak* has been sustained by our understanding of communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The reason being, the structure of blessing: *Maromak: Aman Oan Jesus Kristu no Ispiritu Santu*, same meaning as God the Father, Son Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the ontological experience of God is only understood and perceived in the experience of Trinity in relation to the creations. This conclusion opens up a possibility for me to trace how far the aspects of *inward* and *outward are present in* the *Maromak* relation to the creation.
- As it was pointed out earlier, the word *Maromak* has a rich, full range in the two characteristics, singular and plural. But in the same place, we can trace both exclusivity and inclusivity of *Maromak*:

Characteristics	**Exclusive**	**Inclusive**	**Affirmative**
Singular	*Karoma*	*Maromak*	*Haroma*
Plural	*Naroman*	*Haroman*	*Raroman*

The words *Maromak, Naroman and Haroman* are most regularly used in liturgies of services. The word *Maromak* used with the word *Naroman* can be understood as an ontological affirmation of the Trinity. "He" confesses or affirms within the "We" plural (Ex), the word *Naroman* becomes the adjective form of *Maromak*; *Maromak* mak *Naroman* (God is the Light). When the word *Maromak* is used with *Haroman* "We" in plural form (Inclusive), the word *Haroman* becomes a verb. This shows that both the ontological aspect of the essence and the Persons of the Trinity are embraced in relation to the creation, or we may say the balance of unity and diversity in communion is maintained. Of course, the word *Maromak* itself cannot be separated from Father/*Aman*/*Pai*, Son/*Filho*/*Oan* and Holy Spirit/*Ispiritu Santu*.

It is clear that communion with God cannot be separated from our understanding of the realities of the Persons of the Trinity in relation to creation. This opens up a new basic understanding of human nature and its responsibility. The book of Genesis affirms that the human being is created according to the image of the triune God. Through the lens of the Trinity, we acknowledge ourselves as relational beings in creation. This acknowledgement is effective when we look up to Christ in the Spirit, who defines and lays down our mission as the light. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says, *"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* First, being the light for others should be based on Christ's self-sacrifices. Paul in Philippians 2:5-11 defines it as *pronesis* (joyful willingness) *and kenosis* (Self-emptying). Second, being light is to be good to the creation by promoting good works. It is ethical and moral action which determines our ability to contribute, sustain, nourish, and care.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I tried to show how far the Nicene Creed has been reflected in cultural practice in East Timor, and pointed to the complexity of interaction between Christian faith and culture, while facing the challenges of ecological crisis. It is an attempt that may fail, but the church in Timor-Leste needs to think seriously of the impact of this confession on its realities. The starting point at Nicaea is Christology to Trinity and Trinity to Christology: with the same framework, I have attempted to elaborate on the cultural background of the word *Maromak* and how it can be fully grasped in the Trinitarian perspective through the lens of both historical and cultural interaction, and with the core value of creation care as the framework for praxis.

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The Earth Community Perspective in Psalms and Its Relevance to Ecojustice

Juliana Agusthina Tuasela

Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to read Psalm 8:1-9 from an Earth perspective and its relevance in the ecojustice context in Indonesia. I will explore and identify how and where "Voice of the Earth" was heard in this textual tradition. In this study, it is important to explain the terms "voice" and "the Earth" to understand this perspective. In this case, Laurie J. Braaten defines and explains the use of the term "Earth" in the principle of "Voice of the Earth." The term "Earth", without the article (and using capital letters), the connotation refers to "nature", land and the reality of non-human ecosystems. "The earth" with articles (and lowercase) connotes a planet, or a large part of land. "Land" or "the land" connotes a subject that is narrower than Earth, often connoting the area inhabited by humans or animals. "Ground" is often a synonym for "land", although it usually means the arable land or soil. "Earth community" is a comprehensive term for an entire ecosystem, or web of life. That is, humans are part of a created order that cannot survive without an earth where humans are members of Earth community.[1] In the biblical tradition, God also chooses to live among humans, the nations and the Earth.[2] That God becomes a member of the Earth community. The Earth community consists of the whole symbiosis, wherein when one member acts to destroy or build life, it will affect all community.[3] Norman C. Habel confirms that we can explore where the voice of the Earth is heard in ancient biblical Wisdom tradition. Habel mentions in the following quote:[4] It can be argued that applying the concept of voice to Earth is itself an anthropocentric act, making Earth into a human subject. That is clearly not our intention. We use the term "voice" as shorthand for the diverse ways in which Earth and the Earth community may communicate. When we speak of "body language", there is communication, even if there is no accompanying audible voice. By the voice of Earth, we mean the many languages of Earth, be they gesture, sign, image, or sound, that send a message—whether to humans, to other members of the Earth community, or to God.

This description confirms that the Earth actually has a voice and language that needs to be sought and found in the biblical tradition, especially the Old Testament. Psalm 8 is interesting to study for several reasons, namely:

First, the biblical and theological studies indicate the marginalisation of creation, especially the Earth, in the 21st century. In the current context, there is a significant awareness and effort to restore the role of the Earth properly in theological-biblical reflection.[5] The Bible appears silent and is not concerned about discussing the topic of the Earth. Actually, the Earth has an inner voice that needs to be heard, expressed, and found in the Bible.

The inner voice is tied to a specific language, which indicates that its origin is social.[6] In the Earth perspectives, Psalm 8 is an Old Testament Doxology that praises God as the sovereign of the universe. Psalm 8 is an apology for the domination of God and humans over the Earth. This text raises the vulnerability of the Earth so that the earth is voiceless. From a content point of view, this text shows the existence of a hierarchical relationship and dominance between YHWH, the Earth, and humans.

Second, many biblical references in poetic literature raise more concern about Earth issues than what is commonly known. This tradition presents the diversity and richness of ideas about Earth's ecosystem. In the poetic tradition, some people use the language of the Earth as an educational instrument as it is contained in collections of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Psalms (e.g., Ps.1, 34, 37, 49, 65, 73, 127-128). For example, in Psalms, the Earth or members of the Earth community may praise God or celebrate with singing, shouting, and other forms of rejoicing (Ps. 65, 8, 12, and 13). The Earth rejoices (Ps. 96.11; 97.1), the skies are glad (Ps. 96.11), the seas roar in praise (Ps. 96.11), trees sing (Ps. 96.12), the work of creation gives thanks (Ps. 145.10), and the Earth suffers (Ps. 29:5-8).[7] In this Psalm, the Earth and members of the Earth community are addressed as subjects capable of responding with praise in various forms. Psalm 8:1-9 represents the distinct tradition and genre. Psalm 8 is a poetic tradition, a hymn that demonstrates the dominion of God and humans over the Earth.

Third, the contextual reason is that the Earth is facing an environmental crisis that threatens the life of this planet. In fact, there are indications of an earth crisis, a water crisis, a land crisis, and a crisis that continues and threatens the network of life. According to Murray Bookchin[8], "nearly all ecological problems are social problems," where the Earth crisis is caused by human domination of nature in the hierarchy of society. Fatally, there are patriarchal and androcentric biblical texts that tend to dominate the Earth. However, a new interpretation of those from the perspective of

creation theology is required. This study aims to reinterpret texts that are dominant of the Earth and provide ecojustice consciousness for the survival of the Earth communities. This interpretation refers to the flow of text dialogue that moves from the author's perspective to the reader's perspective and shifts from text interpretation to meaning. I will undertake the interpretation of Psalm 8:1-9 based on the Earth perspectives.

Structural Analysis of Psalm 8:1-9

Literally, Psalm 8 has a complex, symmetrical and chiastic structure with five elements in each half of the chiasma. The chiasma in Psalm 8 is described as follows:[9]

Table 3: Chiasma in Psalm 8[10]

A – LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (v.1a)
B – You have set your glory in the heavens (v.1b)
C – Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger (v.2)
D – When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place (v.3)
E – What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (v.4)
E' – You have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowded them with glory and honour (v.5)
D' – You make them rule over the works of your hands, you put everything under their feet (v.6)
C' – All flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, (v.7)
B' – The birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the sea, (v.8)
A' – LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (v.9)

The above structure indicates two chiastic elements, namely: "language parallel" and "conceptual parallel."[11]

First, parallel language. Parallel language is the repetition of root words that appear synonymously or antonymously. Some indications of parallel language in Psalm 8 are: a) identical exclamations at the opening (v.1) and closing (v.9) of the psalm, often cited simply as an example of literary

inclusion. b) Correspondence between *ma'aseh etsbe'otekha* in v.4 and *ma'aseh yadekha* in v.7. c) the word '*alha-shamayim*' from element B (v.2b) is paralleled with *(tsipur) shaamayim* in element B' (v.9). d) *konantab* in element D (v.4) is synonymous with *kol shatab* in element D' (v.7) and lowly man in element E (v.5), *enosh* and *ben adam*, contrasted with the lofty divine, *Elohim*, in element E' (v.6). The five examples of parallel language support the notion that Psalm 8 is actually an extended chiastic structure. [12]

Second, conceptual parallel. The chiasm of Psalm 8 shows some conceptual parallelism as follows: [13]

a) Elements A and A' represent the identical exclamation of the majesty of YHWH's name.
b) Elements B and B' express the extent of a dominion: God's or man's, respectively. Element B' clearly demonstrates the extent of man's dominion over birds and fish, so the invocation of young children in element B is associated with the power and glory of God who is able to defeat the enemy.
c) Elements C and C' identify the power of God and man over three creatures. In C, God overcomes three types of enemies, namely: *tsorer, oyev* and *mitnaken;* on the other hand, C' describes human dominion over the animal kingdom, namely: *tsoneh, alafim* and *behemot*. The actor in element C is God, while the actor in C' is human.
d) Elements D and D' describe conceptual correspondence. Element D is an invocation of God's dominion and mankind is invited to contemplate the heavenly bodies because they have been established and controlled by God ("the work of your fingers"). Meanwhile, in D', mankind contemplates that God has established him as ruler over the world ("the work of your hands").
e) Elements E and E' are the key thematic verses of this psalm. The two verses neatly summarise the two contrasting realities facing the psalmist. On the one hand, God is so much greater than humans, while on the other hand, God endows mankind with the power to rule over nature and its creatures.[14]

The above structure exhibits that the psalmist makes logical connections and moves from one topic to another. Psalm 8 describes the diversity of topics as follows: a) Adonai's majesty (v.2), b) the problematic sucklings and babies (v.3), c) the evening heavenly bodies (v.4) and d) humanity (vv.5-9).[15] This multi-topic affirms two things: firstly, the poet treats each

topic in a similarly programmatic way,[16] and secondly, interweaves the topics together artfully by creating "a single panorama with multiple elements held nicely together".[17] Structurally, this text promotes the idea of the domination of God and man over the Earth.

Retelling the Earth Story in Psalm 8:1-9

Psalm 8 is one of the most inspiring and uplifting psalms. This psalm is a "hymn of praise to the great creator". In an eco-justice perspective, Keith Carley considers Psalm 8 as an apology for the domination of God and humans over the Earth. This text raises the vulnerability of the Earth so that the earth is voiceless.[18] From a content point of view, this text shows the existence of a hierarchical relationship and dominance between YHWH, the Earth, and humans. This is identified through the formulation of multiple topics in the text.

The psalmist presents this topic reference in the following pattern:[19]

Framing context: majesty of Adonai's name in all the earth (v.2a)

A) Adonai's splendour *vis-à-vis* the heavens (v.2b)
B) The babies and sucklings *vis-à-vis* the enemy and avenger (v.3)
C) The heaven/heavenly bodies *vis-à-vis* the human (vv.4-5)
D) Humanity *vis-à-vis* the rest of the created order (vv.6-9)
    - Humanity's exaltation (vv.6-7)
    - The creatures subjected to humanity (vv.8-9)

Framing context: majesty of Adonai's name in all the earth (v.10)

The juxtaposition sketch of this pair indicates the dominance of the primary topic over the secondary topic, as follows:[20] a) Adonai's splendour is "above the heavens"; b) The babies and sucklings are somehow involved in thwarting the enemy and the avengers; c) a contemplation of the majestic heavenly bodies (v.4) leads to a contemplation of humanity's "finitude and fallibility";[21] d) a discussion of humanity's role in creation leads to a description of the rest of creation as "under [humanity's] feet." The picture above illustrates the existence of a hierarchical relationship pattern in Psalm 8. The psalmist places the primary topic in a relatively high position and the secondary topic in an insignificant position. [22]

Referring to the description above, the researcher will describe the hierarchical relationship and the dominance of the text as follows:

Adonai's Splendour vis-à-vis the Heavens (vv.1-2)

This literature shows the splendour of God above heaven. This text is initiated by acclamation at the beginning and end of the text, "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Technically, this repeated acclamation constitutes inclusion.[23] This inclusion theme indicates the splendour of God in the following description:

a) This acclamation shows that God's power is manifested through the splendour of His name. This psalm opens with a direct address to God in a manner common in lament/complaint psalms: "O Yahweh our Lord." This greeting has the nuances of praise to God.[24] It is possible that this psalm was taken from several early compositions to remember the divine act of deliverance from a difficult situation.[25] This greeting is to express the words of unlimited admiration for YHWH. The psalmist praises YHWH's magnificent manifestations of glory in heaven by day and by night.[26] The word "LORD" used in this inclusion refers to *YHWH*, the sacred Hebrew name and Israel's special name for God. This term is in opposition to the name *Elohim*, the more general Hebrew term for God. This indicates that this acclamation is part of the liturgical resources of the biblical community of Israel/ Judah. This is confirmed in several other Hebrew texts (Deut.12:5 & 1 Ki.8:16) where God's "name" is often considered synonymous with God's personal presence.[27]

b) This royal nuance and language are very strongly permeated in Psalm 8. All royal qualities are addressed to YHWH explicitly as well as divine qualities given to others.[28] There are five words for royal qualities in the Psalm: **אַדִּיר** "glorious" (vv.1a, 9), **הוֹד** "majesty" (v.1b), **עז** "strength" (v.2a), **כבד** "glory" (v.5b) and **הדר** "honour" (v.5b). All of these are both firm and powerful words to denote the power and glory associated with God as King, Creator, and Divine Warrior. Each word has a distinctive nuance of meaning, but essentially refers to the idea of royal quality.[29] This text promotes two words that have the nuances of royal quality, namely: *first,* the Hebrew word "our Sovereign" which means literally "our Lord" is interpreted to refer to a king (1 Kings 1:11).[30] This idea is coherent with the Hebrew word "majestic/glorious" (**אַדִּיר**). This word has two meanings, namely: 1) might or power and, 2) royal attributes. It is indicated that the psalmist wanted to portray YHWH as a royal figure. *Second,* the term "glory"

in this verse has a double meaning, namely: *firs*t, YHWH's personal presence and *second*, kingdom attributes.[31] This text conveys the image of a king who is transcendent and dwells in heaven. If heaven is the abode of God, then the Earth will be devalued. Heaven is God's abode; Earth is God's property. It is the place where God puts God's feet.[32] It means that God has the highest value and is separate from the material world.

c) Essentially, the inclusion affirms YHWH's power rather than immanence of YHWH. This is supported by the analogous phrase in Ps. 93:4, "YHWH is mighty in heaven."[33] This divine transcendence legitimises the system of binary polarity and hierarchical dualism in the text. Hierarchical dualism between YHWH's kingdom and the general kingdom.[34] This polarisation underscores the psalmist's goal to demonstrate the domination of God over man and all creatures. The point is that the idea of "the majesty of the divine name" is the central theme of the text; on the other hand, the Earth or the cosmos is not the central theme.[35]

The Babies and Suckling vis-à-vis the Enemy and Avenger (v. 3)

This text is one of the most difficult passages in Psalm 8 to interpret. From an Earth perspective, this text can be read with three critical questions: who are the "children and infants"? Who is "the foe and the avenger"? and why is "children and infants" used to silence "the foe and the avenger"? This question becomes a guide to investigate the pattern of domination relations between the two in the text.

a. Who are the "children and infants"? Related to the identity of "children and infants", there are various polemic opinions, including: *first*, the conventional opinion that connects the identity of **סיללוע סיקניו** ("children and infants") with the Ugaritic and Canaanite concepts. This opinion is supported by Claus Schedl and Mark Smith. Schedl identifies **סיקני** with the creature described by the Ras Shamra text as "gracious gods…who suck the nipple of the Athiaratu". He interpreted the **סיללוע** in the Psalms not to refer to "the children of the earth", but to "sons of the gods" or **ינב סיהלא**.[36] Both words are translated as "powerful beings,"[37] from whose mouth the majesty of Adonai is sung in heaven (verse 2.b). Smith followed Schedl in identifying **סיללוע סיקניו** with Canaanite beings. According to him, the children of El in CTA rebelled against El and were expelled.[38] In conclusion, the phrases **סיללוע סיקניו** and **ספנתמו ביוא** can be considered as examples of hendiadys. Then,

verse 3 is translated as follows: "From (i.e., against) the mouths of suckling babes you established a strong place, for your stronghold you indeed ended the avenging enemy."[39] Smith even parallels "suckling babes" with the Canaanite conception of a "cosmic enemy who threatens to devour all the beasts of the cosmos." YHWH secures the cosmos as a safe haven (Ps.104:5) by overcoming the cosmic enemy.[40] *Second,* a progressive view based on Old Testament concepts. This view is affirmed by Oystein Lund, Auffrete, Hubert James Keener, and Marvin E. Tate. According to Keener, in the OT, the Hebrew terms **מיללָ וֹע** (babies) and **מיקני** (sucklings) generally refer to earthly beings who have weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This view contrasts with the depiction of the children of El in the Canaanite and Ugaritic myths. As weak and vulnerable creatures,[41] the mouths of children and their descendants receive a power (**זע**) that is able to fight and "silence" Adonai's enemies.[42] Psalm 8:3 affirms that "God gave babes and infants with power, and ordained this power in its natural location, *in the mouth*.[43] The powerful and effective name Yahweh came out of the mouths of infants and accomplished divine purposes in the world (Isa. 55:6-11).[44] Tate affirms with an accent that the word in Psalm 8 has a double meaning, namely: "strength" and "protection". The Old Testament often describes "the mouth as an instrument for the display of power."[45] Tate interprets the cry and breath of a baby's life in two things, namely: *first*, as a testimony of God's act of creation and continuous life. *Second,* an act that reduces the enemies of life to an impotent silence. This gives access to interpret the following questions about the identity of "the foe and the avenger."[46]

b. Who is "the foe and the avenger"? In this case, there are many polemics. There are many scholars who attribute the identity of "the foe and the avenger" to atheists, sceptics, and hostile forces of chaos.[47] In Psalm 44:16, the pair of words "the foe and the avenger" (**ביוא ו תמִ סקנֵ**) refers to the adversary of man or the opponent of the psalmist. Lund states that there are three words that together represent "the totality of God's enemies". The enemy in this context embodies anything or anyone that threatens the divine purpose.[48] The three words used are: *first,* the word **ביוא** "enemy" often appears and is used as an individual enemy, a nation, and an enemy of YHWH (Psalm 8, Neh.1:2). *Second,* the participle of the word **צ ררֵ** in verse 2b indicates hostile attack by enemies that may be political, military, or

personal and can be used for the enemies of YHWH (Ps. 74:4-8). In this context, this word means "the brutal attack of the enemies."

Third, the word **תמִ מקנַ** from the root is interpreted in the idea of avenging, vengeance, and revenge. All these terms indicate the meaning of hostility and fierce attacks, namely attacks that are vindictive, revengeful, retaliatory, and dangerous.[49] In essence, the word "enemy and avenger" in Psalm 8 refers to "the enemy of YHWH".

c. The last question, why are "children and infants" used to silence "the foe and the avenger"? In the OT concept, Adonai uses the baby's mouth as a source of strength.[50] This concept has two meanings, namely: first, from God's perspective, that God uses weak people to present His strength; and second, generally "lowly-poor-needy" expect God's intervention to fight "strong-arrogant-ruthless."[51] This is in line with the general theme of the Psalms. Psalm 8:3 serves to express the psalmist's primary urge to maintain the order of creation. God uses relatively unimportant things like "children and infants" to fight a stronger enemy. The goal in the struggle against the enemy is to neutralise the enemy's mouth, and silence becomes the supreme symbol of that victory.[52] In essence, this text connects the baby's mouth with the power and authority of YHWH.

The Heaven/Heavenly bodies vis-à-vis the Human (vv.4-5)

The central question in Psalm 8 is "What is humanity?" or "How is it that you are mindful of humanity?" This question is put in the context of the work of Yahweh's "fingers" in the heavens and heavenly bodies (v. 3).[53] Marvin E. Tate mentions that there are three qualities of divine endowment that are commonly used to express the status of humanity, namely:[54]

a. Humanity is made "a little less than God/divine beings" (v.5a).[55] The translations "a less/lower than gods" can guide the term **סיהולא** *(Elohim)* in a plural sense for "gods" other than YHWH (e.g., Exod.12:12; 18:11; Ps.86:8).[56] Generally, the use of the word **סיהולא** *(Elohim)* in Psalm 8 has a double meaning, namely: *first,* the word **סיהולא** *(Elohim)* usually refers to a foreign god or to idols or both. In this case, the writer of Psalm 8 wanted to explain the strong status of humanity in terms of gods that are usually considered weak and ultimately powerless. This argument actually rejects the translation

"less than gods."[57] *Second,* the use of **סיהולא** *(Elohim)* for YHWH in the Psalms (Ps. 3:7; 4:1; 5:2; 7:1, 2, 9, 11). Ps. 43-83 often use **סיהולא** *(Elohim)* for Yahweh so this part of the Psalm is called the Elohistic psalm. In verse 5, the psalmist does not use YHWH, because there are probably about the portrayal of humanity as "a little less than YHWH"; "less than divine," yes; but "less than deity," no.[58] Theologically, this text stays in harmony with biblical anthropology. Humanity is near to God, but differentiated from the rest of the created world and humankind does not belong to the divine realm of existence. Human beings are endowed with divine qualities, but humans are not divine. In essence, humans are not angels, gods, or gods.[59]

b. Mankind is "crowned with glory and honour" (v.5b). This text affirms that humanity is empowered with the qualities of the divine kingdom. These qualities are royal qualities related to the kingship and Yahweh's kingdom. The word pair "glory and honour" (**דוֹבָכ הו רדָה ,** *kābōd wehādār*) is found only elsewhere in Ps. 145:12, where the reference is to the kingdom of Yahweh. The word "honour", (**הָדָר** (*hādār*) is used in Ps. 104:1 in connection with creation.[60] This indicates the qualities given to earthly kings (Ps 21:5; 45:2-3). The word **דוֹבָכ ,** "glory," is used frequently and refers to Yahweh (Ex 16:7,10; 24:16,17; Ps 19:1; 24:7-10; 96:97:6; 104:31). This word **דוֹבָכ** is only given by Yahweh in Ps. 84:11. These words convey ideas of importance, splendour, honour, authority, and power.[61] The word **דוֹבָכ** "glory" in particular seems to express the persona of Yahweh in action and presence. It should be noted that in ancient Near Eastern usage, divine glory was manifested in the crown of a god or hero as reflected in Job 19:9, "He has stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head." [62]

c. The crowning of humanity with "glory and strength" is followed by the commission of humankind to "rule" over the works of Yahweh's hands (v.6).[63] When humanity is crowned with glory and splendid strength by God, then humans have several privileges, namely:[64] *first,* humans are made God's viceroy over the world. *Second,* man has the authority to rule over the created world because everything has been "put under his feet," or "laid at his feet." The rulership explicitly includes domestic animals and wild animals, plus the birds of the air and the fish of the sea (vv.7-8). His powers include "whatever moves along the channel of the sea," possibly a large sea creature such as the Leviathan (v. 8a).[65]

Humanity vis-à-vis the Rest of the Created Order (vv.6-9)

Psalm 8:6-9 promotes the idea of God giving humans authority to govern other creatures.[66] The authority is applied in the following activities: naming, classifying, and collecting to regulate the plurality of works. This activity represents the concept of government that guarantees the prerogative of the kingdom.[67] This concept is also constructed in the traditions and concepts of Israel, as recorded in Gen. 2:19-20, Leviticus 11, Deut. 14:3-20, 1 Ki 5:9-14, and Prov. 30:15-31.[68] One of the prominent roles of human authority in this text is to implement a system of animal classification. The mandate to govern humans is realised by naming animals. The author of Psalm 8 presents the reader with a simple classification system.[69] Generally, in the classification system, people divide plants and animals into several taxa levels, namely:[70]

1. Primary taxa (e.g., animals: quadrupeds/fish/birds/insects)
2. Secondary taxa (e.g., birds: waterfowl/perching birds/birds of prey)
3. Tertiary level taxa (e.g., waterfowl: herons/ducks/gulls/kingfishers)
4. Terminal specificity level (e.g., herons: great blue herons/green herons)

The above classification contains tiered from primary level taxa - secondary level taxa - tertiary level taxa - terminal specificity level. The subdivision process ends at the terminal specification level, where categorical distinctions are no longer made.

Based on the classification system, it was identified that Psalm 8:8-9 mentions two classifications, namely: primary level taxa and secondary level taxa that make up the four times primary level division of the animal kingdom, namely:[71]

1a. Domesticated land animals
2a. Small domesticated land animals
2b. Large domesticated land animals
1b. Wild land animals
1c. Aerial animals
1d. Aquatic animals
2a. Small aquatic animals
2b. Large aquatic animals

This demonstrates man's authority over animals. The idea of humans having dominion over animals is also found in Gen. 1:26-28. The difference is that Genesis describes the time when power began (Gen.1:26), while Psalm 8:7-9 shows that power was given to humans in the past (Ps.8:7b).[72]

The writer of Psalm 8 used this classification system to present authority.[73] In conclusion, this classification system is considered a rhetorical vehicle to convey to the reader the idea that humans have authority over animals.

Theologically, Psalm 8 promotes emphasising the themes of praise about God's dominion over man and the universe. This text is placed on the dominion of the name Yahweh over humans and the universe (verse 1). Psalm 8 describes the hierarchical relationship and domination of God, man, and nature. This text has multiple and detailed hierarchical and domination relations. The consistent movement of the "top to bottom" list, namely: God – heavenly bodies – humanity – creation. Rhetorically, the pattern attempts to convince the audience of the seventh verse's claim to the domination of God and humans. Psalm 8 describes the delegation models of God's power to humans with the privileged status of governing other creatures.

Relevance of Text in the Ecojustice Context in Indonesia

In this section, I will relate the theological significance of the text to the ecojustice context in Indonesia. In the Indonesian context, several facts of fatal and worrying ecological damage have been observed.

Indonesia is one of the countries where environmental problems are very concerning; this can be seen both directly and through the mass media. There are many cases of environmental pollution and illegal logging which cause a worrisome impact on the environment.[74] Datauk Tjumano explained that based on data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Indonesia produced up to 65 million tons of waste in 2016, which increased to 67 tons in 2017. Meanwhile, data from the LIPI Oceanography Centre shows that around 35.15% of coral reefs in Indonesia are in an undeveloped condition and only 6.39% in very good condition. Global warming is triggered by the burning of coal which reaches its total annual emission of 9 billion tons of CO2; another problem that becomes an environmental problem is global warming, namely the process of increasing the average temperature of the ocean, atmosphere and the Earth's surface. There are many impacts caused by global warming, such as the destruction of ecosystems of living things and the sinking of small islands, due to rising sea levels due to melting of the polar ice caps.[75] Based on the general data above, the destruction of nature in Indonesia can be categorised into three types of ecological damage, namely: soil damage, water damage, air damage.

There needs to be new sensitivity and awareness about the crisis and devaluation of the Earth. This crisis is so pervasive, destructive and

dangerous that academics, biblical scholars, theologians and practitioners of religion cannot ignore it. How does the church's role address this reality? How to build consciousness of alternatives to address this dominant issue?

In ecological consciousness, there are several alternative consciousnesses built, namely: first, reading text in a new perspective. Text that promotes justice and freedom for the Earth. The Earth and all its components are recognised as having intrinsic value in themselves, not as providing utility value for humans. In the principle of ecojustice, humans and God must give access to the voice of the Earth as a subject that deserves respect. God and human beings who are pro-life are God and humans who are pro-justice, including the justice of the Earth.

The Earth needs to be freed from the anthropocentric constructs that have so far suppressed and muted the sound of the Earth. *Second,* the prophetic message must be based on justice and freedom for nature. This new Earth consciousness motivates us to promote Earth justice both theoretically and practically. Ecological consciousness can begin by building a church's sensitivity and awareness about discrimination against Earth. An amnesic attitude towards action will make the church lose its prophetic value. The church's prophetic attitude can be optimised as follows:

First, have sensitivity and awareness of the Earth by fighting for the Earth's justice. The pro-justice attitude towards this Earth can begin with a change in the perspective of reading the Bible. One of the eco-theological models proposed as a form of ecological awareness is the "coming home" model. In the context of a worrying ecological crisis, we need awareness about the concept of "coming home." It means being at home comfortably with all the Earth community. We create safe homes for ourselves, others, and other creatures. In the midst of an ecological crisis, we are invited to continue to go home and create a safe and peaceful home. The "coming home" model of healing the Earth is an integrated model for reflection.

Second, listen to the voice of the Earth. The reason is that this approach is not defensive or constructive but willing to listen to the Earth itself.[76] This approach contains several main premises, namely:[77] a) the best response to the ecological crisis is openness and humility to listen to the voice of the Earth and to follow the processes and mechanisms of the Earth at work. b) listening to the Earth requires an attitude of love and concern for nature as "a blood relative." It energises the spirit of renewing the relationship with nature. c) listening to the voice of the Earth leads to

a meditative attitude by reducing or ignoring noise and sharpening the ecological approach to hearing the sounds of nature. The voice of the Earth produces symphony, comfort, and calm amidst chaotic situations. In the midst of noise, humans need to take time to admire the mysteries and beauty of nature as God's sacramentum.

Third, the church and society must build a movement for the Earth's transformation. This reform movement was built from below, sourced from community initiatives and pressure. This movement must become the collective consciousness of all elements of society. Consciousness followed by the participation of the movement to care for the Earth, starting from ourselves, family, and extended to society. The Earth renewal movement can be carried out by reviving resistance attitudes and ideas. We are not only sensitive and aware of the crisis and ecological damage but also struggle against injustice towards the Earth. We are responsible for fighting for the environmental justice restoration movement. Listening to the voice of the Earth creates a double benefit: on one hand, the Earth is healed, and on the other hand, the Earth becomes a source of healing therapy.

Fourth, the mission calls for environmental preservation. During the PGI (Communion of the Churches in Indonesia) council session in Kupang in February 2013, a topic for implementation was formulated, namely "The Church of Friends of Nature."[78] This formula contains an invitation from the Indonesian churches on how to be friendly to nature as the implementation of the church's mission to the world. The Earth should be one of the objects of the church's mission. The Earth must be seen as one of God's fragile creations and needs to be embraced by humans. When humans are not friendly to nature, nature will turn to attack humans themselves.[79] Therefore, the Church has an active role in conveying the prophetic voice with an ecological spirit. The prophetic role of the church is to become an agent of God's mission to voice the attitude of ecological resistance for the restoration of ecological justice.

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Eco-degradation: An Indigenous People's Perspective from India

Imtisowa Ayangla

Introduction

Due to a lack of stewardship and care of the ecosystem and land, unprecedented rises in temperature, water crises, landslides, rain, food crises, and different kinds of diseases are experienced. Plentifulness, diversity, and life-sustaining power are under threat. The poor and Indigenous communities who depend on land, water, and forests suffer the most. Former custodians of land are now becoming landless and homeless. This demands a re-examination of the global discourse on eco-justice.

Indigenous activists, with their unwavering voices against land alienation, mining, and colonisation of their spiritual heritage, have been the torchbearers of this movement. Their resilience and determination have not gone unnoticed. Similarly, Indigenous theologians, since the WCC Canberra Assembly in 1991, have been advocating for the ecumenical movement to make justice to the land a cornerstone of its future vision. They have been challenging the global Christian community to articulate a theology that affirms the interrelatedness of all life. Their voices are not lost, but they need to be amplified. A fresh re-examination, firmly rooted in present eco-justice, is imperative to revitalise the ecumenical vision and practice.

This research paper attempts to articulate eco-justice by exploring resources of indigenous people's spirituality, especially indigenous communities in North East India. Critiquing the contemporary capitalist economic system, the researcher examines the human relationship with nature, the covenantal bond that binds humanity with the Mother Earth, care for the ecology, and calls to repent of our selfishness and suggests a theology of stewardship for transformative Cosmic wholeness.

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invincible," begins the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the basic statement of Christian faith formulated in the fourth century at the first and second ecumenical councils.[1] The opening words of believing in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth…establish a fundamental relationship between God and Creation,

who is known as God the Maker or Creator of all of both the earthly realities of the mountains and minerals, creatures and cobwebs, and all these heavenly realities that remain mostly veiled to us (Genesis 1:1-3). Because of this relationship, we cannot relate to creation alone, earthly or heavenly, without recognising and affirming its relationship to God. Examining this relationship between God and Creation is at the core of a developed Christian eco–justice theology or the theology of creation.

A Glimpse of Indigenous Spirituality

In this paper, I acknowledge that there is great diversity among Indigenous[2] societies and uniqueness in each Indigenous person and community rooted in their relationship with local ecosystems, histories, and experiences that have, and will continue to shape their beliefs, identities, and worldviews. While keeping this in mind, it is important to highlight common characteristics found across Indigenous communities worldwide.

In Indigenous societies, living in the natural world provides the ideal environment for developing both the individual and the community. Nature is the essential frame of reality and has traditionally formed the learning experiences of all Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, Indigenous societies have aligned all aspects of their social organisation with their understanding of the natural world as it is mirrored in their region. Natural reality also thoroughly informs Indigenous cosmology. The geographical and structural features of Indigenous communities orient us to our natural place within the cosmos. A communal consciousness emerges, including the natural world in an intimate and reciprocal relationship. Through clan and societal symbolism, ritual, art, and visionary tradition, Indigenous communities connect their people with the plants, animals, waters, mountains, sun, moon, stars, and planets of their world. Spirituality and a sense of the sacred permeate all aspects of the Indigenous community. Life is sacred, the relationship is sacred, nature is sacred, and one's People is sacred. These processes and structures are "creations of the highest thought" and are tied to the guiding myths of the People and the foundations of their religious expression.[3]

Indigenous wisdom and spirituality can be broadly categorised under two areas: (a) Just-peace eco-justice in relation to Land/creation (b) Just-peace eco-justice in relation to other fellow beings. It is to be noted that indigenous peoples' wisdom is not written, and so it is not fixed. It is dynamic. It is owned by the community and interpreted by the community. It is also important to note that elders are the custodians of

the traditional wisdom. They were considered authoritative and highly respected. However, attempts to use local resources for community peacebuilding are recent, as traditional practices were seen as evil by Christian missionaries. Due to the colonial mindset, our people are still reluctant to use our local resources.

Just-peace eco-justice in relation to land/creation: Wati Longchar and many tribal scholars have done extensive research in this area. It is generally understood that there is "No peace without doing justice to land." Many wisdoms and practices are developed geared towards the protection of land and its resources. Indigenous peoples' worldview can be best described as the spirituality of interconnectedness of all life. For the indigenous people, this interconnectedness is possible not only because of God but also because of Mother Earth. The land is the mother of all life. It is the land that sustains people and gives them an identity. Many indigenous societies maintain a special relationship with the land. Land, for them, is more than just a habitat or a political boundary; it is the basis of their social organisation, economic system, and cultural identification. The land is the basis that enables them to co-exist with other living beings in peace.

Since indigenous people view the land and all living beings as interdependent, they maintain a close balance between people and ecological needs in such a way that both are protected and preserved. Thus, their culture, beliefs, and practices were geared to maintaining a balance between human and ecological needs. Such a balance was essential to protect nature from the danger of over-exploitation. This balance was maintained through the practice of taboo and totem. I wish to elaborate on some of the ideas expounded in this discussion by Wati Longchar in his book *Transforming Culture and Praxis*.[4]

(a.) Taboo - It simply means 'prohibition' or forbidden activity, something that is not permitted, something that stands against social approval and is disallowed by norms of behaviour. The practice of taboo covers the whole activity of the indigenous society. It applies between sexes, different age groups, households, different clan members, village-wise, and even according to change of seasons. A taboo is observed with awareness that it affects the whole community. When the observance of taboo is neglected, it is not only the human community who suffers but even the animals and plants are affected. Taboos are, therefore, the signs that the whole world is interrelated and interconnected.

Some taboo practices are: A husband is not allowed to kill any animal when his wife is pregnant. He must also abstain from

eating honey. A warrior or priest is not allowed to kill any animal while observing restricted day(s); the whole village is not allowed to kill any animal on restricted day(s). It is taboo for a woman to hunt. Women are not allowed to eat fish that have no scales such as the stinging catfish and the butter catfish. This prudent use of resources that protected nature from destruction allowed one group or sex to utilise the resources while the other was restricted from doing so. This culture of restraint protected nature from being overexploited.

There are certain taboos that prohibit the killing of animals at certain stages of their life. For example, hunting and keeping traps are not allowed during the breeding seasons. The same rule is applied to hunting pregnant animals. Fishing and the use of certain poisonous roots and leaves that kill fish in the rivers or springs during the spawning season are restricted.

If a calf is born or there is a new litter of pigs, or chickens are hatched in the house, the whole household observes a taboo to preserve, dedicate, and welcome the life of the newborn calf, piglets, and chickens. A period ranging from three to six days is devoted to caring for and welcoming the newborn to the family, as many societies attach great importance to domestic animals. In fact, in many societies, domestic animals are also a part of the family. The observance of a taboo is thus applied to all beings, regardless of whether they are humans or animals. When it comes to agriculture, a taboo is observed to ensure good food crops and bountiful harvests. The land is allowed to rejuvenate its fertility through the observance of rituals and taboos. In addition, it is forbidden to cut certain trees because they are considered sacred. Trees like the banyan, oak, etc., are protected throughout the villages. Cutting these trees is considered to be highly taboo by the people. Unless the priest performs the appropriate rituals to gain divine approval, these trees are never cut down. Many communities believe that such trees are dwelling places of spirits.[5] Young people are prohibited not only from cutting such trees but are also not allowed to remove the outer bark of those trees. If they do so, they will displace the indwelling spirit that could cause their sudden death or shorten their life span. Young people are even prohibited from transplanting trees like the oak, banyan, etc., believing that these trees would outgrow the good fortune of the planter. Besides, many communities set aside some places as sacred spaces where the community congregates for different rituals, festivals, and ceremonies.

Therefore, many societies regard trees/forests, sacred places, and animals as not mere objects to be used, but as alive and active and, thus, to be respected and protected.

This prudent utility is reinforced by religious sanction. In the primeval religious system, taboo is observed in every religious act. It is a sacred holiday from work and a day of rest and prayer (Genesis 2:3). Taboo takes place in different durations and intensities. Some are for one day, others for a few days, a week, or more. While some taboo days are observed by the whole village, some are observed by the clan and family only.

While observing taboo, people do not talk to strangers. The daily routine work comes to a standstill, nothing goes in or out of the house, no animals or birds are allowed to be killed, and sexual contact is to be avoided. Everything is left to rest completely. It is a rest period for the land, family, and community. It is a period meant for the revitalisation of the earth, bringing holistic benefit to the community. Taboo also provides opportunities for people to be more charitable to themselves and others, to the animals and the plants around them, and to their rice fields.

Without taboo with its ample rest, the indigenous people may not have been able to develop a healthy God-world-human relationship. Taboo, therefore, enriches the whole land and community along with the flora and fauna. Such an observance is essential to protecting nature from exploitation. This culture of restraint and spirituality of interrelatedness is the foundation of harmony, peace, and justice to nature and human beings.

(b.) Totem - The totem is another practice that ensures balance and harmony in society as well as with the environment. The indigenous people restricted certain animals and plants from being exploited by maintaining a totemic relation with natural objects. A totem is usually "a species of an animal or a plant or insect or bird and very rarely a class of inanimate objects, very closely related to a group, in that the group of people is believed to descend from the animal or any of the species."[6] Some of the common totem animals are tiger, tortoise, cobra, monkey, jackal, deer, dog, buffalo, cock, peacock, owl, fish, and so on, and plant totems include rice, cereal, cucumber, and mushroom. A common phenomenon of totem belief is that the clan that traces its origin to such a totem sometimes names itself after the totem and attributes supernatural power to it.

The practice of totem reinforces interconnectedness and harmony of life. For example, while some clans kill certain animals and consume them,

others do not. While one clan eats beef, the other clan is prohibited from doing so. While some clans kill birds, others do not. Most clans do not kill monkeys, tigers, bears, elephants, and pythons.

Some clans would kill and eat the totem animals and plants without any restrictions to gain blessing and protection from the deity. Some clans will kill and eat only on certain occasions, which may be followed by a period of mourning. People look upon this eating as a re-establishment of the bond between the clan and its totem. For some clans, the totem is so sacred to the clan bearing its name that it becomes the focus of reverence and awe that they do not kill and eat the totem species. This practice is common to many indigenous communities.

The indigenous communities maintain a very strong symbiotic relationship with the environment because of their totemic roots. The surroundings are personified by attributing personality. Each clan considered it an obligation to protect their totem. Because of this totemic relationship and the myths related to animals and plants, the indigenous communities revere them greatly. In that way, they were interconnected with the whole natural resources, which in turn protected and preserved from being over-exploited.

However, we need to be critical that some of those practices operate within a patriarchal structure. I am a woman. I will not be allowed to inherit land. Without land, women are like second-class citizens. We need to re-examine some of our inherited traditions from women's perspectives.

Just-peace eco-justice in relation to humans: Many communities have developed social ecology to promote peace. One is intermarriage between different clans. It is taboo to marry within one's own clan in my culture, though it does not apply to some tribes, e.g. Kuki, Mizos, Chin, etc. This practice of inter-clan marriage is still retained among some tribes and we need to promote such practices. For Tangkhul, the woman who marries outside of one's tribe/village becomes *pukhriela,* the one who mediates between two warring villages/tribes. For Aos, when the two warring communities were confronted face to face in war, only women were allowed to speak at that time. In some tribes, when someone takes shelter in women's *meghala* (wrap-around), the enemy will not attack the man. Women have been contributing immensely to peace-building and eco-justice but have always been treated as inferior. Aos, the practice of *Aksu* which means giving pigs as presents is followed

between tribes, villages, clans, and families to bring reconciliation, friendship, acceptance, and recognition and to renew and affirm old-age relationships and goodwill. Though this practice is very patriarchal in nature, it is still practised among Ao villages to promote brotherhood (not much of sisterhood). The practice of Aksu must be modified and must begin including women and children.

Despite the undeniable progress initiated and achieved, women continue to experience exploitation, discrimination, and inequality in all areas; women's experiences as victims and as marginalised remain unchallenged in many communities, and women's contributions, talents, and abilities remain unrecognised and untapped. Despite women's restrictive role in a traditional and patriarchal society, women are still involved in peacemaking as they see life as more important than power. Women have been promoters of peace at home, in society, and in conflict situations.[7]

It is important that we reaffirm the potential of women in bringing just-peace eco-justice. But a lasting peace can prevail only when we uphold the sanctity of the land and its resources. True just-peace eco-justice will prevail only when we respect fellow humans, including giving rights to women. God became human in Jesus Christ in the human form not to abolish our traditional cultural values but to abolish unjust cultural systems like patriarchy and ritualism that deny justice (Matthew 5:17).

Just Peace: Devaluing Use of Mother Earth:

The devaluing of Indigenous women during and since colonisation contradicts traditional worldviews that were informed by the creation stories, oral histories, family and community structures, politics, and governments of Indigenous people. Through colonisation, hierarchical worldviews imposed upon Indigenous people marginalised women, sabotaging their individual and collective power while simultaneously devaluing Earth and its non-human inhabitants for profit. We have never been short of wisdom on how to appropriately learn about and coexist with nature; we have simply dismissed the wisdom of nature articulated by Indigenous peoples while simultaneously devaluing the female gender in a myriad of ways.

The greatest female figure we have devalued is Mother Earth. Our collective disregard for her results from the culminating impact of patriarchy and dominant industrial thought, which encourages

exploitation rather than conservation of the blessings of Mother Earth. Sadly, these same ideologies have framed all earthly lives, including human life, as commodified resources like in the Human Capital Theory that results in our social and environmental de-evolution.[8]

This practice inevitably calls us to question spiritual attitudes that impact our relationships with our environments. From a deep ecology perspective, our anthropocentric values have justified our plundering of the Earth and treating other intelligent beings as disposable 'resources' in the interest of capitalism, individualism, economic power, and material success. One of the obvious dangers of contemporary society around the world is the ecological crisis. It has become a vital concern of the contemporary world to heal nature and Earth and restore its purity. The environmental and biological balance of the Earth's biosphere and the home to a multi-million variety of plants and animals, both aquatic and dry land, is endangered.[9] Our atmosphere, water, air, and soil are being attacked and damaged, leading to natural calamities and erratic climatic change.

The eco-crisis is related to pollution, which is caused by chemical, physical, and biological factors such as water pollution, which is one of the urgent concerns that affects the biosphere and is caused by poisonous gases released by industries, motor vehicles, and human waste. The dreaded pollution that endangers all forms of life is the radiation that is caused by nuclear power waste, radioactivity of sun rays, and depletion of the ozone layer, which also poses great dangers to all living creatures, a contribution of modern-day science and technology.

Today, even Dimapur, the smallest semi-city of Nagaland in Northeast India, is experiencing unprecedented climatic changes; there is the issue of global warming, natural calamities frequently occurring, causing damage to life, property, land, and the environment, etc. Besides, soil erosion is taking place at a fast rate, causing immense harm to plants, animals, and humans alike. With all these crises, many biotic species are extinct, and many others are on the brink of extinction, and even human beings are being threatened.

This entire crisis relating to ecology is an ultimate sign of bringing life to a standstill, which is by far and away the product of human greed and negligence. Thus, unless drastic measures are taken and conscientisation of the people takes place, the world faces a grim future.

The development of ecotourism is further causing wide-scale eviction of Indigenous people and other marginal communities from their ancestral lands, leading to the breakdown of traditional values, wisdom, and identity. Today, the continuity of indigenous people and other marginal communities and their spirituality, culture, and traditional way of life is at risk. It breeds injustice and thus contradicts the testimonies of the Bible. Thus, it is a ministerial, missiological, and theological challenge. It is imperative that the churches and theological education make a critical prophetic stand on this issue and critique the whole enterprise of the tourism industry from the vantage point of the people who have been denied human dignity.[10]

The fires that raged in Australia during 2019–2020 rightfully caught worldwide attention as houses were burned down and human lives were lost. However, the greatest losses caused by the Australian bushfires were the nearly 1.2 billion members of Australia's wildlife and countless plant species that comprised their native habitats. From an ecological justice perspective, Australia's bushfires and the disproportionate levels of human, wildlife, and ecosystem losses are caused by and reflect our anthropocentrism. It is one of many apparent indications of what Kolbert in 2014 explains as the sixth great extinction of our planet. It requires a combination of awareness, caring, and significant human change to counteract.[11]

Thus, we tend to become so complacent that many people are oblivious to the situation. Human beings have sold their ethical values to capitalism, materialism, and opportunism. We attempt to reconstruct a model of learning that intertwines social justice, recognising Indigenous ways of living, knowing, and environmental justice, recognising also the rights of Mother Earth and her species. Let us assume the role of priests that creation finds her fulfilment and its completeness in our Creator. Therefore, a shift must take place in education from an anthropocentric paradigm to one that prioritises reconnecting learners to nature.

Just Peace: Equality of All Species-Indigenous Traditions and Wisdom:

Ecological justice must include respect for all species of nature. Indigenous people have long felt a deep connection with all species of nature. They communicate gratitude to all living things that sustain them, including the Earth herself. Through storytelling and oral histories, Indigenous communities teach each generation that all living things are purposefully

created and are integral to the web of life. All living things are connected, their ecosystems and humans, and all living things are sacred.

The tribal communities reflect the "natural" community, and they orient themselves through intimate, meaningful relationships with the stars, mountains, deserts, rivers, lakes, oceans, plants, animals, and spirits of a place. All of these processes have moved learners toward the goal of finding and honouring the "spirit of place." What has emerged is a deeply felt "ecological" relationship between a people and their homeland, born of intimate familiarity with the land and place. The homeland is an extension of the "great holy" in the perceptions, hearts, minds, and souls of the Indigenous People who have lived in it for generations. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why Indigenous people around the world have lamented the loss of their land. From their perspective and reality, these losses are, in truth, the loss of part of themselves.[12]

Globalisation and the free-market economy, on the other hand, have also cultivated injustice through oppression through unfair wages to farmers, deforestation of global ecosystems, nutrient-depleting monocropping, and harmful poisoning of local groundwater sources, and harming of indigenous ecosystems. Though the ecological injustices spread wider and affect more people each day, there is still hope that we can relearn the Creation narrative as told from the margins and bring a change only when we listen to their cries and take action to protect them.

Theological Response:

In spite of its negative effects, we need to recognise its immense potential to create a global community for peace and justice. God created the world not for Himself but for the world, and in creating it, He was moved by love that was not limited even by divinity but that poured forth outside of Him. Thus, all creation is Love and is loved by God because "God is Love." Hence, from the very beginning, we can see that God was not separate or isolated from the creation, but He is intrinsically part of the created order.

For the indigenous people, God is in creation and creation is in God. Therefore, when humans destroy creation, they destroy both themselves and God. That is why they love creation and take care of it. This is the theological message the indigenous people have always wanted to give to the world society in general and to those who take nature as the unlimited source of raw materials in particular.

If humans do not limit their unlimited consumption and accumulation, creation will force them to limit it in their own time in the form of a

catastrophe. From time immemorial, the indigenous people are aware of this fact, and so they intentionally decided not to 'develop' and 'civilise' at the expense of nature.[13] Today, the indigenous people's wisdom is sending a message to the world society to come to its senses and to make the right decision before it is too late.

Thus, from the above discussion, we learned that the indigenous people are life-affirming people or are the worshippers of life. They see and experience life in all created beings and things. They take part in the life of God, and so they worship it and make sacrifices for it. They see and experience the life in the creation as mysteriously related to their own lives. As a result, they feel a blow whenever something destructive is done to the creation. That is why indigenous people do not commercialise forests and land. They think that selling land is selling themselves.[14] Indigenous people affirm that life is God-given wisdom. Because the Bible also affirms life. The Bible says that life is God's life-giving breath, which means life belongs to God (Gen. 2:7; John 1:1-4). On the other hand, the tribals hold that if there is no life, there is no creation. It is the Spirit of God, who is the life that connects God, creation, and humans.

Conclusion

In Genesis, we see that it is our duty to care for and protect the Earth, which is made quite clear, yet so often, this account is read in another theological manner. Many insist that the Earth was given for humans to subjugate and control. However, sadly, this mentality has resulted in violence to the Earth, and abusive use of the Earth's resources, leading to the extinction of thousands of species, depletion of resources, and possibly irreversible damage to the waters, land, and atmosphere.[15] Throughout the Scriptures, from the "peaceable kingdom" that is mentioned in Isaiah 11:1-9 to the hope for the restoration of all things in Acts 3:20-21, attest to God's reigning intention for the proper ordering of all creation.

Thus, the world's state due to the global ecosystem's degradation is unsubstantiated. It is no wonder that ecologists, economists, and theologians are all heralding the impending end to fossil fuels, the unethical enslavement of Indigenous farmers to corporations, and the depletion of soil for growing food for our Earth of around 8 billion inhabitants. Therefore, I call upon all to realise that it is our duty to search for new ethical principles that honour the dignity of all Creation. It is also

important, and it is our duty to transform our very souls through our right actions to ensure ecojustice and our survival by striving for a more holistic, restorative, and inclusive future, making the right decision before it is too late.

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[1] Justin-Cannon-Exploring-Ecotheology-ecotheo.org_.pdf

[2] The word Indigenous is capitalised in order to indicate the specialized and specific knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous people. Common characteristics of Indigenous peoples include a value for all living things, systems thinking, stewardship of the land and non-human members of the shared ecosystem, and intergenerational, nature-based learning experiences.

[3] Environmental justice must include the rights of all species to life and respect: integrating indigenous knowledge into education: International Studies in Sociology of Education: Vol 30 , No 1-2- Get Access (tandfonline.com) (Accessed date: 15/8/24)

[4] Refer to Transforming Cultures and Praxis (Kolkata/Hualien: PTCA, 2018), pp. Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

[5] In Christian understanding, the spirit indwells the heart. It is personalized and limited. However, the indigenous people always perceived the spirit in relation to preservation of nature. The spirit works not only in the human person but also in the whole of creation.

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[7] http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/downloads/Witnessing_to_Christ_in_North-East%20India-wm.pdf

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[11] International Studies in Sociology of Education; ISSN: (Print) Journal homepage: J.LIN. ET AL.

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[14] Ibid., 24-25.

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The Meaning of God's Presence in the Context of the Oceans and Theology of Creation

Margaretha Martha Anace Apituley

1. Introduction

Theology is an attempt to interpret God's presence in context and expressed in various symbols. The experience of human encounter with God in this context is special and cannot be generalised as the only truth. Jürgen Moltmann[1] connects this particular reality to each human being's unique self and context. But theology itself is not God, but rather man's attempt to define God with his limited symbols. Meanwhile, God's existence is a mystery that goes beyond symbols, ratios and theological formulations themselves.

This study hopes to explore the understanding of coastal communities on small islands in the Moluccas, Indonesia, about God based on their experiences in the context of the vast ocean—a theological context that is sometimes forgotten and a reality that is often seen as something negative. There are several basic reasons why a sea theological perspective needs to be used in studying Exodus 14:1-31 as follows:

a) Indonesia and especially the Moluccas are an archipelagic region with a sea area larger than land. The Moluccas are one of the provinces that fall into this category because they have a sea area of 92% and a land area of 8%. This context not only influences people's lives but also the way they do theology. Even though the sea is very important, marine life is not well preserved. In the Moluccas, the sea is often the target of dumping of oil, rubbish, use of trawling, explosives, and potassium cyanide for fishing, gold mining, reclamation, and accumulation of sediment due to development activities on land, including housing, markets, and the sea-based restaurant business, and even theft.

b) The theological heritage tends to be continental in orientation, so that the sea is often seen as something evil or destructive. And the church inherited it in its theology and its song. Peter Boomgard, N. Polunin,[2] and Aholiab Watloly stated that people on several islands in Indonesia view the sea as a place where monsters and evil spirits live.[3] This negative view of the sea also comes from descriptions of

the sea in the Old Testament (OT). In the OT, the sea is associated with chaos, that is, something disorderly, chaotic, standing on the edge of the 'very good' creation, not God's creation and about to break through its boundaries. The sea is also associated with evil forces (Ps. 74, 89, 104, and Isa. 51) and must be conquered by God in a battle (German: *Chaos battle*). But not all descriptions of the sea are like that in the Old Testament. Because evil forces as a representation of chaos are not always depicted with that character (Jonah 1:17, Ps. 104: 25-30, Job 40: 15, 19; 41:12-24). In these texts, they are shown to be the same creation as other creatures and can live in harmony, play around, and depend on God for their lives. The way Israel views the sea is connected to ancient myths in Southwest Asia. In the sea, there are two existences, "evil and good". However, this evil power has also been defeated by God and used in His work for the world (Gen. 7 and Ex. 14-15).

c) Meanwhile, the role of the sea in the lives of Israeli citizens is also very significant, both as a residential, economic, political, and theological area. Israel has close ties to the sea. Two of the twelve tribes of Israel, Dan and Asher, lived on the seashore; Israel's consumption patterns are sea-based; Israel's economic and political power during the time of the kings (Solomon, etc.) was based on the sea; and Israelite theology is rich in their reflections on the sea (especially in providing images of God). Israel also has close ties to the sea. Two of the 12 tribes of Israel, namely Dan and Asher, were inhabitants of the coastal plain with a livelihood orientation towards the sea.[4] The tribes of Dan and Asher are seafaring tribes (Judges 5:17), while the tribe of Dan is a seafaring tribe (*gērîm* - economy class) on Canaanite or Philistine ships. Meanwhile, the Ashers were 'sailors and longshoremen' in the port of Akko.[5]

On the other hand, even though Israel predominantly inhabits the mountainous region of Palestine, the infrastructure of the City of David based on archaeological excavation findings shows that there is fish buying and selling activity in the form of a 'fish market'. Meanwhile, the source of the fish comes from fishing carried out by both the Israelites and the Phoenicians.[6] This shows that the use of the sea as an economic force is not only carried out by a small portion of Israeli society who live on the coast, but also by those who live far from the coast. At a macro level, the sea as a source of economic and political development for the kingdom was also developed during the leadership of Solomon,

Jehoshaphat, and Ahaziah through controlling trading ports in Palestine and building merchant ships, as well as establishing trade cooperation with other nations.[7] The role of the sea as an economic force is also seen in Psalm 104:25.[8] Apart from the 'sea' as a means of developing economic, social, and political activities, Israel also theologised about God and His attributes by using the sea and its elements. The sea in ancient Israelite cosmology was seen both as an ordinary liquid element (Gen. 1:9, 10), and also as something animate (Ex. 14:16, 21).[9] The sea and its elements are also used to describe God's actions in Israel's history, both the sand in the sea,[10] seabed,[11] roar of the sea,[12] and ocean waves.[13] The sea is also a place where God's other creations harmoniously meet (Ps. 104:26). Exodus 14:1-31 is a text that shows the positive meaning of the sea for Israelite society. Batto[14] and Snaith pointed out the word ***yam suph*** in the text means not only 'reed and papyrus' (Exodus 2:3), but also 'algae or seaweed' (Jonah 2:5). This argument is confirmed by Nahum Sarna.[15] The discovery that the reddish-brown algae in the sea is a type of Trichodesminum.

One of the villages whose experience will be utilised is *Titawaai*. *Titawaai* is one of the congregations of the Moluccas Protestant Church (GPM), located in the Lease Islands. From 33 Klasis[16] in GPM, 10 *Klasis* (30.3%) are on the large islands, namely West Seram, North Seram, East Seram, Taniwel Teluti, Masohi, Kairatu, North Buru, and South Buru. Meanwhile, 23 other *Klasis* (69.7%) are on islands, so their congregations are also in coastal areas, one of which is Lease Island *Classic*, where the GPM *Titawaai* Congregation is located. This condition not only provides an overview of its position in the GPM service map and Moluccas Province map but is a necessity in order to understand the theology of the people that developed it.

Titawaai is a village surrounded by the sea, so its history, myths, way of life, perspective, culture, work orientation, and theological style are also coloured by the sea island context. In terms of etymology, the name *Titawaai* formed from the words *titawaelo*, which means "walking on water, breaking through water, breaking water, commanding water, or conquering water". This name was given based on the history of their ancestors who crossed the large and threatening river from Seram Island, namely the *Talla* River, as well as the vast sea until they reached the land of *Titawaai* on Nusalaut Island. The term Nusalaut in the *Titawaai* regional language is *Nusaelau* (meaning: island across the sea). It is located across the ocean and is surrounded by the vast Banda Sea and

Seram Sea so, when viewed from a distance, it looks like Nusalaut Island (*island shape*:floating island).

The *Titawaai* people also view the sea around them as playing a very important role in their history and life. *Titawaai* is one of the Moluccas Protestant Church (GPM) congregations located on Nusalaut Island, Central Moluccas Regency. Nusalaut is a small island surrounded by the Seram Sea and the Banda Sea. In the *Titawaai* myth, their king was found in a coconut floating in the sea and was called the Sea King (Latu Mutihu). The name of their village comes from the word ***titawaelo***, which means to rule the sea or walk on the sea. The sea is also a place to find food, a way to achieve higher education, employment opportunities, a place to get clean water, access to information, communication, and so on. So, the people of *Titawaai* and ancient Israel showed that the sea was something important, very close, and integral to their lives. This context also influences the people who live in it to understand who God is to them.

This paper is based on a theological viewpoint of the sea, which is the result of a dialogue between the meaning of the sea in the cosmology of ancient Israelite society and the meaning of the sea in the cosmology of the *Titawaai* society.[17] In the theological perspective of the sea, the sea is interpreted positively based on the experiences of the *Titawaai* people and ancient Israel. The marine theological perspective sees the ocean as God's partner in His creative work in the midst of the world. The sea is an ordinary fluid element but also a soulful creature.

1. **Sea: Not created, but good and very good.**
   God calls His creation something good - *tobh* or very good - *tobh me'odh* (Gen. 1:9-10, 11-13, 20-23, 24-25). This phrase not only refers to something that is ethical and aesthetic, but is also not static, final, or perfect, and will continue to be updated towards better quality and benefits. In this logic, the sea in the Ancient Near East and the *Titawaai* creation myths are also depicted in this way. In the creation myth, the earth was created from the sea, and the sea became a place of life for other creations (Gen. 1:9, 10). In its renewal function, the sea renews the immoral world order, liberates, helps, and saves oppressed small communities (Ex. 14 and 15). In *Titawaai*, the sea is a place of birth, residence, fulfilment of life's needs, search for life, a way for various good needs, a helper in difficulties, a witness to God's glory, and so on.

So, the sea is meaningful for human life, other creations, and God as creation partner.

2. **The sea as a partner in the work of the Creator.**
   The sea is a partner in God's creative work in the middle of the world as stated in the myths of the Ancient Near East, ancient Israel, and *Titawaai*. In these myths, the 'sea' is involved in God's creation process both in the initial and ongoing sense because God is free to build interdependent and mutualist relationships with His creation.[18] He also uses creation to emphasise the intensity of presence[19] and His existence.[20] The sea and its elements, such as beaches, sand, waves, and seabed, are also used in this task, but with limitations (Job 38:8-11). This happens because God shares His power, "sharing power" with His creation (Gen. 1-2).[21] So, making it involves many parties.

3. **The sea is a mother who conceives, gives birth, nurses, and nurtures life with love.**
   The sea in Ancient Near East myths, Old Testament texts, and the *Titawaai* myth plays a role as a source of life for the earth and its contents. This affirmation aims to balance the concept of 'earth as mother,' which is more inclined towards the cult of 'mainland, island, or *continent*.' The sea is a mother who conceives, gives birth, breastfeeds, and raises life with love. But on the other hand, for the sake of her love, the mother can also occasionally give hard blows with big waves, currents, and winds for the good of the children she gives birth to. This is how the sea exists, which is sometimes calm and washes away the soul, but sometimes is also turbulent and shakes the soul. The calm and turbulent sea forms identity and character to enable one to become a person who can play in the waves; as well as a medium for intimate relationships with God. So, the sea that is the mother of life is the sea that reflects God's self and works for the world. A God full of love, but also fiery wrath. God is full of mysteries, just as the sea is a mystery. The sea is *fascinosum* and *tremendum*, which is both interesting and thrilling. But the sea is not God, but through it, humans come to know God.[22]

4. **The sea is the road that gives life.**
   For the *Titawaai* people, the sea is a way to achieve a better quality of life. Owing to the sea, they have access to finance for

their living, education, health, and other needs. Through the sea, there is an encounter with changes for the better. Likewise, for ancient Israelite society. The Red Sea was a way to change their fate from being a colonised and enslaved nation to an independent nation that could determine its own destiny and beliefs. The sea historically for Israel was also a path for the development of their lives. Indeed, the sea offers a path that is not easy, but on that path, there is God's blessing and care.

5. **The sea is a helper and protector.**
   At the Red Sea, the Israelites were freed from the army of the Pharaoh. God used the sea as their helper and protector (Ex. 14 and 15). The sea protects them from the threat of death, which is not only physical but psychological. Because returning to Egypt means returning to slavery—a crisis of identity, social, cultural, religious, political, defence, and security. The sea is the stage of life and not death for the oppressed little people. The sea emphasises its function as a guardian of life because giving life is its essence. Likewise, in *Titawaai*, the sea became a helper and protector during the 1999 conflict. Its waves became a wall that made the island of Nusalaut and its people untouchable for rioters who wanted to destroy the harmony of life there.

6. **The sea that punishes and renews people and the earth.**
   Some flood myths from the Ancient Near East, such as:[23] *Atrahasis, Gilgamesh,* and *the Incident of Eridu*, show the function of the sea as a punisher and reformer of the earth. In *Titawaai* specifically, this meaning is also found in their understanding of people who die or drown in the sea as a punishment for their mistakes. *Titawaai*, as part of the Seram community, also have the myth of the destruction of the island of Seram by sea due to human and Boiratan errors. The same thing can also be seen in the myths of Ambalau and Nusalaut. Indeed, morality is the infrastructure of the world order created by God. If human morality is destroyed, then the earth will suffer the impact. But at the same time, Allah also uses nature to punish and renew the order of life to make it better, more humane, and harmonious. The task of renewal and punishment is carried out by the sea. The sea is a guardian of life that reminds humans of good morality. This relationship between morality and the order of earth's creation is also a richness of the cosmology of ancient Israel, as reflected in the books of Amos,

Isaiah, and Jeremiah. In it, the 'sea' carries a sacred mandate to participate in punishing and renewing the damaged order of creation.

7. **The sea contains divine wisdom that leads to life.**
   Through wisdom (Proverbs 8:22-29), God carries out His work of creation[24] and makes His creation contain the wisdom of God. In this way, the sea also carries out the function of wisdom, namely, building the lives of other creatures in relationship with humans and God. In *Titawaai*, the sea also teaches humans about good relationships between humans and each other, other creatures, and God, both through marine products and challenges at sea. So, the sea contains God's wisdom. In many OT texts, the sea and its elements are used as a means to describe the existence, character, and work of God for humans and the world.

Interpreting God in Exodus 14 based on a Maritime Theological Perspective.

2.1 God Almighty and sustainer of life (14:1-4).

The LORD forbade Israel to pass through the land of the Philistines, even though it was close to Canaan, so that Israel would not return to Egypt when faced with war and His plans to reveal His glory. For that purpose, He had Israel encamped before Pi Hahirot, between Migdol and the Sea. Right in front of Ba'al Zephon, by the sea (verse 2). Historically, the road through the lands of the Philistines was a busy trade route along the Mediterranean Sea from the Nile River Delta to Megiddo, stretching into Asia Minor and Mesopotamia,[25] and was heavily guarded by Egyptian soldiers. This situation has the potential for clashes between the Israelites and the nations numbering more than 600,000 people (Ex. 12:37) and other nations who have interests in this strategic area. Meanwhile, Israel and other nations were not ready to face it (Ex. 12:39) because they were expelled by Pharaoh and the Egyptian people, and without provisions. (*ṣēdẖâ - supplies, food*). These historical records show that coastal areas (seaside) have long been strategic areas used as transportation routes and means of 'world' trade. So, control of coastal areas had strong implications for controlling the world economy at that time. Thus, if Israel is on world trade routes, it could harm the interests of countries that depend on it. As a result, Israel is not only an enemy of Egypt, but also an enemy of countries that feel their interests are threatened. This

was dangerous for Israel, which at that time was not a strong country, the former slaves of Egypt, who were expelled and left without sufficient provisions. So, avoiding coastal areas was for Israel the only option to maintain their survival and not because they don't like or are afraid of 'the sea or the coast'. But rather the need for security and life. Smith asserted that the sea road (*Via Maris*), which was previously controlled by Egypt and Assyria, was avoided by Israel to avoid contamination of interests.[26] A small portion of the Israelite people eventually settled in the coastal areas, namely the Tribes of Dan and Asher. Meanwhile, the majority inhabited the central region or mountains of Canaan. This central region is also the centre of government, religion, culture, and history. This is what Israel's history tends towards being continentally oriented, i.e. history is dominated by people's experiences of land or islands, not the sea.

- Historical reasons:
  According to history, *Titawaai*'s ancestors came from Seram Island, which is a mountainous area with a large land area. So, the habit of living in the mountains shapes their perspective on the world they live in. Seram Island is the largest island in Moluccas Province with a land area of 18,659 sq.Km.[27]

- Religious reasons:
  The *Titawaai* people chant the name of God in their regional language, namely *Solohua Upu Lanito Manuke. Solohua* means The Almighty God deserves to be worshipped and adored. *Upu Lanito* means the King of Heaven who is equated with Jesus Christ, and *Manuke* is the Holy Spirit. So, God is believed to live in high places (mountains). Therefore, the choice to live in the mountains is also a religious choice to be close to God.[28]

- Security needs:
  To gain a sense of security in the old country (mountains), *Amauna,* so *Titawaai*'s ancestors made a coral fence from the sea to surround it from enemies at that time. This data shows that in the past there was conflict between countries on Nusalaut Island and to avoid it, *Titawaai*'s ancestors chose the mountains as a safe place, rather than the sea as an open area.[29]

However, the *Titawaai* people view the world in monoduality (two but one). This means that sea and land are not two separate things. The land

is where they live. However, the sea is the fastest place for them to find food. So, the Lord preserved Israel by diverting the path of travel. The word of God (*hāyāh* which means: exist, live or come into existence), according to Chr. Barth shows his existence as a God who is present among his people to save them.[30] Likewise with the *Titawaai* community, *Solohua Upu Lanito Manuke* or God is the guardian of their lives everywhere.

According to Bouree,[31] Baal-Zephon, where Israel camped, was named after the god Zephon who was worshipped at that location. Baal-Zephon was an Ugaritic God who lived on Mount Zephon. The god Zephon was worshipped by sailors and was worshipped in several places in Egypt as the creator of the world and everything in it.[32] So according to Gese, the LORD led Israel out of Egypt through the sea which was in the location of the god who was considered the creator of the world and everything in it.[33] Thus, God's plan is also related to confirming His existence before the worshippers of Baal (Egypt), affirming that He is the ruler of this world.

The choice of changing the travel route is also related to God's plan to assert His presence through the desert towards Egypt. Israel is described as wandering and confined in the wilderness. Wandering (*n^{e}bḥukḥîm*) means going anywhere without a specific destination or place of residence.[34] This imagination was deliberately created in Pharaoh's mind so that they would chase Israel back and become a moment of revelation of God's power for them. In the view of the *Titawaai* people, the desert is a place that is open, mountainous, arid, where it is difficult to get clean water and food, which rarely has life, does not have large rocks and caves like the lush green *Titawaai* forest, and has no natural resource potential. So, the wilderness was not a safe and life-giving place for Israel. But for them, it is not just the desert (*midḥbār*) that limited Israel's journey, but the sea (*object*) also. Because Israel was not used to the sea and did not live by the sea. This intense relationship with the sea is important to shape their adaptability, habits, skills, perspective, and belief in God. Therefore, especially since Israel crossed the sea, living by the sea was not an easy thing for them.[35] So this context that is not safe according to human minds will become a place where God reveals His power.

The *Titawaai* people have many narratives about God's revelations in the sea: the sea is the source of their life because they receive blessings in the form of rich marine products such as *food,* sea cucumber, lola, fish, shrimp, and others. Threats on the beach such as damage to house foundations due to waves, high tides, tsunami issues, abrasion, and so

on actually become moments to build an intimate relationship with God, God's way of testing faith, rebuking mistakes that must be faced with praise, gratitude, and reformation of life. So, in all existence, whether calm or bumpy; both on the shore and in the depths, the sea bears witness to the glory of God. The sea invites humans to build a more intimate relationship with God amidst the pressures of life. So, the threats that exist in the sea show that the sea actually has destructive potential (*Chaos*); however, God has conquered this potential to organise life together.

So, nature is the order of life given by God to humans. Nature is not a deficiency and obstacle to God's plan for a better human life, but a partner in His saving work to help humans free themselves from the cruel tyranny of the lives of their fellow humans. Because nature created by God is not a stage for suffering from colonialism imposed by strong and powerful people against weak and powerless people. But nature is a harmonious stage of life where all humans can live in peace, and the strong support the weak in harmony too. If these moral values are ignored, the world order created by God will suffer the consequences. Therefore, in order to maintain the moral values that are the infrastructure of God's created world order, God can also utilise the seas that He conquered and His creations other than humans to continue God's work of salvation. *Titawaai*'s personality shows that for the benefit of humans, God collaborates not only with humans, but also with the nature around them. This is important to remind humans that nature is not just an object for fulfilling their needs, but nature is also a natural subject that equally determines the history of human life. Ancient Israelite cosmology shows that the *Titawaai* view of nature as God's counterpart was shared by them, as will be seen in the following section. However, this perspective apparently did not work when pressure from Egypt put pressure on their lives at that time.

2.2 God is not the Creator of the Sea but its Conqueror

God told Israel to turn around and camp by the sea because He also wanted to reveal His power to the Egyptians as well as to the Israelites. According to Bouree, Baal-Zephon was a god from Ugarit, who lived on Mount Zephon and was worshipped as the creator of the world. This god was worshipped by sailors and in some places in Egypt. So according to Gese, God led Israel through the sea at the site of worship of the god who was thought to own and conquer the sea. Thus, God's plan to pass

through this ocean is also related to the confirmation of His existence that He is the creator and ruler of this nature. However, the sea as God's creation has become an interesting theological discussion among theologians (Walter Lampp, Gerhard von Rad, David Toshio Tsumura, Ellen van Wolde, Karl Barth, and Robert Davidson). All these theologians view the sea as God's creation.

- For Walter Lampp,[36] chaos is God's creation that He continually renews into the cosmos. But at the same time, chaos is also a force that threatens the cosmos created by God.
- Gerhard von Rad[37] does not agree that the world created by God is in a state of chaos. However, he acknowledged the existence of confusion, but as a deep theological speculation.
- David Toshio Tsumura[38] and Ellen van Wolde[39] denied the existence of the good chaos found in Genesis 1:1-3, 2:5-6 because it does not resemble evil forces.
- Robert Davidson[40] argues that Genesis 1:1-3 shows that the heavens and earth were God's creation in a state of chaos. This means that heaven and earth were initially in chaos, which gradually became the cosmos. So, the sea was also created by God.
- Emanuel Gerrit Singgih has a different stance from these theologians. For him, Genesis 1:3 is a description of God's first act of creation, while Genesis 1:1-2 is a description of the initial pre-creation conditions. This means that Genesis 1:2, which in this case is the element of chaos, is not God's creation and is pre-creation material of heaven and earth. Singgih's view is based on his consideration that:[41]

    - If Genesis 1:1 is seen as a theological statement about the Creator of the world and everything in it, this is due to the understanding of God as the absolute Creator and Ruler of the world who alone carries out His creative work. So, this is different from the description of creation in Genesis 1 itself, which shows that when God created humans, God discussed with other people (Genesis 1:26). Genesis 1:26 shows that God does not work alone but involves other people.
    - If Genesis 1:2 is seen as the first act of creation done by God, then God first performed this act of creation outside the sky, while the sky in the cosmology of ancient Israel is the abode of God.

- If God created the heavens and the earth first, it means that both were created together by God. This also contradicts the hierarchy of creation of heaven and earth in Genesis 1:8 and 10. Verse 8 talks about the creation of heaven on the second day. Meanwhile, verse 10 refers to the creation of dry land (earth) on the third day.

With this explanation, Singgih concluded that chaos is pre-creation raw material that was not created by God. So, the sea was not created by God either. I agree with Singgih because the creation story of the ancient Israelites is a construction of the creation myth of Ancient Southwest Asia, which shows that the sea was not created but rather was pre-creation material (Tiamat's body as the pre-creation material of heaven and earth). The sea is not always evil (destructive). However, God has also defeated his destructive power and made him a co-worker (Genesis 7). The sea as the initial order of creation is also supported by the myth of the *Titawaai* people about the birth of 'Latu Mutihu', the King of the *Titawaai* Sea. Latu Mutihu was born from a coconut found on the beach, growing and eating it there. But also, because the people of *Titawaai* feel fulfilled by the sea. So, the sea is the mother of their life.

To side with the sea, it is important to emphasise the theology of "Sea as mother" because the emphasis on the earth as mother often leads to neglect of the sea and seems to place it in an inferior position and vulnerable to exploitation. The sea is only seen as a small element of the earth, and the small is always identified as weak and recessive. However, this tendency does not mean that the sea builds arrogance towards the earth, which is usually identified with land. In this theological framework of the sea as mother, the 'earth as mother' paradigm, which tends to worship 'land, islands, or continents,' needs to be balanced with the 'sea as mother of life' paradigm.

2.3 GOD partners with nature and humans for the liberation of those who are oppressed (14:3-14).

This section shows Pharaoh's very intensive pursuit of Israel and Israel's response to it. There were 600 chariots (compared to the number of Israel's congregation of 600,000 people, without adding women and children, and other nations who joined in), all the Egyptian chariots and the Egyptian people who were mobilised to pursue Israel. A policy that is very ironic when compared with Israel's readiness. For Israel, their departure from Egypt was for the sake of becoming an independent

nation politically, socially, economically and religiously. However, for Pharaoh, the departure of the Children of Israel was solely for the sake of their religion, without changing any social, economic or political status. Israel remained slaves to Egypt. So, it seems that here Yahweh was indeed planning to harden the hearts of Pharaoh and his troops to expel Israel, but Yahweh's plan did not just happen. According to the *Titawaai* people, the fear that gripped Israel was not only because of Pharaoh's pursuit, but also because their chances of saving themselves were very small. If the Israelites only cared about the wilderness (*midhbār*) as a grave or death space for them, so that according to the *Titawaai* people, their fear is also related to the vastness of the 'sea' in front of them. So, the Israelites felt they had no shelter because the land and sea they were crossing could not help them. This is different from the *Titawaai* community. Their land and seas are their source of blessings and help (nature is also a representation of their ancestors – *Lesinussa Amalatu*). In this logic of thinking, the *Titawaai* people actually think the opposite of the Israelis. If Israel complains that the natural environment is not a living space, then they will say the opposite when faced with challenges. For the *Titawaai* people, if Israel lived on the coast of the sea, they would not consider the sea as a cage because the sea would be a fortress that separated and protected them, too. The experience of the *Titawaai* community during the 1999 social conflict confirms this. If Israel considers living in the foreign land of 'Egypt' to be a paradise on earth that gives a sense of peace and well-being, then the *Titawaai* community, who live in its cosmology, will choose to immediately return home and do not want to be slaves in the land of others.

2.4 God is with us (14:15-18).

This section contains God's response to Moses regarding the complaints of the Israelites. The Lord sensed worry and fear in Moses: "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the people of Israel that they should leave." Moses' fear of the *Titawaai* people was because he was not yet familiar with the sea. Moses had experience with the Nile River as his helper when he was a baby. But he also needed interaction with the sea to form courage, just like the ancestors when they crossed the *Talla* River and the Seram Sea. On the other hand, the limitations of sea transportation facilities and the order to divide the sea cannot be understood logically. For Moses, the sea was not a creature with a soul. The sea is an ordinary liquid and cannot be divided. However, this ancient Israeli cosmology shows that the sea is not just a thing but a creature with a soul, as sentient beings

and many creation myths depict this, including the Ugarit myth about the struggle between *Yam suph* and *Baal; the contest* between *Tiamat* (goddess of the sea) with Marduk; and myths from Egypt about resistance with water monsters in the framework of the creation of the world. Thus, this perspective was adopted by the author of Exodus 14 by giving new content to the myths. This shows that the story of the Exodus is not just a story of human liberation or salvation, but also the re-creation of the world into a newer and more humane order in accordance with the purpose for which it was created. In this work of creation, Pharaoh and his army were created in *Chaos* history that wants to destroy the world order created by God. Meanwhile, the sea (ocean) is God's ally in the work of creation. So, Moses and the sea became His allies. The *Titawaai* people also view the sea as a living creature. Therefore, they are often invited to chat *tanjong* (cape), *topo-topo* the sea water is temporarily rough, throwing coins or offerings, clothes, goods, gold and fish caught into the sea as a 'right' and 'part' of the sea to replace the soul or an expression of gratitude to it.[42] If the sea is a creature that has a soul, then the sea is not just an object to fulfil human needs. The concept of the sea as a creature with a soul makes humans aware not to be cruel to the sea and not to brutally exploit its vast and endless love.

Not just the sea, but clouds, wood, wind, and *meti* (receding water) were also used by God to protect Israel (14:19-22). According to the *Titawaai* people, cloud pillars (dark clouds, thick clouds, *butu angin*) that they experience on the island and at sea can indeed cause a very dark effect so that they cannot see and approach Nusalaut Island when sailing; they could run aground on another island, and some would anchor *sero* (fishing equipment) in the middle of the sea until the situation became clear. So, the darkness created by the pillar of cloud is total darkness. If God used a pillar of cloud as a symbol of His presence in Israel, then this shows that God has great power over this world. Because pillars of clouds (the *Titawaai* people call them thick, dark, black clouds) for those on small islands are a sign of threat as well as a harbinger of blessings (rain). So, if God uses a pillar of cloud as a representation of this threat to carry out His plan, then it indicates that God is the Ruler of this world. The *Titawaai* people remind us that nature is God's good creation, and its destructive existence is also controlled by Him to bring blessings to humans.

Likewise, sticks are used as rescue tools. Regarding sticks as a medium used by God to reveal His power in the sea, the *Titawaai* people are also

accustomed to using certain tools when facing difficulties at sea, such as coins, goods, gold, rings, clothes, and even fish to calm the sea. If Moses parted the sea to make way for Israel, then the *Titawaai* people interpret what He gave the sea to calm and thank the sea. These things are understood as symbols of God's way of revealing His power to nature and humans. These methods are the result of ancestors who also received wisdom from God to overcome the life context they faced in *Titawaai* in order to survive. And if the fruit is goodness and salvation, isn't that part of God's work?

Furthermore, like the dark cloud and Moses' staff, verse 21 also shows that through the strong east wind, God stirred up the seawater so that it became dry land. East winds are basically very strong winds. So, if there is the addition of the word 'hard' in verse 21, it shows that the east wind used by God is indeed powerful, with the potential for a very large threat. In *Titawaai*, if it is the east season, the east wind will blow strongly so that the waves in the sea will rage and limit people's activities. Of course, there are those who still go to sea, but there are also those who choose to rest at home or work in the garden. Fishermen who usually fish in the deep sea will only operate in shallow water. However, there are also those who remain in the deep sea because they understand that sea waves are a sign of blessing. This picture will show that fishermen who are only used to the sea tend to think twice about travelling by sea or looking for sea products, especially the Israeli people who are not used to the sea. But just as Moses, the sea, dark clouds and other media were used by God to engage in His work of salvation for Israel and the creation of a new world order, so too with the east wind. Likewise, dry land in the middle of the sea appears due to the opening of seawater by the east wind. In *Titawaai*, the dry land that appears in the middle of the sea is usually called *Meti.* However, the sea that normally separates Nusalaut Island from Molana Island or Saparua Island, which are nearby, and especially from Banda, now parts and makes way, creating a road that connects island to island, a phenomenon that can only happen with God's permission. So, people, the sea, black clouds, the east wind, sticks, coins, natzar, clothes, goods, fish, rings, gold, and places are God's allies. This ally of God also shows that the God believed in by the Israelites and the *Titawaai* people is a God who is indirectly involved in human history. He needs intermediaries from humans, nature, and ancestors, too. He did this not because He did not want to know more about the world He created. It is not that the world He created was too dirty and He was too holy. However, because

He is the Ruler and Creator who does not hold that power to Himself, but rather exercises it through the *sharing of power* with His creation, so that they are also directly involved in the creation and saving of the world on an ongoing basis. So, the task of creating and saving the world is God's task with all of His creation. All of God's creation is tasked with making way for Israel in the sea so that they are safe and have the freedom to build a better life and live far from systematic colonialism, both economically, politically, religiously, and culturally. So, the sea is a path of freedom towards the future, ideals, and hopes. Therefore, learning from the sea means learning to be a 'path' for others and not block or destroy their future 'path'. Learning to be 'the way' is learning not to be oriented towards one's own interests so as not to make these interests a stumbling block in other people's paths. However, in verse 22, it is also emphasised that the sea is not just a road but a wall (the protective fortress of the *Titawaai* people) that protects them. They experienced this when there was a social conflict in the Moluccas in 1999. The sea waves became a fortress when the rioters arrived.

2.5 GOD who renews human life (Ex. 14:23-31)

This section shows that God's plan to harden the hearts of Pharaoh and the Egyptians so that they would continue to chase the Israelites into the middle of the sea had been realised and in the middle of the sea, He revealed His power to them so that they would finally recognise the God of Israel as the person they are dealing with. Through the sea, God punished Egypt and created a new future for Israel. The role of the sea as a punisher is also recognised by the *Titawaai* community.

> AT said a group of people drowned in shallow seas in *Titawaai* because they used an electricity *ammo box* to commit crimes against each other.[43] AL also states, if humans want other people's property, for example, villages, land and natural products, then God can use the sea to punish them.[44] Meanwhile, ZA stated, if a servant neglects to carry out his devotional duties, then God can also use the sea to punish him.[45] And most interpreters in this group associate blessings with people's good relationships with their partners, parents and extended family.

Well, if you follow the series of opinions above, it can be seen that the sea is God's ally in punishing humans if their relationship with God, nature, and others is broken. On the other hand, the sea as a punisher also reaps

controversy from the *Titawaai* community because, for them, the death of someone in the sea is destiny. Genesis 7 proves that God used the vast ocean to punish sinful humans and the world. This means that the sea, as a punisher, is called upon as an ally that was not created by God but conquered by Him. That is not destiny, but the responsibility that God bestowed on Him, just like any other creation.

The Relevance of Understanding about God based on Exodus 14:1-31 in the Moluccas Context:

In commemoration of the day of the Nicene Creed in Constantinople, several things are emphasised in connection with the interpretation above.

3.1. Recognition of God as creator, partner of all creation, preserver and renewer of life, and conqueror of the sea must also have an impact on nature, which has been increasingly exploited massively in recent times. In particular, the sea is the source of life for people on small islands. As previously described, the fact that marine damage due to exploitation has become a local, regional, national and international phenomenon. One of the reasons is that the sea is seen only as an object. However, Exodus 14 shows that God uses the sea as his partner in many things, even though He did not create the sea. This means that the sea is a subject, not an object, that can only be exploited by humans to fulfil their needs or interests. The sea in the cosmology of ancient Israel and the *Titawaai* people was actually the initial order of creation of the earth and everything in it. In other words, the sea is the mother of life for all other creations. So, destroying or exploiting the sea means destroying the mother who has conceived, nurtured, given life and safeguarded life. This is a contextual reflection of society on small islands in the Moluccas, in particular.

The sea is part of the Earth. However, the expression Earth as Mother tends to create a cult of the land while the sea is only seen as a peripheral area. Therefore, a marine theology is needed that emphasises the importance of the sea in theological, historical, economic, social and political life. As a sea island church, the Moluccas Protestant Church (GPM) must dare to have a theology from the sea, which is part of its cosmology, which is full of

meaning for the emancipatory mission of the people and society of Moluccas.

3.2. This recognition of God must also have an impact on the struggle to revive communities on small islands that live in a cycle of isolation and poverty. Nature around them is exploited, but their welfare is neglected. Facts show that the marine resources owned by the people of the small islands in the Moluccas are very rich. However, up to now, Moluccas is still ranked the fourth poorest province in Indonesia, even though 25% of the marine products of the people in Moluccas contribute to development in the country. Another factor causing poverty in the Moluccas is the fact that the orientation of national development in Indonesia is based on land area and not sea area. This means that if the land area of a province is larger, then the development costs provided by the state will be greater than for provinces with a wider sea area. Thus, Moluccas Province, which covers 90% of the nation's ocean area, will experience losses. In fact, the challenges and needs for development in areas with wider seas are very large when compared to areas with wider land. So, this continental development orientation causes an increase in poverty rates in the Moluccas.

3.3. The majority of Israeli society is a central mountainous Palestinian society with livelihoods that are more land-oriented, such as farming and livestock. Therefore, Israel is better known as an agribusiness society and not a seafaring society. However, historically, Israel is also a mountainous society that has a dual life orientation, namely to the sea and to the land, and there are still two Israeli tribes who inhabit the Palestinian coastal plain, namely Asher and Dan.

3.4. Geographically, there are two tribes of Israel, namely Asher and Dan, who inhabit the coastal plain of Palestine. Asher inhabited the region of Asher, located between the south of Tyre and Mount Carmel. In this region, there is also an important port that developed during the time of the Israeli monarchy called Akko. The same goes for the Dan tribe, who have been residents of the region since the beginning of the *Shefelah*, namely the coastal plain in the south of Palestine, which was strategic because it was a fertile place, with several important ports, and was an international trade route at that time, although later, by the rule of the Philistines, they were also shifted to other places. So, it is not that they don't love the

sea. According to Stager, the Dan people were sailors (*I want to say*, "economic class") on the ships of the Canaanites or Philistines, and the Asherites were the "sailors and harbour hunters" in the harbour of Acre. Even though Israelis predominantly live in mountainous areas, Israel's consumption patterns also depend on marine products such as fish, and they are even known as fishermen and fish traders in the market. Meanwhile, during the monarchy era, Solomon strengthened Israel's economic and political power also through developing maritime infrastructure, including building ports, ships, and building cooperation with 'sea nations'. This was continued during the time of the next kings of Israel. In their worship activities, Israel also used sacred tabernacle accessories made from dolphin skin as a form of contextual theology based on the Canaanite view of El's abode at the bottom of the sea. The goal was to help Israel understand God based on the culture of the local peoples and affirm who God was to them. Meanwhile, theologically, Israel's relationship with the sea is very close. The sea is not only understood as a living space for Israel but is also used to describe the existence of God and His deeds for humans and the world. So, behind and in the gaps of history, which predominantly tends to be in mountainous areas (*continental-oriented*), also contains the story of Israel's life and struggle with the sea, as Israel's economic, political, ritual, and theological power, as previously described. From this almost forgotten history, the sea actually played a role in building Israel into a great, prosperous, strong, and religious nation.

It must be acknowledged that the mountains are the locus of life for the majority of Israeli society, and Israel's leaders also come from this region. Thus, Israel's history will be described as a history that is more oriented towards land than sea. This condition is slightly different from the very dominant archipelagic context in Moluccas, with its people's orientation towards sea and land equally, but its history is interpreted based on the *continental* community, who inhabit large land areas in several other provinces in Indonesia, which are central to power.

The impact is that the 'sea', which is the economic, social, cultural, political, and theological power of the island communities, is also neglected, which has negative implications for the development of their lives in various dimensions of life. History that is oriented towards the sea and the condition of the islands of its people seems to be something

negative, difficult, dangerous, and detrimental. Even though the sea and the richness of the islands are so rich and used massively for the development of areas with wider land, they are still neglected and forgotten.

Thus, paying attention to the sea and the people who inhabit the islands is a form of taking sides with small communities and their natural environment, which is not taken into account or forgotten. Maritime theology, as a theology of alignment, suggests that all people with their life experiences in each different location are unique, cannot be generalised, are valuable, and should be taken into account so that they also become the determiners and history makers of their lives. Through marine theology, people are invited to live and learn from the sea, which has rich economic, political, social, cultural, and theological values. So even though the island dweller is not always taken into account in history, his contribution is important in human life. Having theology from the sea, therefore, will be the strength of small communities to continue to share and benefit life as a whole without the lure of praise or attention. It is a strength to share sincerely.

The sea in Israel's history was not only an economic and political force but also a partner or co-worker of God with other creations to renew the world. Therefore, marine theology teaches people not to feel inferior about their 'small' selves because they do not determine history and have no power. On the other hand, marine theology educates people to remain valuable 'pearls', namely the ability to make changes together with God and other creations in order to build life. The sea is life-giving, so humans must also be a source of life and not a destroyer of other people's lives. God used the sea as a symbol of His power to give hope to Israel, who was suffering in exile. So, humans must also be a symbol of guaranteeing hope for others who suffer.

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Meaning and Applications of The Nicene Creedal Affirmation

Rajan C Thomas

Introduction:

In the month of July 2024, a huge landslide and flood happened in the Wayanad district in North Kerala, India. During the utter pandemonium, a mother and her little girl were trying to escape, and they came in front of a roaring tusker in the night. They had nothing to do except with folded hands to plead and beg: *njangale onnum cheyyaruthe* (Malayalam for "do not harm us"). It was still pitch dark at 2 a.m. It is no exaggeration that the animal guarded them till the impending dawn. On the other hand, humans in that area used to trap or place crackers inside their fodder and harm the elephants under the guise of protecting their crops.

Once, a group of students in Kerala were asked about their ambition in life, and one boy replied, "veterinary doctor". His rationality was that no relative of a dog or cow will sue a veterinary doctor for incompetent and improper treatment.

I: Deciphering the Theme: "WE BELIEVE IN GOD THE CREATOR ...."

1. *Structure and Aim of the Presentation:*

What is the meaning of the faith affirmation of God as the Creator, not only in relation to humans themselves but also in relation to the non-human world? Who needs whom? Is human existence inevitable for the sustenance of animals and plants, or is it the case that humans depend upon the non-human created order for their existence? Since 1960, a drastic change has skewed the Christian interpretation of the human-nonhuman relationship. Did our concept of God as creator trigger this? These two above-cited incidents indicate the typical undue claim and attitude that humans are superior to the non-human world. This approach reflects our lopsided rationality in relation to the non-human created order. One refuses to accept that the pretext of God as creator for whether humans can exploit the non-human world to their advantage. These two anecdotes compel one to ask the question: '*Do we humans accept the sovereignty and freedom of an almighty God which cuts across all our presuppositions*?' One of our presuppositions is that the creator has endowed us with more rational faculties than the animals. Another is that humans can manipulate the non-human world as per their whims

and fancies. Are humans more intelligent than animals? The matter is in doubt. One may succumb to the statement that the biblical author Job had already said: *"Ask the animal; they will teach you, or the birds in the sky; they will tell you….."* (refer to Job 12:7-25). Any claim or argument that humans as superior to the non-human world is only a chimaera and a mirage. That presupposition has already turned redundant because God is the creator of all seen and unseen things. These incidents compel us to rethink our relationship to nature, to acknowledge that humans have a natural and biological relationship to the non-human world. "WE BELIEVE IN GOD THE CREATOR FATHER ALMIGHTY MAKER OF HEAVENS AND EARTH". This statement was formulated in a different milieu than ours. This paper attempts to examine the meaning and implications of this faith assertion. The primary question is not 'Who is God?' Or 'What is his/her/its name?' But what is this divine Almighty doing in relation to humans and the non-human world?

Firstly, we need to retrieve the biblical ideas of a creator God in relation to some of the basic characteristics of God. Moses asked God, "What is your name?" God did not reveal his name. But replied "*I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE*". God meant that through my actions, you will know who I am. Biblical writers never describe "God-in-isolation" but as "God-in-action" in relation to humans and the environment. One cannot speak of a pure anthropology but only a theological anthropology; not a "cosmology-in-isolation" but a "cosmology-in-relation" to a sustainable world, not a depleted nature. Biblical insights are drawn in the first chapter to validate this presupposition.

Secondly, some exciting leaps have changed the contour of this assertion, though the jump was sporadic and intermittent. A few of them are selected in order to validate the main argument.

Thirdly, one may draw some lessons in relation to some of the contemporary challenges so that we can apply the faith affirmation of God as creator for a more sustainable world.

2. *Presuppositions:*

Any talk on Creator is inextricably related to the Created order. Creator -Created continuum in terms of continuity-discontinuity remains inevitable.

- *Any discussion on God as creator involves a logic of the God-Human-World tripartite relation.*

- *A flux in the biblical hermeneutics since 1980 has changed the warp and woof of our concept of God as Creator, bringing to the surface many submerged ideas.*
- *Though God the Creator is an ancient faith assertion, it has not become obsolete or redundant. Its vibrancy enables us to visualise a better world.*

3. Nicene *Reflection of the Biblical Creator God:*

The Nicene Creed may be reinterpreted in the light of the Creation description as reflected in the book of Genesis and other books. The creation process in *Genesis* develops at three stages: (a) *Creation of the celestial bodies; (b) Creation of the non-human earthly beings; (c) the Creation of human beings.* Of the many features of the creation account, only a few can be highlighted. When the Church Fathers of the 325 Council said **"WE BELIEVE IN GOD THE CREATOR FATHER ALMIGHTY MAKER OF HEAVENS AND EARTH",** it epitomised the following facts. The Creation description of the celestial bodies conveys the following ideas: *(basic ref. Gen. 1:2-19).*

God (Elohim) as Intelligent Designer:

The biblical writers are awestruck as they observe the design and grandeur of the created order (Ps. 8:3, 4; 19:19:1-6; 147:5, 20). All biblical passages, without any ambiguity, assert that the biblical God is the creator God (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 8, 19; 33:6-9; Pro. 8:22-31; Jn. 1:1-3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3).

The Divine Creation Theory presupposes a divine entity creating the universe and all therein. It is also known as *Creationism.* It visualises a supernatural origin, intelligent design, and a purposeful, teleological creation. Creation concepts in the Judeo-Christian traditions affirm and confess some crucial concepts about the being of God, in contrast to many other religions and ideologies, which hold an entirely different view of the nature of God.

"Creatio ex nihilo":

The expression *Creatio ex nihilo* means *Creation out of nothing*. It connotes that God did not need any prior material for creation. We confess that God has created. That is all. It is akin to what science says about the *Big Bang.* Science does not ask the question of how this matter for the bang originated. It is only an assumption that matter existed. Similarly, the church confesses that God created this world out of nothing. The question of what existed prior to it is an illogical question.

The primary difference between the Bible's creation story and those of other religions is the concept of a single, all-powerful God creating the universe "ex nihilo" (out of nothing), whereas many other creation myths involve deities shaping the world from pre-existing materials like an ocean or cosmic egg, or through a more collaborative process with other beings, often including animals or natural elements; additionally, the Bible's story is typically presented as a linear, sequential event over a set period of time, unlike some other narratives which may be more cyclical or symbolic. In the Bible (Genesis), God is the sole creator, speaking the world into existence. The transient nature of created matter has to be underlined. In the Bible, humans are created in God's image and given dominion over the Earth. Other narratives may present humans as emerging from animals or being part of a larger cosmic balance.

Creation as a free act of a Creator God:

Creation as the temporal act of God implies that time began with creation. It is a measurable unit, but an enigma. It is only the creation of our mind. "In the beginning" in Gen. 1:1 and Jn. 1:1 refers to this fact. Time is compared in relation to God's nature. God is *nitschi* (Heb.), *eternal, timeless, everlasting, immortal, perpetual, undying.* The more one thinks about it, the more one enters a labyrinth. St Augustine observed that "*when you ask about time, I don't know anything ; when you do not ask, I know everything*" (Confessions 11). Time is not eternal.

> *The Bible distinguishes b*etween the "temporal" and the "eternal." Paul says that the visible things are "temporal" but unseen things are "eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). In describing God, the psalmist declares: ". . . from everlasting to everlasting, you are God . . ." (Ps. 90:2). Yet, in the same context, of man it is said: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten . . ." (v. 10).

"Time" clearly does not relate to God and man in the same way. Eternity is endless, but time is measured by a "beginning" and an "end." The Bible commences with these words: "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*" (Gen. 1:1). Jesus once said: "*But from the beginning of the creation, male and female made he them*" (Mk. 10:6). Christ said that in some sense there will be an end. In the Parable of the Tares, he said that the "harvest" represented the "end of the world" (Mt. 13:39). Elsewhere, the Lord announced: "He that rejects me, …shall be judged in the last day" (Jn. 12:48). Paul discussed the concept of the future resurrection of the body, which, he affirmed, will occur at the time of the

Lord's "coming" (1 Cor. 15:23). In an epistle to the saints at Corinth, the apostle writes: "*Then comes the end, when he shall deliver the kingdom to God*...). Ultimately, the consummation of time will occur. "Time" is moving towards a goal which will be realised at the time of Christ's return. In that connection, Paul affirms: "Then comes the end when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God..." (1 Cor. 15:24). "The end of the world" is contemplated in terms of Time as Jesus spoke repeatedly about the coming "last day" (Jn. 6:39-40, 44, 54; 12:48); The created universe will "perish" (Heb. 1:11). The elements therein will be "dissolved" (2 Pet. 3:10-11) and "pass away" (Mt. 24:35; Rev. 21:1). All the ravages associated with this sinful environment and earthly suffering will be eliminated (Rev. 7:16-17; 21:4); Physical death, as man's final enemy, will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). Opportunity for Salvation – The door of opportunity for spiritual reconciliation with the Creator will be closed (Mt. 25:10; Heb. 9:27); Deceptive Teaching – The deceptive doctrines that have confused and destroyed souls will be vanquished (Rev. 20:3).

After every creation, God assessed and waited for feedback on the creation process. Goodness *of Creation*: Creation is basically good according to the Bible, whereas many religions consider creation as a mass of damned matter. In the creation description, at least seven times it is said:

"God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

What is good? All that which does not go against the will of God can be called good. They are 'good' because they do not have free will, and all of them operate on a definite principle. Humans are exceptions, which will be entirely different. To caricature, one may say that a fixed physics is possible where a permanent sociology, anthropology, or psychology is impossible. More on it in the following lines.

Creation continua:

Creation does not end with one creative activity. But creation is continuing. Humans participate and share in the Creation. It is neither random nor value-neutral but purposeful; the Creation description of the celestial bodies conveys a message. Don't be afraid of the celestial bodies. They do not control you. But the Lord of Hosts hovers over you. Don't worship these bodies, as a chasm exists between the creator and the created. Remember that God did not need any intermediary or agent to aid in God's creation. He is the sovereign one. The unutterable and ineffable word YHWH conveys all these meanings.

(a) *Creation of the non-human earthly beings (see Gen. 1:20-25);*
(b) *and the creation of human beings.*

Our contention is that the Nicene Fathers did not invent anything on their own. They were only unravelling what the Bible basically holds. The Nicene Creed appropriated some convictions and affirmations on *God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, etc. God as the Creator* is the first and foremost doctrinal assertion to which our attention turns in this paper.

Humans as Imago Dei of a free Creator God:

In many religions, gods are bound to create. In the Bible, love is the motive for God's creation rather than any necessity. The Biblical concept of creation has challenged all theories, such as *dualistic theory, Emanation Theory, Evolution theory, etc. Emanation theory* envisions a ladder of hierarchical structure in which higher levels influence the lower nature. *Evolution theory* advocates the principles of natural selection, survival of the fittest, genetic variation, and speciation from a common ancestor. It proposes that the universe has emanated from an eternal, unchanging source of unity.

Gen. 1:27 says: "Let *us make them in our own image*". It is suggestive that it does not say *"Let me make".* As a New Testament church, we interpret that creation is the free act of a Triune God; one may speak of an act of *ex Triniatae vs. Creation by a Monad.* In the New Testament, it is the triune God who created the universe, not the Father alone. (cf. Jn. 1: ; Col.). The church is concerned not only about creation but also recreation and reformation. A few creation stories in other faith systems claim that gods created humans to serve them and to be their slaves. Judaeo-Christian interpretation, on the contrary, asserts the freedom of humans. "*God created humans in his own image"* (Gn. 1:27). Here, image means freedom to choose between 'to be or not to be,' to choose good or evil, freedom of will to decide, not merely a pawn in the hands of *Haimermene Morai or Fates, the* Greek gods of Fate. Only a free God can create free humans. God in *Genesis* blew his breath only into the nostrils of the humans (Gen. 2:7), assuring a divine continuity and eternity of the soul compared to other organisms.

Creation as Gender Equality

Among all other created species, sex is distinguished (male-female), but gender difference (man-woman) is maintained in biblical accounts. It means that human creation goes beyond any sexual definition, and the

two remain in mutual support and share the same responsibility. The creation process conveys the idea that God is aware of the uniqueness of humans. The Supreme Divine needed only sound waves to command the creation of the celestial bodies. In creating the animal kingdom, he blessed and 'spoke' to them (Gen. 1:22) and told them to multiply. Thus, God gave a biological nature to all of them, developing a 'pet-like' nature for them.

However, in the creation of humans, there were some key "technical" nuances. He could have said: "*Let there be a man; let there be a woman*''. If so, the Intelligent Designer knew that humans themselves would exercise a "bless the" freedom, and they would be obstinate and recalcitrant. Some of the biblical words regarding human nature in relation to the animal kingdom are very suggestive. After the creation of humans, God did not say 'good', God did not 'bless'. God did not 'feel sorry' for any of his creations except humans (Gen. 6:6; see 6:5-7). When He created them, they were 'good'; but in their *imago dei*, the Creator knew the potential danger of sin.

4. *Inevitability of the Nicene Creed:*

Was the Nicene Creed an exigency of some pedantic theologians? No. Was it inevitable? Yes, as far as Christian faith was concerned, when the whole Bible was under editing (canonisation) even in AD 325. So, the Nicene Creed became the yardstick for interpreting faith and to ward off all doctrinal contaminations. "*We believe in God the Creator*" was formulated in the background of a certain socio-political milieu.

Only the first two clauses of the present *Nicene Creed* (*God the Son,* but not on *God the Holy Spirit*) were shaped in A.D. 325 as part of Christian confession. God as Creator was not an exclusive theological innovation of the Christian Church. The church fathers who gathered in A.D. 325 had only appropriated and improvised the existing Hebrew faith. It reveals the Christian identity and theological stance in relation to Hebrew faith and in opposition to many pagan religions. The royal patronage, which accelerated the formation, depended on the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) rather than the New Testament corpus for any idea of God as Creator. Some of the Hebrew presuppositions of God as Creator are so crucial and decisive for Christian theology. Some of them may be jotted as follows.

For the early church, doctrinal formulations were not a luxury but a matter of life and death during heresies and heterodoxies. The Nicene

Creed was formulated as a matter of doxological, apologetic, and didactic tasks. The original creed was very simple: *Iesus Kurios (Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour)*, which was the faith declaration of the newly baptised at the time of baptism. The present *Nicene Creed*, properly called the *Niceo-Constantinople Creed*, is a later expansion during AD 325-381. The faith of the Church had to be guarded against all lopsided and partial theological and biblical assertions. It was formulated in the light of heterodoxies such as Arianism, Apollinarianism, etc. More than the theological issues, there were other polity matters and non-doctrinal factors which triggered such formulations.

With the formulation of this creed, the Church defined and set the parameters of Orthodoxy—heterodoxy/heresy. The 325 Council categorically declared that God the Father has created this world. Thereby, the early Church Fathers reiterated what the biblical faith had already established. A personal God is the cause of this good world, and he created it *ex nihilo* through his word. Nicaea was, in fact ,a rejection of all existing pagan concepts of creator God, and it considers creation as good in relation to the non-human world. The biblical background of the theme has already been unearthed. Now, the task is to spot some of the important junctions in the Christian circles where the theme has been highlighted.

II: Some Historical Leaps of the Theme "WE BELIEVE IN … CREATOR ...."

One cannot claim that the church consciously and consistently developed this Nicene theme of a Creator *God*. Though the church did not reject it, its inclination waxed and waned. *Some Perspectival Shifts after 1980*:

Deciphering Nature, Environment, Eco-system:

The Bible's perspective on nature and the environment is that God created the world and entrusted it to humans to care for and protect: *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15); "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps. 24:1); "Through Jesus, all things were made" ; "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures"; "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps. 104:24-25)*.

Distinguishing Temperature, Weather and Climate Change:

In traditional meteorology, one was satisfied with the daily, monthly, annual cycles of weather, atmospheric pressure, wind speed, daily

temperature, etc. As human intervention and manipulation of the earthly resources increased, new experiments revealed either aridness, or heavy torrents, deluge, landslides, or an increase in CO2. Hidden dangers of climate change began to be highlighted after 1980.

***From Anthropological to Anthropocene*:**

Anthropocene is a term which denotes the current geological era when human activity has had a significant impact on the Earth's climate and ecosystems. *Anthropological* connotes humans at the winning end, as champions and harbingers in the rat race of development and progress, whereas *Anthropocene* indicates the impending danger.

Linking Ecology to Economy and Gender:

The concept of God as the creator gave impetus to a shift to a new formula of *Ecology-Economy - Gender.*

Ecumenical Inclination*: *towards "… God the Creator…."

There is no time in the history of the Church when it rejected the role of the created order completely. The best example is the contour of our theological education before 1975. God the creator was a matter of discussion confined to a few paragraphs. Implications of this concept were reflected in the concern for the survival of planet Earth that had been growing in secular circles during the 1970s. Slowly, this new theme found space in the World Council of Churches (WCC) discussions and it encouraged churches to make public commitments and act on threats to life. In the 1970s, the WCC began to recognise the nexus among justice, peace, and ecological sustainability. The WCC invited churches to view their journey of faith as a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

Out of that commitment, the World Council of Churches convened a conference in 1979 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on "*The Contribution of Faith, Science, and Technology in the Struggle for a Just, Participatory, and Sustainable Society*". Leading scientific experts and theologians made a report. *The Club of Rome* in 1972, the influential book ***Only One Earth: The Care and*** *Maintenance of a Small Planet*, and the concept of "sustainable development" by Barbara Ward and Renee Dubois, the founding of the *International Institute for Environment and Development* (IIED), reminded us of the alarming and ticking ecological danger caused by human intervention. In 1990, the WCC held a World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The *Justice, Peace, and*

the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) movement since the 1970s. Since 1991, the WCC has focused on articulating a "theology of life".

A few of the theologians of the universal church are highlighted for their interest in the theme of God as creator in relation to the environment.

St Ephrem the Syrian Poet:

St Ephrem the Syrian, a teacher in the Syriac theological tradition, made use of nature-based imagery in his poetry. In his sermon on the Cross of Christ, St Ephrem uses the image of a tree to describe how mankind crossed over from death to life. He says that the bitter branch of the ancient tree was replaced by a sweet young shoot, which represents the Lord. In his *Hymns on the Nativity*, St Ephrem describes how the sun gave longer light in the month of Nisan, overcoming darkness and proclaiming the victory of the first-born. He drew on images from everyday life, such as putting on and taking off clothes and looking into a mirror, to describe four main stages. For Ephrem, God created the first man, Adam, for a specific purpose (Mathews, Edward and Amar, Joseph. "Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis…" in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. Kathleen McVey, 1994). The *Peshitta* Bible refers to this as the "fashioning" of Adam. Unlike the other creatures who came alive at the voice of God, Adam was specially crafted and given honours like authority to rule, a "garment of glory", and intelligence to perceive God's majesty. Adam and Eve cast off their "garment of glory" when they trusted the deceit of the serpent. They tried to gain mastery of things beyond the limits placed by God. They set aside their God-given intellect to follow the logic of the serpent (Gen. 3:1-5).

St Gregory of Nyssa (ca.335-395) and other Cappadocian Fathers:

The Orthodox theologians catch hold of the logic reflected in the Book of Genesis. Though the biblical authors start with the creation of celestial bodies and extra-terrestrial entities, they do not dwell on that theme but move to temporal and tangible realities like the creation of the Earth and all that is therein. In this vein, Nyssa takes the parable of the ninety-nine intact sheep and compares it to the celestial bodies, and the lost one is the replica of the lost world, which needs redemption. Among the trio of the Cappadocian Fathers, St Gregory of Nyssa discussed the creation more meticulously. Constraints of space allow only three ideas of Nyssa to be mentioned. (For details see Paulos Mar Gregorios, Öusia *and Energia,* in Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence**,** (1988), pp. 110-123.) He argues that humans cannot know God in his *ousia* (as-it-is) but only

his works (energia). The actions of God are the only means to know God, as a spatial distance (*diastema*) exists between God and the created.

St Francis of Assisi: relating to Creatures as Brothers and Sisters

St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) is known as the Catholic *Patron Saint of Pets and Animals*, *and the Environment*. Many pet owners pray to him to bless their pets. He treated all creatures as equals, and in his interactions with animals. As a young man, Francis sought inner peace, abandoning churches and lonely places, and found solace in relation to flowers, tumbled down walls, and bird song. Francis found the solitude he needed to hear his deepest yearnings. Gradually, St Francis realised that he was truly a brother to the sun, moon, stars, fire, and water, and to the whole cosmos. Expressing his attitudes through a simple and peaceful lifestyle, Francis modelled an ecological consciousness, a spiritual and mystical vision of all creatures as brother and sister having one source in God, the Creator and Father of all. Francis made this discovery through prayer and a simple but sincere interaction with other people and with nature. He prayed: "*Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun"*. St Francis preached that all creatures are brothers and sisters under God, and that humans and other creatures should be treated as equals. He told interesting stories about birds, fish, and rabbits in his sermons.

Pope Francis on Laudate Deum (2021):

Laudate Deum is an *Encyclical and Apostolic Exhortation* by Pope Francis on the Climate Crisis. "Praise God for all his creatures" is the quintessence of this well-written document, which has 73 paragraphs. It identifies that humans have triggered this crisis, and an indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources is going on. For this reason, we are now unable to halt the enormous damage we have caused. It is ticking, and we should stop this irreparable destruction. It reminds us that everything that exists ceases to be a gift for which we should be thankful, and we should esteem and cherish it. Instead of becoming slaves and prey to any caprice of the human mind and its capacities, we must recognise ourselves as a part of nature. Human beings are currently the only seemingly extraneous entity, a foreign element capable of harming the environment. Human life, intelligence, and freedom must be re-envisioned as elements of nature that enrich our planet, part of its internal workings, and its equilibrium.

It calls for a healthy ecology as a result of interaction between human beings, in which we recognise that our power and progress are beginning

to boomerang on us. It is a clarion call for a new ethical guide by which we will be guided. It analyses the hoax of international politics in executing decisions made at conferences. It seems to run with the hare and hunt with the hound. Humanity needs an ethics for a better world. Since humans are the culprits, they must put themselves in reverse gear in order to extenuate the destruction of the environment. We barely have time to prevent even more tragic damage. We should have sound ethics, culture, and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.

***Jürgen Moltmann* (1920-2024)**

Jürgen Moltmann, a German Protestant theologian, developed a complex doctrine of creation that includes the following ideas. He believed that creation is a continuous process, with three parts: *original creation, continuous creation, and new creation.* He linked creation and eschatology as interdependent, and argued that the goal of history is a panentheism where God is in everything and everything is in God. It was a middle ground between pantheism and a God who is radically separate from creation. For him, the Sabbath is central to the doctrine of creation, and the fact that this doctrine should culminate in the celebration of the Sabbath reinforces the link between the two. He believed that God's love for all creation is real and that theology should be a living experience of God's love breaking into the suffering and salvation of all creation. He rejected the idea that evolution is a beautiful and grace-filled reality, believing that it has too many victims and cannot exhaust God's aim for creation. Moltmann suggested Evolution as God's Continuous Creation - "Creation" refers to the temporal and eternal scope of the cosmos, including its eschatological redemption. His cosmology, therefore, defines God not according to nature (i.e., the way things are) but rather according to creation (the eschatological end of nature). The above observations represent the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant concerns over the Damocles' sword hanging over the head of humanity, viz., the worsening environmental destruction. In tandem with this, six questions may be raised as the Nicene Creed is more than a doctrinal treatise. *Nicea* motivates us to reconceptualise the assertion of God the Creator. That is what we attempt in the next chapter.

III: Application of "… God the Creator…":

The affirmation, *"… God the Creator***…"** should be applied to a few quivering and pulsating vulnerable areas.

(i) Is God the Creator, at the end of the rope?

Are we, humans, playing God in an era of AI? Are we ousting God the Creator in the age of IVF? Ian Wilmut pioneered the SCNT (Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer) technique in biological bodies to create exact genetic replicas. Thus, he cloned a sheep called 'Dolly'. He practically achieved what Mary Shelley spoke about in the classic tale of Victor Frankenstein's experiment to create life (cf. *Frankenstein* (1818); or Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), visualising genetically engineered humans, or H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896)). Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself.

The God of *Genesis* was, in essence, saying to man and woman that sperm and eggs are yours, but life is mine. He gave this breath to humans (Gn. 2:7), thus assuring an exclusive continuity between God and humans. But experiments are today being conducted to short-circuit God in this creation process of giving life. Probably, during the coming years, this may turn into a possibility. But the question is regarding the commercial interest of such inventions (e.g. the Western world has accused China of creating some absolute muffs with no IQ but with strong muscles to toil in their Sisyphean task and gruelling ordeal or mocking and lampooning the Chinese). Are the inventions equitable, just and sustainable?

(ii) Role of God the Son:

The Pauline contention is that Jesus Christ is the harbinger of New Humanity, the prototype of redeemed humanity. Any concept of God cannot be a matter of faith in the bygone millennia, but the role of Christ in creating a new humanity remains crucial in a situation where humanhood is jeopardised through poverty, injustice, avarice for money, xenophobia, bigotry, and so forth. This aspect is highlighted by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and other liberation theologians who plead for a new humanity considering Jesus Christ as its archetype.

(iii) Resuscitation of our doxological task:

According to the principle of *"Lex credenti, lex orandi, lex vivendi" (we confess what we believe, we practice what we confess*). A Christian is challenged in the Sunday corporate worship. That is the definition of

worship, and it culminated in the Holy Qurbana (Eucharist) of the church. Only our true worship can assure us of the creatorship of God.

Greening of the church and its campus is a practical thing. The impact of harvest festivals has shrunk in this computer age where agriculture is no longer a means of livelihood. The traditional way of that festival may be impossible. So, in some of the churches, people buy a small portion of vegetables, eggs, or live chickens from the market and bring them for auction during the harvest festival. The point is to maintain a biological link between humans and the non-human world.

(iv) Feminist Inclination of Nicea:

The New Testament pattern is unique, contrary to the Hebrew practice of eliminating the names of women from any account and counting. *Matthew and Luke* mention the names of women in the genealogical account. The Nicaean approach is akin to it. It mentions the one and only name of Virgin Mary, the archetype of women and the second Eve. Let us assert that it is the extension of a New Testament vision that God has no partiality or preference for men.

(v) A New Vision and the Fourth Dimension of the Human Body:

In the contemporary world, at least seven perspectives of the human body can be identified: *"Soma seema" of the Ancient Greeks:*

The Greeks believed and taught that the human body is a cage in which the golden bird called soul remains in captivity. For them, the body was a tomb, and death is the exit.

- *Body as a machine*: Since William Harvey, who discovered the phenomenon of blood circulation in 1628, and Christian Bernard in 1967, December 3, told us that the human body has a mechanical rhythm and any part can be pulled out or any part can be replaced.
- *Human Body is a commodity:* The world of manicure, pedicure, beauty pageants, beauty contests, and fashion vogues conveys the message that the body can be decorated, festooned, and ornamented.
- *Human Body is for 'Gaze' and sale:* Pattaya, Mekong, Amsterdam, Las Vegas, and other places are only a few places among many spots where human flesh can be bought for pleasure.

- *"My Body is Mine":* Virulent feminist studies claim that "I, the woman, would decide what to do with my body. It is not the man who decides whether and when his wife would get pregnant".
- *Human Body is for Pleasure:* Our society in Kerala is no more traditional in keeping the old value system. Premarital sex is not uncommon among schoolchildren. The new pleasure principle pressurises the younger generation. Paedophilia is another consequence of this approach.

It is in this context that we think of the human body biblically. In biblical terms, one may make the following observations regarding varied dimensions of the human body:

- The sinless, ethereal body created by God in the Garden of Eden;
- The fallen body in Eden;
- The Incarnated body of Jesus Christ;
- The deformed body of Christ on the cross, which saved our body from corruptibility;
- Resurrected body of Christ, which attained a fourth dimension (Jn. 20:19. Jesus entering a closed room);
- The body which one leaves in this world;
- Human body to rise in glory.

All these derivations take their cue from our basic assertion: "God is our creator".

Conclusion

- The Bible does endorse and guard the final sovereignty of God.
- We have gathered as CATS-X participants, and we are at the threshold of the 1700th Anniversary of the Nicene Council and the Creed. A vista of insights is open before the young theological novices in an ecumenical vision to fortify the theological edifice in Asia.
- We are hooked at the individual level, at the parish, and global levels to engage in concrete actions "to make this world a better place to live in," as Michael Jackson has sung.

This presentation was intended to identify the various zones of general agreement and disagreement within the subcategories present in different discussions on the theme of God as Creator in particular and Creation Theology in general, in order to clearly isolate the areas that require further research.

Towards an Inclusive Church with Shared Commitment to Unity

Suryaningsi Mila

Introduction

The church does not exist in a vacuum but rather in the context of social struggle. The church exists amidst religious diversity, despite many difficulties and unrest. In the Indonesian context, the church is present amid religious plurality, with various challenges and turmoil faced. One issue is the existence of extremist and intolerant factions within some religious communities that decry pluralism. This group targets the Christian community as well as other minority religious groups.[1]

The rise in radicalism, discrimination, and religious intolerance is a threat to religious diversity. The Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace recorded 329 cases of violations of religious freedom in 2023. Of these 329 cases, 114 cases were committed by state actors and 215 cases by non-state actors. The disruption of worship places is one of the issues the Setara Institute faces. Throughout 2023, 65 cases of rejection of the establishment of places of worship were found, consisting of 40 cases of rejection of the establishment of churches, 17 cases of prohibitions on the establishment of mosques, 5 prohibitions on the establishment of temples, and 3 cases involving Viharas.[2] In May 2024, there was another case of discrimination and violence based on religion, namely the assault on Catholic students who were praying the Rosary in a rented house in the South Tangerang area. The prohibition of worship was accompanied by lawless actions by the head of the Neighbourhood Unit, which included physical and verbal assault.[3] Another recent case occurred in September 2024, when a State Civil Apparatus barred and threatened Christian neighbours who were worshipping. This case became viral on social media.[4]

In the face of a crisis of religious plurality and violation of religious freedom, Indonesian churches play a prophetic role by promoting interfaith dialogue and collaboration. In terms of the church's role, research by Thomas Pentury and Penti Novri Inda Lumintang demonstrates the connection between Christian teachings and Pancasila ideology, which is a force for promoting religious moderation. According to Pentury and Lumintang, Christian teachings and Pancasila ideology share the same goal: to present a just, successful, and peaceful life together. Pentury and Lumintang then proposed that churches in Indonesia, through the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, continue to strive for the presence

of an inclusive Christian community that is deeply rooted in its Christian identity but is aware of the reality of diversity as a shared identity.[5]

Suriawan's research highlights the challenges and opportunities of the church's mission amid religious plurality by criticising the practice of evangelistic missions for Christianisation. He suggests that the church can transform the traditional mission paradigm into a transformative mission by doing the following three things: (1) actively participating in the struggle for human values and the integrity of creation; (2) bearing witness to the kingdom of God as it is manifested in the world; and (3) creating a mission of reconciliation.[6]

In response to the religious freedom issue, Agustina Samosir et al., through postcolonial analysis, shared the critical voice toward various cases of discrimination and violence against Christian communities in specific regions, such as the congregations of GKI Taman Yasmin and HKBP Filadelfia Bogor. Indeed, this is one of the many cases of the violation of religious freedom experienced by church members. In Samosir's observation, et al., solidarity among Christians is still minimal. As a result, Christian communities often struggle alone to obtain the right to religious freedom. Based on a postcolonial analysis, Samosir et al. propose a new approach to understanding conflict, especially between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia, through a practical spirituality that encourages introspection and the application of religious values in daily interactions.[7] Previous studies have focused more on discussions at the level of theoretical discourse and case studies that provide recommendations on the urgency of interfaith dialogue in the Indonesian context. Based on recommendations from several previous studies, this study seeks to find out the active role of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (CCI) as an ecumenical umbrella in building dialogical and inclusive relations with other religious communities in Indonesia. In this study, I will use library research methodologies to frame a dialogical and inclusive church through the study of literature and the document of the church unity of CCI in 2019-2024.

Aside from that, I also conduct interviews with CCI leaders who are represented by the general secretary to find out the role and challenges as well in creating a dialogical and inclusive church in the face of religious diversity.[8]

The Basis for Developing Interfaith Friendship and Hospitality

In this section, I will discuss several concepts about the ecclesiology of communion and interfaith friendship as a framework to understand the prophetic role of the church in a religious plurality context. Bernd Jochen Hilberath, a systematic theology scholar, offers communicative theology

as a method for developing social interactions and relations based on God's self-communication. Reflecting on the communicative nature of God, the church must play a role in building communicative theology through dialogue and conversation between groups. Communication theology comes from the words communio and communication, which mean working together, and living and sharing with others in a fellowship. God actively opens up to mankind and all of His creations, forming relationships with them, and this is where communicative theology originates. God has been incarnated as a human in the person of Jesus Christ and has established a relationship and friendship with humans.[9]

Hilberath emphasises the idea of communion ecclesiology, which is the existence of a church that is willing to engage in conversation and life-sharing. Theologically speaking, a communicative community and communion are closely related. In this situation, the church is expected to interact with other religious groups in the spirit of communion, which is unity and solidarity. Growing in the spirit of community, the church and Christian community will be able to fight for peace, justice, and respect for creation for the continuity and sustainability of life. An ecclesiology of communion is a reflection of communicative theology that continues to strive for communication and dialogue for the common good. Within this framework, the church has been involved in the ecumenical movement, which has an impact on interfaith cooperation.[10] The ecclesiology of communion becomes the basis for the development of interfaith dialogue. A church that practices dialogue fulfils its mission to have cordial relationships with people of different religions.

The ecclesiology of communion is inseparable from the theology of interfaith friendship and hospitality. Joas Adi Prasetyo and Nindyo Sasongko, Indonesian Christian theologians, proposed the theme of friendship by giving a new meaning to the doctrine of the Trinity with the idea of trinitarian friendship. The friendship theology presented here is an attempt to invite others into the circle of friendship. Referring to the trinitarian perspective, Christians are challenged to create companion space-making that reflects on Trinity relationships and all who live together in love. One interesting theological term that is raised here is perichoresis, which means "moving around the space", which involves the universe, including human beings from various backgrounds. The trinitarian concept is an invitation for other groups to be in the same rhythm to engage in a mission that is mutually reviving and liberating.[11] The idea of the ecclesiology of communion and interfaith friendship shared a progressive Christian mission based on an inclusive spirituality that encourages Christians to cross borders and enter diverse realities with Christian values that are conditional on the values of kindness, hospitality, and acceptance of others.

To be an open church, one should practice hospitality. Jody B. Fleming highlights the importance of hospitality in the work of mission, in which the church is sent to spread the good news that often crosses cultural and social boundaries. This means that Christians must be sensitive to the needs of others and provide a level of hospitality to others as a means of offering respect and humbly entering their world. Hospitality is grounded in generously giving to others and receiving the blessings they offer in return.[12] Hospitality is connected to spiritual generosity that assists Christians in accomplishing the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, through the practice of hospitality in the process of dialogue and encounter with others from different cultural, racial, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds. Sharing hospitality and generosity with other groups will be the entry point in promoting and maintaining peace in a diverse society.

Indeed, interreligious encounters become learning spaces that enrich views and prepare religious communities to embrace others by living the spirituality of generosity. The statement of Adiprasetya emphasises the openness of the church to an embracing, liberating, and transformative mission as the essence of being a church community in a pluralistic context. The mission of the church, which reflects on open ecclesiology, becomes one of the references to develop a church that crosses the boundaries of dogma and tradition and practices a spirituality of generosity and friendship.

According to Amos Yong, a progressive Pentecostal theologian, hospitality is not just an idea but a practice of life in interpersonal relationships. For Yong, hospitality does not require an aspect of orthodoxy or understanding of Christian teachings, but requires an aspect of orthopathy or affection of the heart, feelings, and whole life. In principle, hospitality includes feelings, including fragility, in building relationships with other religious communities. Furthermore, Yong proposes a theological argument that the Triune God, namely God the Father, has sent His Son to incarnate as a human and pour out His Spirit upon humans. For that, Christians who are followers of Christ who have been filled with the Holy Spirit must embrace the mission of orthopathic hospitality, namely that which involves the aspect of affection in interfaith relations.[13]

Yong suggests that in interfaith relations, it is important to build a foundation for a hospitality mission based on a theology of affection and feeling, or the orthopathic aspect. The orthopathic perspective is one of Yong's offerings for interfaith encounters and interfaith dialogue. The orthopathic approach becomes the basis for interfaith hospitality, where the Christian community not only accepts and hosts other religious communities but is also willing to be a guest hosted by other religions.

Here, there is a reciprocal relationship and mutual need to live together amidst religious diversity. The orthopathic approach in interfaith relations encourages empathy and acceptance of differences. The orthopathic hospitality encourages the Christian community to open itself up and allow other religious communities to become friends or brothers through a life of mutual fulfilment and sharing. The orthopathic hospitality mission does not aim to convert people of other religions to Christianity but aims to establish a friendly relationship full of empathy and acceptance. The practice of orthopathic hospitality emphasises more on the feelings that drive orthopraxis.[14]

The Communion Churches in Indonesia, within religious diversity, embody the doctrine of Ecclesiology Communion, which promotes amicable connections and the practice of interfaith hospitality. The Document on the Unity of the Church of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia 2019–2024 declares the churches' commitment to ecclesiology communion, the mission of friendship and hospitality. The practice of tolerance and peace amongst religions, as well as attempts at interfaith interaction, are reflections of ecclesiological communion. The document of the unity of the church highlights that Indonesian churches are theologically centred on religious plurality or diversity. Theologically speaking, Indonesian churches acknowledge that religious diversity is a gift from God that must be celebrated. Religious diversity requires openness and acceptance towards one another. In this context, Indonesian churches are called to articulate their calling to become an inclusive and dialogical community. This means that the church has an active role in initiating and developing the mission of dialogue without abandoning its identity. The church's inclusive stance, which embraces and mingles with others while clinging to its truth, is the foundation of a dialogical mission.[15]

The reality of religious diversity also motivates churches to reinterpret their mission statement, which now emphasises cooperation and communication rather than conversion to Christianity, to address a range of socio-ecological issues. In this situation, the church must share the good news of the gospel—that is, the good news that is filled with justice, love, truth, and peace—with people of all theological backgrounds. The mission of the church amidst religious diversity culminates in acceptance of diversity, harmony, peace between religions, and recognition of religious freedom. The document of church unity serves as a guide for churches in Indonesia to carry out a dialogical and inclusive mission and service amidst religious diversity.

Becoming a Dialogical and Inclusive Communion of Churches in Indonesia

Marianne Moyaert, an expert in the theology of religions, in her writing on Interfaith Dialogue, emphasises the urgency of dialogue in the context

of religious plurality. The everyday existence of individuals from different religions in contemporary society, who coexist and engage in social settings in the workplace, neighbourhood, and other public areas, embodies the reality of religious diversity**.** In this context, each religious group can learn from the others to live side by side peacefully. According to Moyaert, the context of religious diversity is a good space for each religious community to get to know the existence of others and learn about the spiritual and moral values shown by other communities. Moyaert contends that religious diversity creates an excellent environment in which members of different religious communities can learn about each other's existence as well as the moral and spiritual principles they uphold. According to Moyaert, every religion possesses vitality, or the capacity to exist, grow, or progress. Put more simply, the lessons of life are taught in all religions. Because of this, interfaith gatherings need to be based on the moral principles that sustain one another.[16]

Moyaert distinguished five categories of interfaith discourse that had been conducted out of the several movements for interfaith communication that the Christian community had started:

1. The Dialogue of Life.
   The dialogue of life is a process of dialogue that takes place in informal spaces and day-to-day settings where individuals of all religions come together to develop connections of love and unity. This type of dialogue is more natural since it happens in daily life rather than being practised in the name of religious organisations. Through the dialogue of life, everyone can enrich each other and learn from each person's way of life according to the teachings of their respective religion. Within interfaith social circles, religious people encourage, care for, and share goodwill. This is a reflection of life's conversations.

2. The Dialogue of Action takes place when all religious communities work together to take concrete steps towards cooperative participation in justice, humanitarian, development, and liberation movements that benefit all of humankind. The dialogue of action occurs through collaboration from all communities across religions in overcoming various social and humanitarian problems such as poverty, forced migration, violence, environmental crises, and other problems. The dialogue of action aims to build solidarity among communities across religions and an awareness of shared responsibility for various social and humanitarian problems.

3. Theological Dialogue refers to discussions and exchanges between adherents of various religions concerning the interpretation of

sacred texts, the teachings of the Trinity, incarnation, salvation, and other religious doctrines. The goal of theological conversation is to improve comprehension of other religions' teachings while avoiding incorrect assessments, including assessments of those doctrines. Through interactions with the truth found in other faiths, theological discussion also creates a space where people of different religions can comprehend religion's truths.

4. Spiritual dialogue or dialogue of experience is a meeting space to learn about the spiritual richness in each religion through prayer and meditation activities. In the meeting of other religious spiritual experiences, each religious person will further deepen their religious spirituality. This meeting space also creates interfaith friendships. Spiritual dialogue aims to enhance the spiritual experience of a religious community through encounters with the spiritual experiences of other religions. In this way, each religious person can make the spiritual experience of a religion a shared experience.

5. Diplomatic dialogue is an effort by religious leaders to create peace among people of different religions. In this context, religious leaders build a commitment to meet, join hands, and accept each other with full friendliness.

In developing interfaith relations, the Communion Churches in Indonesia have practised dialogue of action, theological dialogue, and diplomatic dialogues while also strengthening dialogue of life and spiritual dialogue. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia places interreligious relations as a transversal issue that is working to foster interfaith dialogue. This means that all activities and initiatives of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia always touch on interfaith concerns. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia is the point of contact for churches nationally as well as the point of contact for churches with other religious communities.

According to an interview with Rev. Jack Manuputy, Secretary General of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, the link between religions, including grassroots advocacy and community network strengthening, is the primary tenet of the interfaith programme. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia exhorts all of its member churches to foster interdenominational and interreligious collaboration in addressing a range of social and humanitarian concerns as well as ecological issues. Examples of these include mitigating the effects of disasters, collaborating to address environmental issues, and addressing violence and other issues. Due to its active involvement in promoting ecological justice and the sustainability of life for Indigenous people groups with their traditional

wisdom values, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia holds the position of chairman of the interfaith rainforest initiative organisation. As part of the interfaith rainforest initiative organisation, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia has a prophetic role in strengthening moral values that support the creation of ecological justice.

The Communion of Churches in Indonesia is also actively developing interfaith activities, such as capacity building at grassroots levels, namely becoming facilitators and mediators of harmony. This can be seen through the interfaith women's movement in interfaith paralegal activities, and the Youth community that brings young people from different religions to learn to increase their capacity in managing diversity at the grassroots level. In addition, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia also provides community assistance at community bases, such as network strengthening assistance to strengthen work at the community base through training of facilitators and mediators who address environmental issues, such as agrarian conflicts.

Regarding the issue of intolerance and religious freedom, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia has initiated the establishment of an interfaith institution that is concerned with religious harmony. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia not only initiates dialogue and advocacy at the grassroots level but also actively moves to encourage policy changes that support the creation of a harmonious, peaceful, and prosperous society. To bring about interfaith peace, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia joins hands with various organisations that are concerned with interfaith issues. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia promotes interfaith relations at the base level and prioritises mapping high-tension regions in Indonesia, including West Sumatra, West Java, and numerous other regions.

In its advocacy efforts, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia also uses resources or interfaith movement role models as facilitators on many interfaith programmes. Besides, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia also continues to socialise and raise awareness about harmony and tolerance in other areas of Indonesia to prevent violent conflict.

In responding to cases of violations of religious freedom, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia also makes litigation efforts by further strengthening the harmony approach. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia is aware that the legal process is time-consuming. However, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia frequently faces criticism from its member churches, who typically advocate for legal actions or litigation in cases of intolerance and religious freedom abuses as criminal cases.

In various efforts for dialogue and strengthening relations between religions, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia is facing internal challenges from Christian groups, namely the exclusive attitude of some member churches that are more focused on evangelism for Christianisation amidst religious diversity. In addition, the communion of churches in Indonesia is also facing threats from radical Christian groups that are anti-diversity. Concerning this issue, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia is aware of the presence of various theological views of each church denomination regarding the Bible and its church doctrines, as well as their views on other religions that are considered as objects of evangelism. Dealing with this issue, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia consistently carries out socialisation and awareness among member churches to read the Bible using interfaith perspectives.

The Communion of Churches in Indonesia persists in promoting inclusivity and tolerance among all religious groups. To preserve religious harmony, the Indonesian Communion of Churches also actively engages in all forms of dialogue, such as dialogue of life, dialogue of action, theological dialogue, spiritual dialogue, and diplomatic dialogue. Numerous dialogue programmes seek to manage and avoid confrontations. Dialogue between religious leaders does not necessarily occur in formal places but also in informal domains such as interfaith music, namely arts and cultural events, by inviting the engagement of interfaith leaders.

Interfaith Dialogue and Identity Vulnerability

Moyaert defines dialogue as a process of discovering the truth and wisdom found in various religious traditions. Interfaith dialogue can function as a space for equal encounters when everyone can accept and celebrate differences. There is a thin line between being open and being susceptible to losing one's identity. Dialogue does not aim to eliminate one's identity but to create a fellowship of identities without having to lose each other's identities. It means one group must practice openness while maintaining boundaries. Through dialogue, each religious community needs to go beyond the boundaries of its tradition to encounter religious traditions and experiences, but must return to its religious tradition to have a reflection.[17]

According to Moyaert, dialogue does not aim to eliminate one's identity but to strengthen one's identity through the process of learning from others. In the space of encounters with other religions, there is an exchange of values, experiences, and religious views.

In addition to commitment, dialogue also requires humility to accept and acknowledge other truths outside the truth of the religion one adheres

to. Commitment and humility are part of the hermeneutics of openness, which emphasises openness and willingness to accept others in the circle of friendship without having to feel threatened by the presence of others.[18] Moyaert suggests that openness and hospitality in the dialogue process need to be criticised because they are vulnerable to issues of identity tension. The dialogue process is an exchange of meanings, values, and views that mutually enrich each other. At the same time, there are also questions about self-identity, for example, between one truth and another truth. Identity tensions can cause identity fragility if not bridged by openness and respect for strangers as something different in their uniqueness, but as part of themselves.[19] Moyaert's perspective on dialogue brings to mind the importance of awareness of the fragility of identity in the process of dialogue. Therefore, every religious community needs to carry out dialogue as a process of learning from others to strengthen their religious identity. Dialogue must take place in commitment and humility to learn from each other and enrich each other in a process that could be called a hermeneutics of openness as a way to begin to understand others without having to lose one's identity.

Conclusion

Churches in Indonesia, through the umbrella of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, have been on a journey to become a dialogical and inclusive church through a shared commitment as stated in the 2019-2024 church unity document. Furthermore, various interfaith programmes of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia have demonstrated their prophetic role to become agents of interfaith dialogue and peace. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia has lived its calling as a medium of God's mission by living an ecclesiology of communion through a mission of friendship and an orthoptic hospitality mission through interfaith dialogue and cooperation. The prophetic role of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia amid diversity is also seen through its active involvement in advocacy on interreligious issues. In addition, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia has actively developed a dialogue of life, dialogue of action, theological and spiritual dialogue, and diplomatic dialogue to build peaceful coexistence between people hailing from different faith traditions.

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Embracing Unity in Parish Ministry in Local Context

Joohong Kim

Introduction

In August 2008, North Avon Presbyterian Parish and Shirley Methodist Church covenanted to work together for mission and ministry, from which Crossway Community Church was newly formed. Having confirmed that the parent churches' reserved position on creating a new union parish, the Crossway congregations had to maintain the *status quo* as one church with two congregations, two legal entities, and two traditions. This is the outcome of a case study carried out on the interdenominational ministry and mission of Crossway Community Church that incorporates St Columba Presbyterian Church and Shirley Methodist Church, to identify guiding principles of decision-making and to discover peculiar ministry patterns.

Two Places of One Mission

Shirley Church started its life as one of five preaching places within the Christchurch area in 1860. After they made two shifts in response to the increased membership along with the growing settlement, the building was erected at the east corner of New Brighton Road and North Avon Parade, and the Opening Service of the new church was held in March 1919. Shirley Church was not only a sign of growth and expansion of the church in the district but also a centre of the community, flourishing with vibrant, enthusiastic, and faithful people.[1]

St Columba Church[2] also began with a small number of people in 1878 when St Paul's opened a branch Sunday School in the Richmond public school. In 1913, when St. Paul's Extension Committee bought the present site, the first move for its establishment as the church was made. In July 1916, the construction was completed, and Rev John Paterson of St Paul's Church conducted the first service. From the outset, the St Columba congregation was filled with a missionary zeal, which included caring for the mourners during war years and the sick in times of epidemic.[3]

The Tide of Challenge

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the churches in New Zealand were full of people who were part of church services, social events, and mission activities. Overall membership, however, has been declining

since the 1890s' peak, even though "Christian attitudes in various shapes and forms are taken into diverse areas of New Zealand life such as the marketplace, educational institutions, social meetings, the public service, local body politics, and government."[4]

Furthermore, Shirley Church experienced a major split in 1998 and a loss of members in 2001. Not only that, some issues—the structural problem of the buildings, ageing and declining membership, and lack of resources—put them under pressure to consider selling the property. St Columba Church was also dwindling with low attendance and a lack of resources and could not afford a full-time minister.[5]

Making a Way Forward

In May 2006, Shirley Methodists approached St Columba Presbyterians with a view to some level of cooperation. The first meeting was held in October 2006. Following the first combined service, the two churches kept exploring possible issues such as compatibility, mission objectives, working arrangements, and the church site to discern a new vision and new ways of being church. On 1 September 2007, they had a combined retreat that produced a suggested timetable for a three-month trial of combined services from 11 November 2007 through to the end of January 2008.[6]

After trial services, two congregations were determined to work together, and yet they intended not to form a union parish, but to be in a covenant partnership. The Shirley Church's Strategic Plan described the reasons for not proceeding to formal union: Firstly, further clustering or amalgamation of congregations was likely to take place in the area. Secondly, parent churches were not favouring formal union. Thirdly, a successful working together depends on the shared vision rather than a formal structure. Subsequently, two congregations retained their denominational identities as Methodists and Presbyterians.

On Sunday 3 Aug 2008, the two churches had the Covenant Service and formalised the two churches' relationship. They covenanted to meet together for worship and witness, to honour their traditions and use them as a launching place for mission, to continue to seek God's help in reaching into the community, to share resources to enable mission and ministry, to appoint a full-time minister with an agreed job description and budget, to appoint parish officers to be part of a joint Parish Council, and to continue to share in the life of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches.[7]

Signs of *Unity in Christ*

Jesus' prayer for oneness in John 17 and the message of one body and many parts in 1 Corinthians 12 point out that the signs of unity in Christ are emitted from a congregational life of respect, integration, and love. There are various signs of unity coming through the congregational life of respect, integration, and love at Crossway Community Church.

Signs of Respect

The meeting minutes of discussion around a new name for the church, restructuring the Parish Council, and discussing amalgamation with the Richmond Methodist Church, show their respect for each other.

New Name

The congregations' responses to an invitation for a new name included "Shirley, North Avon Uniting Church," "Shirley, Richmond Uniting Church," "Shirley Church," "Crossway Community Church" and "The Gathering Place." After discussion, Crossway Community Church was most favoured, and the subheading "St Columba Presbyterian and Shirley Methodist" was agreed upon, so that different identities could be clearly shown.[8]

New Structure

The Parish Council was restructured with five committees and a lay chairperson. The committees were given a certain amount of power to act on the Parish Council's behalf to take on the simple and housekeeping tasks. Each committee elected its own convener, and it turned out to be four conveners from Shirley Church and one from St Columba Church. One Methodist convener intentionally withdrew, and an additional Presbyterian convener was appointed for the sake of leadership balance.[9]

Amalgamation with the Richmond Methodist Church

Methodist Synod organised a meeting with the Richmond Methodist Church and Crossway Community Church for discussion on the future. As some concerns were raised that the Richmond Church members might be put under pressure to join Crossway Community Church, the Crossway and Richmond Task Group was formed to continue the discussion. After some discussions, the Task Group reported that it reached "the point where it believes there are good missional reasons" for the three congregations to become one church. All the members of the three

churches—St Columba, Shirley, and Richmond—participated in the vote and decided that they would worship together from 3 February 2013.[10]

Decision Making without Conflict

All decisions were made by consensus, which included appointing one Parish Secretary, nominating the representatives working on a joint profile for new ministry appointments, putting up a new church noticeboard, supporting an expedition of the Boys' Brigade to Lake Daniels, planning to reduce the number of members on the Council, organising the twenty-four-hour prayer-a-thon, and so on.

Signs of Integration

Dealing with the Issue of Formal Union

When the Parish Council was enthusiastically exploring the possibility of formal union, it received a letter from Synod, indicating that Synod would not endorse the Methodist parishes entering a formal union with another denomination. While understanding Synod's position, which was based on negative experiences of dissolving union parishes, some leaders, who expected a formal union to sort out some difficulties with the financial accounts, were disappointed. The mood of the meeting was refreshed by the last comment shared among them that "even though we are from different traditions, we are one in Christ."[11]

Coping with Disaster

Immediately after the earthquake, special Parish Council meetings were called to plan pastoral care and worship services. The pastoral roll was divided up into nine clusters, with a Parish Council member responsible for each. All people on the roll were connected either by visit or over the phone. The Parish Council members encouraged one another by sharing, "the buildings may be damaged, but the church, as people, is still standing. It is time to go the extra mile for others."[12]

Celebrations

They enjoyed a variety of social events, including meals, barbecues, Games Evenings, concerts, fairs and newcomers' meals, and celebrated infant and adult baptisms, and the accreditation of a lay preacher. They, connected in an integrated network of life, warmly welcomed newcomers, gently supported and cared for one another—particularly

in times of disaster—and joyfully celebrated significant occasions in life such as baptism.

Signs of Love

Sharing Finance

The two congregations equally shared finances. They shared offerings equally, ran equal budgets, contributed half the cost, and adjusted, if necessary, at the end of the year. In February 2010, the Presbyterian finance team reported that the shortfall in offerings was covered by some investment funds with only limited life. The financial reports of the following year indicated that the Presbyterian offerings were a little light, with attendance down due to the earthquake, whereas the Methodist finances were healthy at the time of the report. Even though the two congregations agreed to share finances equally, they practised a rule of generosity that whoever can afford willingly makes a greater contribution than the other.[13]

Pastoral Caring

The Joint Pastoral Caring Team was formed with a combined pastoral role. Christmas greetings were sent to those who had left the city permanently following the earthquake, and to others who were unable to come to church for various reasons. When an elderly member was not able to drive to church, she gladly accepted an offer of transportation to attend church once a month. A young couple, however, gave her a ride on other Sundays as well. Another elderly woman was relocated to the other side of the city, which made her unable to attend services. Her need was advertised, resulting in five offers to take her to the monthly Communion Service.[14]

Support for the Youth Band

When the youth music group requested a new drum kit to replace the old one, the Parish Council granted finance for a new kit. A couple of years later, the Parish Council contributed $350 for a new acoustic guitar at the request of the Youth Band. Encouraged by the support from the church, the young musicians organised a contemporary and contemplative music service with songs and psalms, which was named Saturday Night Praise.

Support for Children's Ministry

The noise of children during the service was raised as an issue. After some discussion, the Parish Council affirmed that "we are a 'kids-friendly'

church and welcome children" and "we accept that young children will make some noise" and agreed that the partition in front of the front pew be removed to allow more space for children "to stand up and do some actions to songs or play percussion instruments" during the service. Other resolutions also suggested that a friendly place for pre-schoolers be provided at the back of the church, and that someone sit with the children to encourage their participation in worship. Three years later, the same issue of children's noise during the Sunday service was brought to the Parish Council again. At the suggestion that the children's time in church be shorter and earlier, the Worship Committee had some discussions and agreed that the children's time be positioned at the earlier part of the service.[15]

The Crossway congregations enjoyed a life of respect, integration, and love that reveals unity in Christ. These illustrations are only part of their congregational life, and yet they effectively portray how they have lived in unity in Christ. It does not mean that there was no tension, conflict, or friction among the congregations. It does signal, however, that there was no serious problem that shook the church, disrupted the congregational life, or damaged its unity.

Tradition and Unity in Christ

Tradition is one of the focal points in the ministry and mission of *one church with two traditions* as they pursue revealing unity in Christ. The two congregations, who had agreed to retain their own denominational identities, felt their own traditions challenged as they observed a new one taking shape.

Traditions Honoured

They were so determined to keep their own denominational identities that they covenanted to honour the traditions they came from and use them as a launching place for mission.[16]

Traditions Retained

The Holy Communion

When the Shirley Methodist Congregational Meeting decided to sell the property, there were concerns about the church building and the Methodist traditions being lost, such as the way of sharing the Communion. The question was answered that the things important

to Methodists and Presbyterians alike would be respected, that the Methodist traditions would not be forgotten, and that the different ways of celebrating the Communion would be used. Crossway Community Church has shared Bread and Wine in two ways. The only difference is how to share it. The Presbyterians receive Bread and Wine at the pews, whereas the Methodists make their way to the table to receive it. They have the Methodist Communion in odd months and the Presbyterian in even months.

The Entry of the Bible

The St Columba congregation had begun the Sunday Service with the Entry of the Bible, whereas the Shirley congregation had proceeded without it. Since they combined, they have carried in the Bible as part of the procession. After the earthquake, this was discontinued in Services at the parsonage, at a member's home, and the Windsor House lounge for lack of space, but resumed after they moved to the St Albans Church. At the new church building, the service commences with the Entry of the Bible.

Envelope System

They covenanted to continue as independent legal entities, to keep separate financial records, and to contribute to a common budget. Two traditions are sustained separately along with their own financial system. Since the two pastoral rolls were merged, the original membership roll of each congregation has lost its significance. Instead, the envelope system has been referred to for statistical purposes, which implies that the envelopes help set the membership roll of each congregation. Subsequently, the envelope system has become a significant marker of tradition. Their denominational identity is determined by the envelope they choose, and a new journey of faith begins with the one that they prefer.

Traditions Developing

There are new ideas and new initiatives that indicate the emergence of a new tradition within the church, which is not the outcome of any planning, guidance, or direction of parent churches, but the fruit of the congregations' self-motivation. It may be too early to say a new tradition, and yet it is a clear sign of unity in Christ.

Multi-Cultural Ministry

As of 15 September 2024, greetings in eight languages have been shared at the beginning of Sunday Services, which include English (Good morning), Samoan (Talofa Lava), Tongan (Malo Elelei), Chinese (Ni Hao), Filipino (Magandang Umaga), Malaysian (Selamat Pagi), Kunama (Maydoka Karembe), and Korean (Annyung Hasimnika). And since the Korean service was developed six years ago, the Crossway Korean congregation is growing under the umbrella of Crossway Community Church.

Emergence of New Generations

As Sunday School continued growing gradually and steadily for years, it was divided further into groups to give more effective caring and teaching, which resulted in the need for more teachers and helpers. Noting that there had been no group activity and support for youth while there were a few teenagers already and several young people approaching high school age, the Parish Council agreed to establish a new part-time position. Early in 2024, a part-time youth worker started youth ministry at Crossway. He, as a Korean-New Zealander, has been part of the congregation for some years.

Visioning for a New Future

With members realising no visioning had been undertaken since the Parish Council was restructured, they agreed to choose a visioning topic for each Parish Council meeting. Some ideas for the future church included outreach and evangelism, small group ministry, a Korean representative to the Parish Council, and a Bible Study group. It was a bottom-up visioning, not something imposed by the leadership.

Traditions Challenged

Fear of Loss

When Shirley Church decided to sell the property, anxiety was voiced about the loss of their Methodist tradition. To the concern about the church building being lost, reassurance was given to the effect that, although the building would no longer stand, the Shirley Methodist congregation would still exist. A more direct question was also raised about the Shirley Methodist Church's traditions after combining with St Columba Presbyterian Church, and members were assured that the two churches' traditions would be respected and nurtured.

The Uncertain Journey Ahead

Noting that maintaining two sets of accounts caused some confusion in relation to envelopes, record-keeping and property management, the Parish Council explored possibilities to form a union parish and consulted with Presbytery and Synod. However, they were informed that the union parish model was not what parent churches wished to continue. The parent churches convinced them that the Crossway Community Church's covenant relationship was less formal, and, thus, more flexible, allowing for change in the future. The two congregations' journey kept going ahead into the uncertain future because no one knew in what form their traditions would appear in the future. Ten years later—in 2020—when the project of rebuilding the church facilities was completed, parent churches allowed them to be a union parish because it was the best way of dealing with property and finance issues.

Ecumenical Spirit Alive

The Parish Council members expressed some concerns about the parent churches' tradition-oriented reservations. Three points can be made about church tradition.

First, as unity is both a gift and a goal, so is tradition. Tradition can be both an obstacle to and a catalyst for unity in the church. Clearly, the church tradition embraces all believers under its wing, whereas some traditions of the church, which were developed from denominational, cultural, and ethnic emphases, can hinder the unity of ALL believers, in that they may build up some barriers by binding SOME believers.[17] Therefore, the all-embracing church tradition is both a gift given and a goal yet to be lived out.

Second, as unity is not to be taken as an ideology, neither is tradition. It has been a danger for the church to fall into the trap of taking tradition as an ideology. Ideological attachment tends to lead a group of believers to put their own tradition at the centre of the church tradition, which generates tension and division among the believers. Traditions aiming to be placed in the centre cannot avoid competition with one another.

Third, as unity is paradoxical by nature, so is tradition. The church tradition is always the old and the new. A new tradition is envisioned and established, but it is not possible to disconnect it from the old. An old tradition is cherished and kept, but it is not possible to prevent it from maturing further. A congregation may try to sustain or preserve the tradition, yet it develops until it becomes part of a new church tradition.

The Crossway congregations have cherished their own tradition, honoured the other's tradition, experienced the emergence of a new tradition, and observed their own tradition under challenge. However, they have stayed together in unity in Christ that transcends denominational, cultural, and ethnic differences.

The Christchurch Earthquakes

Two years after the establishment of the covenant relationship, CCC was hit by a natural disaster, which not only shook the church building but also devastated some members' lives. The church building had been so seriously damaged that it was demolished.

Worship Arrangements

Responding to the earthquake, the worship services were promptly organised, including a Communion Service at the parsonage, which was not spacious enough for all church members. It took the Crossway congregation ten years, during which they were on the move in search of worship space. It includes the North Avon Baptist Church, a member's house, the lounge of a local retirement home, the hall of St. Albans Uniting Parish, the church building of St Albans Uniting Parish, and the lounge of Delta Community Centre.

Strategic Planning and Two Principles

While the parent churches were working on the strategic plan for the post-earthquake churches in Christchurch, the parish council affirmed that "we wish to stay together as a congregation of Methodists and Presbyterians without losing our identity and traditions."[18] Having carried out a wide range of conversations, consultations, and discussions, the Synod brought forth "the Recommendations to Parishes" and the Presbytery "Exploring the theology of the church." Both papers emphasised two strategic principles for rebuilding the churches: one was "community-facing" and the other was "working together", even beyond denominational differences.[19] It was highlighted that "the future vision of the church is as the hub of the community, outwardly focused, responsive to community needs, and with multipurpose community facilities that are used seven days a week."[20]

A Public-Private Partnership Project

The idea of a public-private partnership between the Christchurch City Council and CCC was initiated from an informal conversation between

the CCC minister and a Strengthening Communities Advisor from the City Council. Following a series of conversations, CPC advised the City Council of its plans, requesting a partnership for the purpose of rebuilding a church-community facility. The conversation continued, and the Community Board supported the proposal in principle and recommended that the City Council grant a long-term lease for the former Shirley Community Centre site. A month later, the Christchurch City Council Meeting on 15 Aug 2013 supported the proposal in principle. In response to the City Council's decision, CCC continued convening a series of consultations with the local community groups to confirm the support from the local community, and dealt with technical, financial, and procedural issues about the project, which included the appointment of a project manager and the production of the concept plan for the new building. Following the Local Body Elections in 2013, however, the church noticed the changing climate in civic administration and politics. The church leadership also sensed "the general negative attitude of the community towards a church having ownership of the Community Centre building" and even the resistance of some leaders of the parent churches. The public-private partnership proposal was turned down at the Shirley-Papanui Community Board meeting on 11 July 2016. The lengthy and costly process of consultation, discussion, and planning turned out to be fruitless, having taken four years, from July 2012 to July 2016.[21]

A Multilateral Partnership Project

In March 2016, four months before the official termination of the public-private partnership project, North Avon Baptist Church[22] approached CCC to discuss possibilities for working together. After a series of meetings, the two churches agreed on combining their children's programmes, sharing lay preachers, periodically having combined services, and exploring the possibility of working in partnership to build a combined facility. Delta Community Support Trust, whose community services have been supported by North Avon Baptist Church, had offered CCC a lounge for Sunday services a year before the two churches started the partnership conversation. In March 2017, the representatives from the three organisations—CCC, North Avon Baptist Church, and Delta Community Trust—gathered for a consolidated meeting, in which they shared their common vision and embraced the partnership proposal. Consequently, an interdenominational and multilateral partnership project was initiated, which included three churches and one community service provider:

North Avon Presbyterian Parish, Richmond-Shirley Methodist Parish, North Avon Baptist Church, and Delta Community Support Trust.[23]

It took three years and eight months for all legal and administrative requirements necessary for construction to be fulfilled, which included the appointment of a project manager and the architect, the concept design of the building, a termination plan in case of the breakdown of partnership[24], the plan for worship arrangements and for sharing the facilities, the confirmation of financial resources available, [25] and the payment agreement[26]. The first half of the construction plan was completed, and the Delta Community Centre was opened on 1 September 2019. With the completion of the second half of the project, Crossway Community Church held the opening service in March 2021.

Conclusion

Two churches of different denominations agreed to work together in ministry and mission, which was not a voluntary commitment but rather an unavoidable choice for survival. However, this ecumenical initiative is recorded as a successful one. Not only have they become a thriving multicultural congregation, but also, they have cooperatively responded to the damage of the earthquakes. Furthermore, they had a multilateral project successfully completed. Crossway Community Church has set an example of ecumenical ministry and mission.

- First, they have evidently shown various signs of unity in Christ, which were revealed in interpersonal, inter-traditional, and inter-generational levels.
- Second, they have made their own journey in unity to be a healthy church where a new tradition is taking shape from the traditions that they value and respect.
- Third, there were some ministry activities limited or in recess after the earthquake. However, their congregational life in unity is more visible through times of difficulty.
- Fourth, there are young generations emerging in unity and growing in faith, being surrounded by the ecumenical spirit of the congregation.
- Fifth, there are valuable attributes that have been practised in congregational life, which are sharing resources generously, respecting each other's traditions, and networking the community of faith.

- Sixth, the life of unity in Christ beyond denominational difference enabled multiple congregations to stand together against difficulties and move forward, empowering one another.
- Seventh, it is not a structural model, but a behavioural model, which offers applicable principles for decision-making, policy development, mission engagement, and ministry practice.

Eighth, it puts people before positions, support before direction, and patience before discipline. The church has been growing in numbers, with members envisioning their future, strengthening evangelical passion, and confidence in who they are. At the same time, they had to deal with challenges on their ecumenical journey, and some challenges persist.

Lack of Confidence.

Considering working together, some expressed their concerns that even joining the two churches was not going to solve the financial problems and that new people were not coming into the church as fast as the church was losing people.[27] Some did not completely embrace the new journey and moved away.[28]

Risks of Distraction.

When two churches' ecumenical conversation was going on, other discussions took place between Shirley Methodist Church and Richmond Methodist Church, among three churches in the eastern suburb, between the St Albans Uniting Parish and the Christchurch North Parish, and among the St Albans Parish, the Shirley Methodist and the St Columba Presbyterian. Eventually, the Shirley leaders' meeting preferred to concentrate on the progress that had been made with St Columba Church.[29]

Lack of Resources

The challenges of low membership, lack of resources, and weakening financial status were given as the reasons for the two congregations deciding to be one church. Even if each congregation's financial status was improving and some new families joined, the challenges did not disappear. In particular, the earthquake impacted the sustainability of various mission activities and services for the community. As the church grew in numbers and children's ministry became vibrant, the needs of the church have been ever-increasing, which demands more volunteers.

A Road Never Travelled

Before coming together in ministry and mission, the two churches found their future full of uncertainty, which implied that there might be hidden issues yet to arise. Even though there were some other examples of ecumenical ministry and mission, it was a totally new journey for them.

Traditions Confronted

Some members of the two churches expressed the fear of losing their own traditions before they joined together. Their fear and anxiety were not groundless, in that tradition changes over time. Ecumenical spirit, alive in the minds of the two congregations, is a hidden factor that impels them to change. The appearance of the third group, who identify themselves as Crossway members, not Shirley Methodists nor St Columba Presbyterians, is a clear indication of the invisible force. Eventually, a ministry model of *one church with two traditions* is another tradition which confronts the two traditions inherited.

Traditions to be Remembered.

There was no indication that the members were regularly reminded of the origin, the historical context and development, core beliefs and theological emphasis of their traditions when they gathered for various meetings, and even after they had combined. It is not clear that each congregation has sufficient knowledge of their own tradition, without which there may be a danger that the members may only hold on to the name, denominational customs, and titles of leaders rather than to the beliefs, perspectives, and emphases of each tradition that has shaped the church. Respecting tradition is not only to name it, but to live it. This would be how tradition will be passed on to the next generation. Therefore, it is essential for them to know what their own tradition is before they pass it on to their posterity by living it out.

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[1] Abbreviations: MCCP - Minutes of the Crossway Community Church Parish Council. MSLM- Minutes of the Shirley Methodist Church Leaders' Meeting.
Neil Mitchell, *Shirley Methodist Church: one hundred years of Christian witness 1866-1966* (F.W. Larcombe, 1966), 5-10.

[2] Presbytery identifies St Columba Presbyterian Church as North Avon Presbyterian Parish. This thesis uses the name 'St Columba Church' for the sake of consistency.

[3] Presbytery identifies St Columba Presbyterian Church as North Avon Presbyterian Parish. This thesis uses the name 'St Columba Church' for the sake of consistency.

[4] Davidson, Christianity in Aotearoa, 182.
[5] MSLM, 13 Feb 2006. There were 15 attendees at Annual General Meeting on Sunday 26th August 2007.
[6] MSLM, 8 May 2006, 12 Oct 2006, 10 Sep 2007, 12 Feb 2007.
[7] Vision and Voice, 27 Jul 2008. Vision and Voice is the weekly newsletter of Crossway Community Church that includes the order of Sunday Service.
[8] MSLM, 11 Aug 2008, 8 Sep 2008.
[9] MCCP, 8 Jun 2009, 20 July 2009. Five committees are Children and Youth, Worship, Pastoral Care, Property and Finance, and Outreach and Social.
[10] Ibid., 13 Aug 2012.
[11] Ibid., 14 Sep 2009
[12] Ibid., 11 Oct 2010.
[13] Ibid., 22 Feb 2010, 11 Apr 2011.
[14] Ibid., 9 Aug 2010, 11 Oct 2010, 12 Dec 2011.
[15] Ibid., 14 Dec 2009, 8 Oct 2012, 9 Dec 2012
[16] A Covenant, signed on 3 Aug 2008.
[17] The definition of 'the church tradition' is not what this thesis is required to make. It may be understood as the overarching criteria that bring all believers in unity, which may be substituted by the Christian faith tradition that
[18] MCCP, 10 October 2011.
[19] Ibid., 14 May 2012, 9 July 2012.
[20] The Methodist Church of New Zealand, "Strategic Plan 2013-2017 of the Central South Island Synod," 7.
[21] MCCP, 30 July 2012, 10 September 2012, 10 February 2014, 8 September 2014, 10
November 2014, 10 August 2015, 9 March 2015.
[22] North Avon Baptist Church was renamed to be Delta Community Baptist Church on 1 September 2019.
[23] Ibid., 9 March 2015, 14 March 2016, 9 May 2016, 13 March 2017.
[24] MCCP, 10 April 2017, 10 July 2017. The separation of the building can be possible with a fire rated wall in case the partnership project has to be divided between parties in the future.
[25] Parish treasurers and finance staff from each party confirmed that $6.4 million dollars were available for the building.
[26] MCCP, 9 May 2017. It was agreed that payment for the architect, the project manager and other expenses will be met by all parties percentage wise, according to monetary input into the whole project.
[27] Minutes of the Shirley Methodist Church Annual General Meeting, 28 Oct 2007.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 10 Sep 2007.

Nicene Principles as *Motus Dei (movement of God)* In Shaping Interfaith Peace Movements in Asia

Vinod Syamala Sailus

Introduction

The Nicene Creed, formulated in AD 325 by the Church Fathers attending the Council of Nicaea,[1] is a foundational declaration of Christian faith aimed at addressing theological disputes about the divinity of Jesus Christ, particularly in response to the teachings of Arius, who claimed Christ was a created being and not fully divine. By affirming that Jesus is "of the same substance" (*homoousios*, the word was inserted in the Nicene Creed solely by the personal order of Constantine[2]) as God the Father, the Creed emphasised His full divinity and eternal existence, thereby preserving doctrinal unity and establishing the basis for Christian beliefs, especially concerning the Trinity, Christ's resurrection, and eternal life. Beyond its historical role in articulating Christian faith, the Nicene Creed offers a theological framework for engaging with a pluralistic world. Its principles, such as creation, Trinity, unity, and reconciliation, can be seen as *Motus Dei* (God's movement) that still functions after 1700 years in shaping theologies and especially in shaping interfaith peace efforts. By applying these Nicene principles, Christians can and are promoting harmonious relationships, fostering understanding among diverse faiths, and working collaboratively for peace and justice across religious boundaries. Thus, the Nicene Creed remains a vital symbol not only of Christian unity but also for transforming interfaith engagements.

Motus Dei, in Latin for "Movement of God", is a theological concept that emphasises God's active presence and work in the world. 'Movement of God,' in this context, is a concept that highlights God as a dynamic and active presence rather than a static being.[3] Initiating from Biblical accounts, God's movements are seen in creation (Genesis 1:2-3), His guidance of Israel (Exodus), the incarnation of Christ (John 1:1-5), and the empowerment of His disciples through the Holy Spirit (Acts of the Apostles 2:1-4). In the same way, the paper claims that the Nicene Creed is the post-Biblical continuation of this *Motus Dei*. Thus, this movement emphasises God's redemptive nature, signifying His active involvement in human history and His desire to establish Christ's kingdom among nations.[4] *Motus Dei,* therefore, applies to interfaith movements, where God's dynamic and transformative presence fosters inclusivity, cultural integration, and communal harmony across diverse faith traditions. This

understanding shows God's mission as continuous and evolving, aligning with the changing and mobile nature of human society.

According to Mani Chacko, four hermeneutical principles should be applied while interpreting any form of theologising, such as: holistic integration, theological imagination, liberative action, and theological progression.[5] Using these hermeneutical principles, the paper tries to establish that the Nicene Creed is the *Motus Dei*, emphasising the dynamic presence and active involvement of God in shaping interfaith relations and peace efforts. The Nicene Creed, as a movement, affirms the unity and love of God, and thus encourages Christians to engage with people of different faiths as part of one divine family. This approach fosters an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation, allowing for the exploration of shared values and common goals. Thus, Nicene principles as *Motus Dei* serve as a transformative framework that inspires collective action towards peace, compassion, and the well-being of all creation in our diverse and pluralistic societies.

Overview of the Religious Diversity in Asia

Asia is one of the most religiously diverse regions, including different faiths and spiritual traditions. Major world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism have deep historical roots in Asia, alongside numerous indigenous beliefs like Shintoism in Japan, Taoism in China, and various tribal and animistic traditions.[6] The spread and evolution of these religions have been shaped by migration, trade, colonialism, and missionary activities, resulting in a complex interplay of religious identities across the continent.[7] But this diversity has also led to challenges, including interfaith tensions and conflicts.[8] In this context, the application of Nicene principles as *Motus Dei* provides an opportunity to shape interfaith peace efforts in Asia by emphasising the theological framework for addressing the complexities of Asia's religious milieus. This approach not only enriches cultural and spiritual development but also creates a transformative space for interfaith engagement.

Importance of Interfaith Peace Efforts in Asia

Interfaith peace efforts are crucial in Asia, where faiths like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and various others coexist. In such a pluralistic environment, differences in beliefs and practices can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts.[9] To address these challenges, Nicene principles, as God's active movement in the world, provide a transformative framework for fostering peace and reconciliation. This is possible in a wholehearted attempt to know about the other. John Hick believes that all world religions share 'a common ethical ideal' or

'a common soteriological structure.' This common ideal arises from the fact that all of them are animated by and in search of the same ultimate reality. Through a voluntary renunciation of ego-centredness and self-giving, religious persons will live lives of acceptance, compassion, and love for all humankind.[10] These efforts reveal that different religious traditions, rooted in common values, can collaborate for the greater good, promoting social justice, unity, and the well-being of all communities.

Models of Interfaith Movements from History

Throughout history, interfaith dialogue has taken various shapes, signifying how people from different faiths have engaged with each other's beliefs and ideas. In ancient Greece, philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato interacted with Eastern traditions,[11] while Jewish scholars such as Philo of Alexandria blended Jewish theology with Greek philosophy.[12] In India, Ashoka, the Mauryan emperor and one of the greatest Mughal rulers, Emperor Akbar promoted the *Dhammamahamatra*, religious tolerance, encouraging peaceful exchanges between Buddhists, Hindus, and other communities.[13] In China, Buddhist and Daoist scholars engaged in debates on metaphysical concepts, enriching both traditions.[14] Medieval Spain saw Muslims, Jews, and Christians collaborating in intellectual and theological pursuits,[15] while in the Sassanian Empire, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews discussed topics like the nature of the soul.[16] In India, Hinduism and Buddhism engaged in philosophical debates about life, enlightenment, and spirituality.[17] These historical models of interfaith engagement highlight how diverse religious traditions can influence and enrich each other, promoting understanding and cooperation even amid significant differences. The uniqueness of the Nicene Creed is that, though established in AD 325, it continues to inspire generations by representing the movement of God, and serves as a theological foundation for building interfaith peace efforts, emphasising unity, reconciliation, and respect for the dignity of all traditions.

Nicene Creed and Its Relevance in Interfaith Dialogue

The Nicene Creed, formulated in AD 325 during the First Council of Nicaea, was a pivotal moment for the early Church, convened by Roman Emperor Constantine I to address significant divisions regarding the nature of Jesus Christ and His relationship with God the Father.[18] A major point of debate was the teaching of Arius, who claimed that Jesus was not fully divine but rather a created being.[19] In response, the Nicene Creed affirmed that Jesus is "of the same substance" as the Father, thereby emphasising His full divinity and establishing a foundation for Christian faith.[20] But the relevance of the Nicene Creed extends beyond its historical context.

Its teachings are vital for contemporary interfaith dialogue in Asia and beyond, since it also highlights unity under one God and the inherent dignity of all humans. The Creed fosters an environment of mutual respect among diverse faiths. Its declaration of God as Creator emphasises the shared value of all people, irrespective of their beliefs. The Creed's call for reconciliation and peace serves as a powerful motivator for overcoming divisions and conflicts, inspiring collaborative efforts for the common good. By integrating these Nicene principles as *Motus Dei*, we can shape effective interfaith peace initiatives that promote understanding and harmony in diverse contexts.

Unity of the Triune God in the Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed emphasises that "in every form of the Trinity, creation involves," serving as a vital foundation for understanding shared human dignity and promoting interfaith dialogue. According to Daniel Miller, "The Nicene Creed states that the Holy Spirit is 'the Lord, the giver of life.' In the same way that the Spirit gives life to the creation that is brought about from the Father through the Son, the Spirit gives life to Christian participation in the Son's saving mission to the glory of the Father."[21] This belief underscores the existence of one divine source of life that connects all creation, highlighting that all people are created and sustained by the same God. By affirming this common origin, the Creed fosters a sense of shared humanity, encouraging respect and mutual understanding among different faiths. This unity calls believers to reflect on that oneness in their interactions with others, actively seeking reconciliation and peace. In interfaith contexts, the principle of the Triune God's unity provides a robust basis for dialogue and cooperation, as well as for recognising the dignity and value of every individual, regardless of their religious background.

Affirmation of Creation in the Nicene Creed as the Shared Human Dignity

The Nicene Creed affirms God as the Creator of all things, highlighting the inherent dignity of every human being as part of His creation. According to Daniel Miller, "knowledge of the Trinity is for two reasons. First, it was necessary for the right idea of creation, and second, we may think rightly concerning the salvation of the human race, accomplished by the incarnate Son, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit."[22] Thus, the Trinity's relationships are to the creation and with human persons and actively to reach out and embrace other persons, which is most fully expressed and accomplished within the Eucharist.[23] This belief asserts that all people, regardless of their background, culture, or faith, are made in

the image of God, which bestows upon them intrinsic worth and value. By acknowledging this shared dignity, the Creed, as the movement of God, fosters unity and mutual respect among diverse individuals and communities. In the context of interfaith dialogue, this understanding encourages collaboration, respect, and compassion, serving as a foundation for addressing social issues and promoting justice. It calls for the recognition of each person's unique purpose within God's creation, advocating for the protection of human rights and well-being across various faith traditions.

Understanding the Universal Church in the Nicene Creed as the Totality of Creation

In the Nicene Creed, the term "universal church," expressed as "one holy catholic and apostolic Church," should be understood not only as the global community of Christian believers but as the entire created order. This interpretation signifies an inclusive vision of God's redemptive mission for all creation. Such a de-colonised theology of the Nicene Creed is inclusive, open, mutually affirming, global, and recognises 'the other' on equal terms socially, culturally, and religiously.[24] It emphasises that the church holds together the whole of creation, affirming that everything exists under the sovereignty of God.[25] Such an impression will indicate that the church is not confined to a specific group or institution but is inclusive of all humanity and the total creation. By defining the universal church as the "Totality of Creation," the Nicene Creed underscores the unity and interconnectedness of all life, highlighting a refined vision in which every part of creation participates in the divine plan and purpose. This broader understanding recognises the sacredness of all creation and calls for a commitment to harmony and stewardship of the world as an expression of faith.

The Way Forward: A New Model of Interfaith Relations

According to Walter Brueggemann, "The task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[26] In the same way, the Nicene Creed offers an alternative consciousness for interfaith dialogue by emphasising the unity of the Triune God, affirming the dignity of all humanity through the act of creation, and presenting the universal church as encompassing the whole of creation. This focus on unity within diversity establishes a strong framework for fostering meaningful engagement and cooperation among different faith traditions, which I call a *Bandhutva* Theology. The Creed affirms the shared

human dignity and divine image in all people, offering a framework for approaching others with respect, friendship, and a commitment to peace. Thus, *Bandhutva* Theology I propose as an alternative consciousness for interfaith relations, which is also an alternative to the *Varandha* theology proposed by George Zacharia. *Varandha* theology of George Zacharia emphasises the importance of public talk in a fellowship in a *Varandha*, but not inside a home. Another problem with *Varandha* theology now is the condensed space of the *Varandhas* and the real lives of the Asians in the present-day context.

Whereas *Bandhutva*, derived from the Sanskrit term "*Bandhu*," which means a family member, relative, or kinship, who has access not only to the *Varandhas* but even into a home, offers a relational approach to mission and interfaith dialogue. This model emphasises community-centred engagement over individualistic conversion efforts. The Nicene Creed's focus on the unity of God and creation, alongside its affirmation of creation as shared human dignity and the universal church as the totality of creation, aligns seamlessly with the principles of *Bandhutva*. This interpretation creates a meaningful framework for enriching interfaith cooperation. By recognising all people as members of one divine family, this approach fosters solidarity and connection across religious boundaries, promoting collaboration and mutual understanding among diverse faith communities.

Practical Examples of Nicene Creed Principles as *Motus Dei*

The principles derived from the Nicene Creed regarding unity, relationality, shared human dignity, cultural identity, social justice, and the broader understanding of the universal church as a tool for conflict resolution can be seen in practical models within India, particularly in the contexts of the CSI Church Kalasapadu and the CSI Cathedral Medak. Both churches exemplify the Creed's teachings as a movement of God, through their inclusive practices and commitment to interfaith dialogue. At the CSI Church Kalasapadu, the celebration of the anniversary fosters a spirit of collaboration among diverse communities, highlighting the shared dignity of all people and the importance of mutual respect. The CSI Cathedral Medak serves as a vital space for fostering relationships across faiths, emphasising reconciliation and cooperation in the spirit of the Triune God's unity. These churches embody the Nicene Creed's call to recognise the sacredness of all creation and to actively engage in efforts that promote justice, peace, and harmony, thus bringing the theological principles of the Creed into a movement within their communities rather than limiting it as a rite.

Medak Cathedral, in the southern Indian state of Telangana, is the largest church in Telangana and the cathedral of the Diocese of Medak of the Church of South India since 1947. It was built by Charles Walker Posnett, a British Wesleyan Methodist missionary, and was consecrated on 25 December 1924.[27] Every Sunday, the church organises an 'Intercultural Worship' service exclusively for non-Christians,[28] during which the Nicene Creed is recited. All through the year, people of different faiths visit the church and, as they do in a temple or a dargah, offer their hair as a sacrificial offering to God. People from different parts of the country visit the church and give offerings.[29] The uniqueness of the cathedral is that the 'people of other faiths' visit from their own familiar surroundings as a *tirthayatra* (pilgrimage) and perform the symbols of faith of their personal religion as part of fulfilling vows and performing rituals to cope with the contingency of their everyday life. This includes pilgrimage on foot, shaving of their heads, dressing like a *sanyasi*, observing fasting, taking holy dips, and so on. The shrine helps the pilgrims to experience the Ultimate Reality[30] and provide mental and spiritual satisfaction, and so people remain in their own faith but experience a higher form of spirituality in the host shrine.

The CSI Church Kalasapadu, dedicated in December 1887, is often referred to as the 'Church for All' or '*Punya Kshetram*' (Holy Temple). It is one of the churches in the Nandyal Diocese of the Church of South India, built with the support of SPG missionaries during challenging times, such as the cholera epidemic in 19th-century Andhra Pradesh. The church celebrates its anniversary on December 2nd and 3rd, attracting a diverse group of visitors from various faiths who come together to celebrate life.[31] The festivities highlight the involvement of different communities, such as the *Kummari* people providing pottery, the *Dobi* community making clothes for the temple, the *Nai Brahmins* playing music, the *Budesab* family handling repairs, and the Reddy family feeding attendees. Thus, these two days can see the replica of India in Kalasapadu.[32] The festival is marked by an openness to 'Appropriation of Faiths,' where individuals from Hindu backgrounds engage in rituals, including the ceremonial breaking of coconuts and head shaving.[33] The speciality is that after reciting the Nicene Creed as part of Holy Communion worship, the Holy Eucharist is served to everyone regardless of their faith. This inclusivity fosters a sense of shared community and healing, as the pilgrims believe that through the Eucharistic meal, they connect with God and each other,[34] embodying the concept of the church as a place where the movement of God is experienced and that embraces interfaith sacramentality. The foundation is the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed as *Bandhutva* Theology

Nicene Creed: A Document for Relational Mission

Radhakrishnan thinks that religions can play a crucial role in the peace process, but only after they transform their historicity into universality.[35] *Bandhutva* Theology, founded in the Nicene Creed as a movement of God, underscores the significance of nurturing relationships as universal community connections, prioritising inclusivity over exclusivity or division. The Nicene Creed emphasises the unity of God and all creation, advocating for a mission approach that values and respects the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds of individuals. In this perspective, Christian mission transcends the goal of converting people from their existing faith traditions; instead, it focuses on fostering meaningful connections that honour different beliefs. This means that every religion should focus on its substance and overcome those features which hinder the peace process;[36] thus, it is relational. This relational approach promotes peace by inculcating trust and empathy among various communities. Thus, the Nicene Creed as *Bandhutva* theology becomes a movement and encourages dialogue among different faiths, centred on efforts to achieve shared objectives such as social justice and the protection of human dignity, rather than on the pursuit of religious conversion.

Nicene Creed Affirms Cultural Identity and Goodness of Creation

God's love did not begin with the creation of humanity, but has always been a part of who God is.[37] In the same way as the movement of God, the Nicene Creed, as *Bandhutva* Theology asserts that all of creation is fundamentally good because it reflects the nature of God and thus, falls in line with the Indian philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which translates to "the cosmos as one family."[38] *Bandhutva* Theology reinforces the notion that conversion should not necessitate a rejection of one's cultural heritage. Instead, it advocates for the integration of Christian faith with the richness of local cultures, illustrating how faith can enhance and uplift cultural traditions rather than demoralising them, because it is a matter of the family. This approach goes along with Asian values of inclusivity and reverence for nature, fostering cooperation among different faiths by emphasising shared moral values such as compassion, justice, and stewardship of the Earth. Thus, the Nicene Creed recognises religious diversity as an asset rather than an obstacle, and its sprout, *Bandhutva* Theology, highlights that embracing the Christian faith can deepen one's connection to their heritage within the broader context of God's creation.

Nicene Creed Validates Social Justice as the Core Mission Principle

Since it is the movement of God, Nicene Creed as *Bandhutva* Theology places a strong emphasis on social justice and equality across various faith traditions. While it focuses on the incarnation of Christ, as God becoming human (man), the Nicene Creed never affirms Jesus incarnated as a Jew or Christian, but as human. Thus, the incarnation of Jesus is not for Jews or Christians, but for the entire humanity and creation. This aligns with the Indian concept of *Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*, which suggests that all religions ultimately lead to the same truth. This perspective reinforces the notion that Christian mission should collaborate with other faiths to address pressing social issues such as caste discrimination, poverty, and inequality. Rather than prioritising the imposition of one faith over another, the Nicene Creed, as *Bandhutva* Theology, emphasises such social empowerment and the upliftment of marginalised communities. Thus, the Nicene Creed advocates for a mission based on justice, fairness, and dignity for all, reflecting the belief that every human being holds equal value in the eyes of God.

Challenges and Opportunities

When we view the Nicene Creed from the perspective of interfaith dialogue, it faces both challenges and opportunities in our diverse and multi-faith world. One major challenge is that its core beliefs, such as the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity, may sometimes be seen as exclusive. This can make people of other faiths feel excluded or misunderstood, leading to divisions and tensions between different communities. Another challenge is that it may also find that the Creed's teachings clash with their local customs, values, and traditions. This can make it difficult to blend these Christian beliefs smoothly into their everyday lives or cultural practices, creating a struggle for those who want to balance their faith with their cultural identity. However, the Nicene Creed also offers considerable opportunities for Christians to engage constructively with people from various religious backgrounds. It advocates for unity, respect, and dialogue, emphasising that all individuals are created in the image of God and thus deserving of dignity. This universal message creates opportunities to collaborate with other faith communities on pressing social issues such as discrimination, gender inequality, and injustice. Moreover, the Creed's focus on God's love for all creation fosters a shared responsibility for environmental stewardship, paving the way for interfaith initiatives aimed at caring for the Earth. Thus, while the challenges of maintaining theological integrity and fostering meaningful interfaith engagement persist, the Nicene Creed provides

a strong foundation for Christians to promote peace, compassion, and unity across diverse cultures and communities, because it is a movement.

Conclusion

As *Bandhutva* Theology, the Nicene Creed proposes a model for interfaith relations by providing principles of unity, reconciliation, and love with the values of kinship and interconnectedness. This approach emphasises building genuine relationships over conversion efforts, promoting social justice, and fostering mutual respect among different faith traditions. By integrating the concept of *Bandhutva* with the theological foundation of the Nicene Creed, this model offers a transformative and relevant framework for interfaith engagement in Asia, contributing to the collective well-being and peaceful coexistence of diverse communities. The *Motus Dei* framework highlights God's active presence in the world, and *Bandhutva* Theology encourages Christians to engage with people of other faiths as equals, recognising their shared dignity and humanity. Ultimately, the Nicene Creed, as *Bandhutva* Theology, calls for a mission that goes beyond proclamation, focusing on peaceful coexistence and the development of just and inclusive communities. Thus, the Nicene Creed challenges us by asking the question: What issues could there be that cannot be solved through open dialogue and collaboration? But the answer is simple: THERE ARE HARDLY ANY!

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[5] 'Holistic integration' is bringing out liberative potentials from both the Old and the New Testaments by going beyond or skipping what is not necessary. 'Theological imagination' helps us to realize that a few texts alone will not exhaust the concern of the Bible about the subject of our study and therefore similar texts should be examined. 'Liberative action' helps us to explore the ways in which we can support the life in its fulness and 'theological progression' will enable us to review the existing ideologies and helps us to enter into the process of revision to be in line with the central message of the Bible. While Mani Chacko is emetising this framework for interpreting Bible, the presenter will use the same framework since Nicene Creed is the summary of the Bible. M. Mani Chacko, "Engaging with the Text of Violence in the Bible: A Hermeneutical Challenge," Bangalore Theological Forum LI/2 (December, 2019): 75-77.

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Indigenous Mysticism and Interconnectedness of All Beings

Ro Din Mawia Ralte

Introduction

The contemporary world faces a multifaceted ecological crisis that demands innovative and sustainable solutions. One promising yet underexplored or less explored source of wisdom lies in the indigenous mysticism of Northeast India. This region, rich in cultural diversity and ecological heritage, offers profound insights into the interconnectedness of human, divine, and natural realms. By exploring the mystical experiences and worldviews of indigenous communities, we can uncover principles that not only resonate with contemporary ecological needs but also provide practical approaches to environmental conservation and sustainable living.

Indigenous mysticism, often overlooked in mainstream ecological discourses, encapsulates a holistic and relational understanding of existence. Unlike classical mysticism, which tends to emphasise a personal, often exclusive union with the divine, indigenous mysticism is inherently inclusive and integrative. It weaves together the spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of life, emphasising the interconnectedness of all beings and the environment. This perspective is particularly evident in the indigenous cultures of Northeast India, where spiritual practices are deeply intertwined with daily interactions with the natural world.

In this article, I delve into the mystical traditions of Northeast India to uncover how these ancient practices can address the pressing ecological challenges of our time. We begin by exploring the general concept of mysticism through the lenses of renowned scholars like William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Raimundo Panikkar. This foundation allows us to appreciate the unique characteristics of indigenous mysticism, which we then examine in detail, focusing on the tribes of Northeast India. Through an analysis of indigenous religious practices, rituals, and worldviews, I highlight the profound ecological wisdom embedded in these traditions. I argue that indigenous mysticism, with its emphasis on the sacred interconnectedness of all life, offers valuable lessons for contemporary ecological efforts. This exploration is not merely an academic exercise but a call to rediscover and re-practice the sustainable ways of living that have been overshadowed by modernity and globalisation.

In reconnecting with indigenous mystical traditions, I find a pathway to restore our relationship with nature, respect its intrinsic value, and

promote ecological balance. This wholistic approach, which integrates spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions, is crucial for addressing the ecological crisis we face today. Through this article, I attempt to illuminate the relevance of indigenous mysticism in fostering a more sustainable and harmonious world.

Understanding Mysticism

I will take the help of three scholars who are well-known in the field of mysticism and explain in brief its multi-faceted dimensions before I turn to indigenous mysticism. William James (1842 – 1910), a well-known psychologist of religion, in his celebrated book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, highlighted four marks of mysticism or characteristics of the mystical state of consciousness, such as: **Ineffability:** that mysticism defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. **Noetic Quality:** that mystical states are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. **Transience:** that mystical states cannot be sustained for long. **Passivity:** that although mystical states may be induced by some voluntary activities like fixing attention, going through certain bodily performances, once mystical consciousness is set, the mystic feels that he/she was grasped and held by a superior power.[1] This explanation oscillates with the swinging of classical Christian understanding of mysticism, and it may be disputed by contemporary mystical theologians on account of its remoteness and abstract nature.

One of the best-known writers on Mysticism in the twentieth century was Evelyn Underhill (1875 –1941), whose work *Mysticism* became a classic in the study of mysticism. She defines mysticism as:

> The expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order…This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called 'Mystic union,' attains its end. Whether that end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy, the desire to attain it and the movement towards it—so long as this is a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation—is the proper subject of mysticism.[2]

Again, she says with more specificity, "Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and that the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it. Not to *know about*, but to *Be*, is the mark of the real practitioner."[3]

Raimundo Panikkar rejects the classical understanding of mysticism for its exclusiveness and aloofness from normal human life and furthers a more inclusive and holistic understanding of mysticism. For him, mysticism is simply the experience of Life, not our own life but of Life, which is *not* the privilege of the chosen few but a human characteristic par excellence. It is *not an extraordinary* or esoteric phenomenon which is out of the ordinary or outside the normal range of human knowledge or something special – pathological, paranormal or supernatural. Mysticism is *not* a specialist's field but something that belongs to human beings as such. Every person is a mystic – even if only potentially so. True mysticism, according to Panikkar, is thus not dehumanising. The experience of Life as mysticism is a more or less harmonious union of the three forms of consciousness – divine, human and the world – a *cosmotheandric* experience which is more the fruit of a *being* than of *doing*, the awareness of being as an act, rather than as the outcome of action. Panikkar sharply criticises any form of mysticism that is described as indifferent to human suffering, but emphasises mysticism as directly touching the whole of the human condition. Mystical experience is a communion with reality that involves all our senses, the intellect, and the soul. In a *cosmotheandric* mysticism, God, the human person and the world form an indissoluble trinity. Mystical experience cannot be an individual experience alone; it always involves others as much as ourselves. Panikkar emphasises the social aspect of mysticism as being sensitive to human suffering, ecological crisis and the like.[4] Panikkar's understanding of mysticism is in tune with indigenous mystical experience where the emphasis is laid on the wholistic experience of life, not a spiritual experience of human being alone, but the meeting of three realities, the mystical union of divine, human and creation.

William James represents suitably *classical mysticism* where emphasis is laid on personal, intuitive, direct experience of God, which is more or less like that of the Hindu *samādhic* trance. He reduces mystical experience to individual pietistic spiritual experience. The mystical theology of Underhill can be seen as a link between classical mysticism and contemporary understanding of mysticism, represented in this paper by Panikkar. Underhill retains the extraordinariness of mystical experience, which is attained by people who follow 'mystic ways'. The *contemporary mysticism* represented by Panikkar deviates from the classical mysticism with its *wholistic intent* – mysticism as touching all aspects of human life and the whole creation, and its *inclusiveness* where mystical experience is considered as *a way of life available to all* who are genuinely for it. We shall see, as we go along, that the 'contemporary mysticism' represented

here by Panikkar is quite in tune with the mystical experience of the indigenous people.

Indigenous Mysticism of North-East India

Extensive studies have been done on mysticism in various religious traditions, but the mystical experience of the indigenous people has attracted less attention. Apart from a few inadequate studies on the mysticism of indigenous people of Africa, America, and Australian Aborigines, as I briefly discuss below, there is little or no work on this. Speaking on the American indigenous mysticism, John A. Grim of Yale University says, "Mysticism, although differently expressed in particular indigenous lifeways, manifests the intimate relatedness of person, community, spirits, and ecosystem. This interactive quaternity is ritually embedded in indigenous lifeways and symbolically unfolded in cosmological narratives."[5] Indigenous worldviews do not see the earth as simply an *objective other*, or a reality separate from human beings, but a complex web of persons, communities, and ecosystems charged with spiritual power where "the foundational interaction of humans with their local landscape is the matrix in which indigenous mystical knowledge of the sacred occurs."[6] Thus, Grim emphatically states that, "Indigenous mysticism is not withdrawn from society or ecology; rather, this mysticism is engaged in dynamic ethical responsibilities and ritual privileges."[7]

Australian Aborigines have the same kind of mystical experience of connectedness with nature. According to Joan Hendriks and Gerard Hall, the 'natural mysticism' of Indigenous Australian peoples is not the ecstatic, unrepeatable experience of a chosen individual, but the ordinary, everyday, abiding experience of the sacred and interconnected unity of all beings with the earth, cosmos, and ultimate reality. One is not separate from this reality; in fact, there is no one—nor for that matter no other— separate or separable from creation and the natural world.[8] The same trend is seen in African thought as well, where mysticism continues to describe the realm of interaction between humanity and the divine or supernatural. "The orientation is social and utilitarian", observes Jerusha T. Lamptey, Professor at Union Theological Seminary, "and the manifestations occur within the structure of indigenous rites; mystical practices aim to fulfil needs in society, and they do not exist as a separate body of practices."[9] He stresses the social emphasis of African indigenous mysticism, saying that African indigenous mysticism retains a social, worldly focus, deriving its purpose and value from its functionality in effecting change in society, rather than in the individual only.[10]

I attempt here to understand indigenous mystical experience, especially in relation to the indigenous people of North-East India. Mysticism

in Indigenous spirituality is the experience of oneness where divine,[11] humans, and creation share together the richness of wholistic reality. These three realities – divine, human, and nature – are mystically connected. In other words, mysticism for indigenous people is the meeting of these realities that enables experiential perceiving of the suffering of the natural world. The wholistic continuum relationship between divine, human, and nature is the pinnacle of indigenous peoples' mystical experience. Again, mysticism here is *relational* and *unitive*. It is *relational* as it emphasises the integral relationship between entities in the whole existence, pointing to the interconnectedness of all realities. It is *unitive* as it acts as the invisible uniting string that binds together diversified cosmic entities into one wholistic continuum.

Mystical Experience: The Core of Indigenous Spirituality

It may not be too much to say that indigenous people's religious experience, whether as individuals or a community, is by and large characterised by mystical elements. Indigenous people all over the world have a unique worldview, which is uncharacteristic of most other communities—a wholistic, non-dichotomous, and relational worldview, the conception of realities as integrally related. According to James Cox, who had done commendable work on African indigenous religions, the African indigenous religions are co-extensive with their societies because religion is an undifferentiated part of social life. Reciprocity between the community and the spirits marks the central core of indigenous religious activity.[12] The traditional worldview of the different tribes of North-East India, such as Mizo, Khasi, Naga, Garo, Boro, etc., is simply a unified non-dichotomous worldview where realities are considered as integrally related. The relationship and interconnectedness between humans, the divine, and nature is mysterious and therefore beyond explanation in human terms and categories. This mystical relationship defines indigenous spirituality, which is why it is always wholistic in nature and encompassing in its intent. For indigenous people, mystical experience is not compartmentalised into moments of deep meditation, *samādhic* trance, or possession by the spirit, though such specialised spiritual experiences do occur, particularly during rituals. Indigenous people live their daily lives in constant awareness of the active divine forces surrounding them and their deep connection with both animate and inanimate objects. This mystical sense of oneness with the divine and the created order lies at the heart of indigenous spirituality.

Spirit Possession: An Occasional Indigenous Mystical Experience

We may say that Indigenous religion is not rich in measurable doctrines and dogmas, traceable history, and philosophical speculation, but

enormously rich in religious experience, where such experiences are guided primarily by their constant interactions with spirits and nature. One of the most important features of indigenous religion is what may be termed as 'spirit possession'. Spirit possession mostly happens during ritual practices, in which one, or a few, or even several, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways which believers interpret as signifying that 'spirits' have taken 'possession' of them. In that condition, they are for them the 'mediums' of unseen beings."[13] Among the various North-East Indian tribes, the *shaman* who had the gift to contact God and spirits was in high demand. These *shamans* were the medicine men and the priests who were the ones who experienced spirit possession and were very important to the community. They were the ones who could tell the cause of sickness and suggest the remedy; they could practice divination and protect the people from danger. They were the ones who could call the spirits and commune with animals. Today, shamanism is still very much alive among many North-East tribes, especially among the non-Christian communities. The shamans are active among the Nishi and Apatani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Khasi Pnar of Meghalaya, etc., providing security and healing to the indigenous people.

The spirit possession phenomenon as an important religious practice shows the union and communion of the human with the divine. This mystical experience is helpful and important for the people in addressing various problems and suggesting ways and means by which such problems can be tackled meaningfully. Such a strong mystical experience is a source of security, contentment, and refuge for the Indigenous people all over the world.

Mystical Bond between Humans and Animals

One of the unique features of the indigenous religious experience in Northeast India is the mystical relationship some people have developed with animals, particularly the tiger. Certain 'priests' or 'medicine men/women' have an inexplicable and mysterious bond with tigers, where both the human and the tiger can sense, communicate, and feel each other's emotions, even sharing suffering when one is in pain. These individuals are known as 'tiger men/women.' In this mystical relationship, the human appears to hold a superior position, as he/she can command the tiger to do his bidding. However, if the tiger is hurt, the human will also feel the pain in his/her body; if the tiger is killed, the human will also die instantly. This relationship is deeply mystical and cannot be fully explained in human terms or categories. Such connections were common among several Northeast tribes in the past and still persist today. This phenomenon is particularly found among certain Naga tribes, such as the

AoNaga and Sumi Naga, etc. While the tiger is the most common animal involved in these mystical relationships, other creatures, like pythons, are also part of this unique bond with humans. What we can discern from this mystical phenomenon is the unprecedented closeness that can develop between humans and animals— where human beings regard animals not merely as co-creatures or, in a deeper sense, as part of the family, but as beings with whom they share life in its totality, achieving a profound oneness. Such is the strength of this relationship.

Mystical relations with nature

The indigenous peoples of Northeast India perceive reality as harmoniously and mystically interrelated, where seemingly distinct entities are united into a cohesive whole. The divine-human-nature continuum is a defining feature of their sacred worldview, as Nirmal Minz notes: "A nature-human-spirit continuum is the key to the tribal vision of life. All religious rites, observances, and festivities are based on this wholistic vision of reality. Tribal religion accepts the integral relationship of nature, human, and spirit in their experiences."[14] Nature and indigenous people are inseparable. Their worldview is naturalistic, where the supernatural is perceived as present both in the animate and the inanimate realms. The earth, the forest, the river and the hills, the birds and animals constitute the life of the indigenous people, who, dependent upon them, derive their knowledge, construct personality, folklore, culture, and also religion.[15] Wati Longchar maintains that for Ao Naga of Northeast India, "the Supreme Being is an integral part of the land; and at the same time, the land is not external to God. Without land, the Supreme Being ceases to work."[16] He goes on to say that for the indigenous people of Northeast India, "the land and the Supreme Being are inseparably related. The land is the symbol of unity of all living creatures and the spirit and the Supreme Being. The misuse of the land implies chaos among creatures. It is like killing one's own mother."[17]

According to Bolinkar Sohkhlet, Khasi-Pnar believe that inter-communication between humans and the divine is possible through natural elements. Forests, hills, and rivers are the ones through which such interrelationship and communication with the divine are facilitated. They consider forests and groves as well as some hills and rivers as the special sanctuaries of *ki ryngkew ki basa* (divine tutelary objects or benevolent spirits), through which God manifests his/her power. So, these objects facilitate a deeper bond between God and human beings.[18] Thus, natural objects are considered as the meeting point of the divine

and human or, in other words, the divine, creation, and human meet mystically in these objects.

Such a mystical experience of wholeness gives the indigenous people a sense of belonging to nature and God. It helps them *not* to see nature as an object of sensual enjoyment but as mysterious living beings with whom a mystical relationship bond is established.

Wati Longchar reminds us of the centrality of land to the indigenous people of Northeast India and how they are inseparably connected with it, receiving their sustenance as well as deriving their culture and religion from it. Thus, loss of land for the indigenous people becomes loss of culture and religion. Aos and Sangtam Nagas' conception of Supreme Being, *Lijaba*, which means 'the real of the real earth' or 'the one who enters the earth,' as coming from the soil or entering the soil clearly depicts the connection these peoples have with the land.[19] He says that "most of the tribes in North East India have myths which say that they are born out of the earth. Many Naga tribes, the Mizos, and Garos, say that their ancestors emerged from stones. The land holds not only the clan, village, and tribe as one, but it also unites the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors, and creation as one family."[20]

The earth is conceived symbolically as the spouse of the Supreme Being, mother of all creatures; the land and everything in it are regarded as having life and power; it is a place which gives an identity to the tribal community, a sacred place and a temple of the Supreme Being. So, the land is an integral part of the Supreme Being.[21] For many indigenous peoples of Northeast India, such as the Mizos, land is not only the source of their existence but also a dwelling place for divine beings. The Mizos believe that a divine being resides beneath the earth, while many benevolent spirits inhabit the land's surface. In the Mizo indigenous religion, priests invoke a god who is believed to dwell beneath the earth. Another prominent god, Khuavang, is said to have lived on the mountains, not in the heavens above.

Some of the most fundamental religious beliefs of the indigenous peoples highlight the mystical relationship that exists between the divine, humans, and nature. Beliefs in mana, fetishism, omens, divination, taboos, totems, and similar concepts indicate the numinous interconnectedness of realities in the minds of the indigenous people of Northeast India. In these beliefs, humans and spirits, or divine beings, share an inseparable relationship with elements of the created world, such as mountains, trees, rivers, rocks, uniquely shaped stones, bird beaks, and vegetables. This relationship depicts a mystical bond that weaves through these realities like an unseen yet deeply felt and experienced thread. For

example, many of the Garo clans are named after animate and inanimate objects such as land, animals, insects, vegetables, fruits, etc.,[22] showing an inseparable *totemic* relationship between human beings and these natural objects. The presence of mystical relationships between the tiger and certain men/women, as discussed before, underlines a close mystical relationship between humans and animals. The connections they develop with both animate and inanimate objects shape their perceptions of creation and their relationship to both the created world and the creator.

Thus, it can be asserted that the diverse indigenous peoples of Northeast India uphold the ultimate oneness of all creation. They view these varied entities not merely as physical objects but as vital religious and spiritual resources. Wati may be right when he says that for the indigenous people of North East India, "the whole universe is a religious universe.

Rocks and boulders, trees and rivers are not just empty objects, but religious objects; the voices and songs of animals speak of a religious language, the eclipse of the sun and moon are not simply physical phenomena of nature, but it speaks to the community that observes it, often warning of an impending danger and misfortune."[23]

These examples from the indigenous religious experiences of Northeast India (a list that could extend endlessly) illustrate the mystical interconnectedness of the divine, human, and all of creation. Such profound feelings of togetherness and belonging mark the indigenous sacred worldview, reflecting a rich heritage of mystical union and communion among all realities. Thus, the mysticism evident in the experiences of indigenous peoples is not indifferent or irrelevant to the contemporary socio-political and economic exploitation they face, nor to the indiscriminate destruction of nature. Due to this interconnectedness of existence, indigenous mystics can directly perceive the pain and suffering of the natural world.

The Uniqueness of Indigenous Mysticism

The indigenous peoples' mystical experience is unique in that it encompasses not only the union or communion between humans and God but also includes creation as an integral part of this relationship. This broader scope has the potential to cultivate a more holistic and liberative spirituality. The distinctiveness of indigenous mysticism lies in its wholeness of purpose and experience. The indigenous worldview attributes life to the environment and all its elements due to the pervasive presence of spirit, enabling them to interact with one another. Human beings and the environment, both plant and animal kingdoms, are in

constant communication and communion, sensing and responding to one another. From this mutual attentiveness emerges a sense of harmony, oneness, and wholeness among the various components of the cosmos. Such an ongoing and intense mystical union and communion between humans, creation, and the creator is rare in other spiritual traditions. Again, Indigenous mysticism is not centred solely on God but also emphasises interaction with spirits, whose roles are equally significant in indigenous thought and life.

Another distinguishing feature of indigenous mysticism is its emphasis on the social transformation of the community, rather than solely on personal spiritual upliftment. This focus makes it particularly relevant in the context of struggles for justice and peace. Lamptey highlights the difference between Christian or Islamic mysticism and African indigenous mysticism, noting that mysticism in Christianity and Islam often involves meditation and asceticism, where individuals withdraw from the physical world to undergo a subjective experience of the divine and personal transformation. In contrast, African indigenous mysticism is socially and worldly-oriented, aiming to transform society as a whole rather than focusing solely on individual transformation.[24] In other words, for indigenous peoples, mysticism is *a way of life* that permeates the entire society, rather than an extraordinary religious experience reserved for a few individuals.

Mysticism, as understood by indigenous peoples, is neither irrational nor impractical in addressing daily life, nor is it irrelevant in the context of the struggle for justice and peace. It is not a parapsychological phenomenon or occult practice that holds little significance in the post-modern world, nor is it a *samādhic*-ecstatic experience reserved for a select few with extraordinary mystical gifts. While elements like ecstasy, miracles, visions, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing are part of mystical experiences, they should not be regarded as synonymous with mysticism. Furthermore, indigenous mysticism is not limited to feelings and emotions alone- it leaves ample room for intellect and reasoning. In this sense, indigenous mysticism is inclusive, wholistic, life-affirming, and deeply relevant for addressing today's ecological crisis.

Indigenous Mysticism as a source for addressing ecological crisis

Northeast India's indigenous mysticism holds profound insights that can contribute to solving today's ecological crisis. Indigenous worldviews provide an alternative understanding of humanity's place in the world-

one that recognises the interdependence of humans, the divine, and the natural environment. This mystical relationship is rooted in a reverence for all forms of life, resulting in a life-affirming approach to the natural world. The ecological crisis we face today— driven by industrialisation, deforestation, climate change, and pollution— requires a radical rethinking of our relationship with the Earth. Indigenous mysticism offers both practical and spiritual resources for that rethinking.

There is no need to reiterate the gravity of the ecological crisis we face today. The northeastern regions of India, inhabited mainly by tribals (indigenous people), seem to have maintained a better ecological balance compared to most parts of the country. However, heavy deforestation and rapid developmental works such as the construction of roads, urbanisation, and industrialisation have disrupted this balance in Northeast India.

Currently, India's forest cover is 21.71% of the country's geographical area, whereas the Northeast region boasts a forest cover of 66.52%. According to the India State of Forest Report 2021, the top five states in terms of forest cover as a percentage of total geographical area are Mizoram (84.53%), Arunachal Pradesh (79.33%), Meghalaya (76%), Manipur (74.34%), and Nagaland (73.90%) – all from Northeast India. However, this report may be misleading because it seems to consider 'green cover' as 'forest cover' rather than 'real forest cover.' When we consider true forests that are habitable by animals and birds, Northeast India may not be significantly better than the rest of the country. The region's heavy rainfall, coupled with a lower population density and its mountainous nature and soil conditions, account for the greenery in the Northeast. However, local practices such as hunting wild animals and birds for consumption and heavy fishing have led to the depletion of wildlife in the region. In terms of the presence of terrestrial and aquatic animals and birds, Northeast India may not be much better than the rest of the country.

To address such a situation, I feel that we have resources within us, and what is important is to rediscover and re-practice those resources that have been curtailed for quite some time now. Due to conversion into Christianity, the majority of the tribes in Northeast India abandoned their traditional religions. Along with the indigenous religions, gone were the resources that helped our forefathers and foremothers maintain ecological balance. There are significant changes that have taken place after a number of tribes left their traditional religion under the sway of modernism:

(a) The wholistic worldview has been replaced by the Western Christian dualistic perspective
(b) The sense of oneness with nature has diminished
(c) Respect for trees and animals has faded
(d) In many cases, the deep connection with nature has been reduced
(e) The belief in a God who dwells in the earth, rocks, rivers, trees, vegetables, and animals has disappeared, replaced by the literal understanding of "Our Father who art in heaven"
(f) A "this-worldly" attitude has been replaced by an "otherworldly" focus
(g) Indigenous mystical experiences with both God and nature have faded, replaced by Christian mystical experiences with God alone
(h) The focus has shifted to "God and human relations" from "God-human-creation relations"
(i) Monetary profit has become the primary driving force, leading to large-scale deforestation

And much more…

It is important now to rediscover the indigenous wholistic mystical spirituality in order to feel the pulse of nature again. Contemporary Christians in Northeast India emphasise mystical union with God. The many revivals that swayed the churches in Northeast India produced the desire in the minds of the people to have mystical experiences with God. Countless testimonies are recorded claiming such mystical experiences with God. The Christian mysticism known to and practised by Christians in Northeast India is, by and large, classical mysticism that emphasises personal contact with God in a mysterious way. We have to move further away from this and inculcate the indigenous mysticism, which is our own, that will help us reestablish our lost relationship with nature.

The relevance and implication of the indigenous mysticism to address the ecological crisis include:

Mystical connection with the land

The indigenous people of Northeast India have a deep connection with the land. Land is considered the dwelling place of God; an integral part of God, the separation of God and land is impossible. This sends a strong message to protect the land. The people consider themselves as being out of the land; they worship a God who is present beneath the earth. Thus, land, people, and God are united as one. Destruction of land in any form due to developmental works, etc., is equal to self-destruction and the destruction of the presence of God. So, the mystical connection between God, land, and humanity teaches us how to treat the land with care and

love. Destruction done because of a selfish, profit-oriented mentality is an unpardonable offence in the eyes of the mystical experience of the Northeast Indian indigenous people.

Kinship with Nature

For many indigenous communities in Northeast India, nature is not merely a backdrop or a passive resource but an active, divine presence that connects them to the sacred. Forests, rivers, hills, birds, rocks, and other natural entities are seen as agents of God—abodes and sanctuaries where divine beings dwell. These objects act as intermediaries between humans and God, serving as sacred meeting places where divine blessings are sought, and God's voice can be heard.

This understanding of nature goes beyond simple reverence; it forms the very foundation of the indigenous worldview. The natural world is imbued with sacredness, and without it, the relationship between humanity and the divine would be severed. Indigenous communities believe that these natural entities must be protected and nurtured because they sustain not just the physical world but also the spiritual connection between humanity and the divine. Without forests, rivers, or animals, the link between humans and God would be disrupted, leading to spiritual impoverishment.

This deep kinship with nature fosters a strong ethical responsibility to care for the natural world. The sacred value placed on natural entities becomes a compelling source of inspiration for ecological stewardship. Indigenous people recognise that the destruction of nature leads to a rupture in the cosmic balance, affecting not only the material environment but also the spiritual harmony between God, humans, and the rest of creation.

Kinship with Animals and Insects

In the indigenous belief systems of Northeast India, animals and insects are not just biological creatures but bearers of spiritual significance. Beliefs in *mana* (spiritual power), fetishism, omens, divination, taboos, and totems reflect a worldview in which humans, animals, and all other beings share a deep interconnectedness. This interconnectedness blurs the lines between the animate and inanimate, suggesting that everything in creation is imbued with life and spirit.

Totemic beliefs are especially significant, with many clans taking their names from specific animals, insects, plants, landforms, or other natural objects. For example, a clan might be named after a bird, a river, or a

particular species of plant, symbolising a deep kinship with that totemic entity. These totems are not merely symbolic; they represent a profound spiritual bond between humans and the natural world. This bond implies responsibility- humans are bound to protect and honour the animals or natural objects that are sacred to them, for these totems embody their ancestral identity and spiritual heritage.

The totemic relationship serves as a reminder that humans are not separate from the rest of creation but part of an intricate spiritual continuum that includes animals, plants, and even inanimate objects like rocks or rivers. Each totem represents the sacred link between human life and the natural world, reinforcing the idea that humans are stewards of creation. This kinship, therefore, fosters a sense of ecological responsibility, urging people to care for the natural entities with which they share this spiritual bond. By honouring their totems, indigenous communities affirm their connection to the universe and fulfil their role in maintaining the balance and harmony of the cosmos.

This mystical kinship provides a powerful framework for rethinking humanity's relationship with the animal kingdom in the context of the ecological crisis. In contrast to the Western anthropocentric worldview, where animals are often seen as inferior or merely instrumental to human needs, indigenous cultures grant agency, dignity, and sacredness to animal life. Animals are not seen as lesser beings; rather, they are recognised as spiritual participants in the broader ecosystem. This perspective could serve as an antidote to the modern ecological challenges of species extinction, habitat destruction, and the commodification of animals.

By viewing animals as co-inhabitants of the Earth, indigenous wisdom promotes a view that recognises their intrinsic worth and advocates for their protection, not just for ecological reasons but as a spiritual necessity.

The concept of mystical kinship with animals carries profound implications for contemporary environmental ethics. It encourages a sense of responsibility and protection, suggesting that the conservation of animal species is both a spiritual obligation and an ecological imperative. This understanding is vividly illustrated by the life of Chawngkhupa, a Mizo Christian mystic, who was known for his deep connection with the natural world. Chawngkhupa would release crabs caught in crab traps, saying, "When I release them, they sing 'Hallelujah' as they swim into deeper waters." On several occasions, it was reported that he sought warmth and safety by sleeping among wild animals such as tigers. He was even said to communicate with creatures like tigers, pythons, and bees. Such

accounts offer a glimpse into the profound mystical relationship that indigenous people, like Chawngkhupa, maintain with the natural world, emphasising respect, coexistence, and protection.

In this mystical worldview, animals are more than just creatures to be observed or utilised; they are spiritual beings with whom humans share a sacred connection. By embracing this perspective, we are encouraged to foster a more respectful and harmonious relationship with the animal kingdom. Indigenous wisdom reminds us that animals, like humans, have their own place within the divine order of creation and deserve to be treated with the care and reverence that comes with that understanding. This mystical connection, rooted in indigenous traditions, offers not only spiritual insight but also practical guidance for addressing the ecological crisis by promoting the protection of animal species and the preservation of biodiversity as part of a broader spiritual and ecological harmony.

Divine-Human-Nature Relations as an Example of Cosmic Harmony

Indigenous cosmology integrates the divine, humans, and nature into a harmonious whole. In many indigenous belief systems, natural features like rivers, mountains, and forests are seen as the abodes of deities or spirits. This sacred geography teaches that humans are not masters of the Earth but custodians who must maintain harmony between the divine forces and the natural world. Rituals, prayers, and sacrifices are performed not only for human benefit but also to ensure the well-being of the land, animals, and elements.

This principle of cosmic harmony has profound ecological implications. In the indigenous worldview, disrupting the balance of nature is akin to disturbing the order of the cosmos, leading to disorder, famine, and disease. Indigenous practices that respect the limits of natural resources—such as controlled hunting, forest preservation, and sacred groves—reflect this understanding of balance. In the face of today's environmental degradation, this ancient wisdom teaches that ecological health is essential to the overall health of society. Policies that seek to restore natural balance, such as reforestation, sustainable agriculture, and wildlife conservation, resonate with the indigenous notion that nature must be respected as part of a greater, divinely-ordered system.

Spiritual Response to Ecological Crisis from an Indigenous Mystical Perspective

James Gustave (Gus) Speth, lawyer, author, and a senior US advisor on climate change, says, "I used to think that top environmental problems

were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these, we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that." This calls for spiritual involvement to fight against the ecological crisis.

Indigenous mysticism offers a holistic spiritual framework for addressing the ecological crisis. Unlike many religious traditions that focus on individual salvation or transcendence, indigenous spirituality emphasises collective well-being and a this-worldly approach. The fate of the human community is intertwined with the fate of the natural world, and therefore, any ecological harm is also spiritual harm. Rituals, songs, and stories are passed down to remind each generation of its responsibility to the land and its creatures.

In responding to the ecological crisis, indigenous mysticism teaches that healing the Earth requires a spiritual transformation. This transformation begins by recognising the sacredness of the natural world and understanding that environmental destruction is not just a physical issue but a spiritual one. Indigenous perspectives urge us to adopt a reverential attitude towards nature, fostering a spirituality that sees environmental care as an act of worship. This can inspire movements for ecological justice that are not just political or economic in nature, but deeply spiritual, calling for a renewed relationship with the Earth rooted in respect, care, and sacred obligation.

Conclusion

The indigenous mysticism of Northeast India offers profound spiritual insights into how humanity can address the contemporary ecological crisis. Rooted in a worldview that sees nature as sacred and interconnected with the divine, this mysticism challenges the modern, utilitarian approach to nature that has led to widespread environmental degradation. By understanding the land, animals, and natural elements as divine embodiments, the indigenous people of Northeast India offer an alternative framework that promotes harmony, reverence, and stewardship over exploitation and destruction.

At the heart of this indigenous wisdom is the belief in the inseparability of humans, nature, and the divine. The mystical connection with the land, kinship with animals, and recognition of the sacred in rivers, forests,

and mountains all point toward a holistic vision of the world—one in which ecological health and spiritual well-being are deeply intertwined. Indigenous cosmologies teach that the destruction of nature is not only an ecological problem but also a spiritual crisis, disrupting the cosmic balance that sustains life. This understanding urges humanity to rethink its relationship with nature, to see environmental care not just as a scientific or economic task but as a spiritual responsibility.

Furthermore, indigenous traditions emphasise the importance of collective well-being and a this-worldly focus that contrasts with the often individualistic and transcendental orientation of other religious traditions. In the face of biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecological degradation, indigenous mysticism provides an ethical and spiritual foundation for ecological justice. It calls for a return to a reverential relationship with the earth, urging us to protect and preserve the natural world as an act of both ecological necessity and spiritual devotion. In a world driven by materialism, greed, and exploitation, the indigenous wisdom of Northeast India offers a necessary corrective—a reminder that the earth is not something to be dominated or depleted but a sacred, living entity that deserves our respect and care. As we face the escalating environmental crisis, the teachings of indigenous mysticism can inspire a deeper ecological consciousness, one that sees the earth not as a commodity, but as a divine partner in the shared journey of life.

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[5] John A. Grim, "Cosmology and Native American Mystical Traditions" in Theologiques, (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2001), p. 115.

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[9] Jerusha T. Lamptey, "Mysticism in African Thought", in New Dictionary of the History of Ideas, edited by Maryanne Cline Horowitz, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), p. 1559.

[10] Ibid., p. 1560.

[11] The term 'divine' is used here instead of a more popular generic term 'God' for one specific reason. Indigenous folk all over the world generally believe in the existence of one Supreme Being which can be referred to as 'God'. However, apart from the Supreme Being, they also believe in the existence and importance of other divine beings and a number of benevolent spirits who are as active as, and indispensable or rather more so in some areas of life to the indigenous people than the Supreme Being. But interestingly, though they are worshipped, prayed to or invoked upon, they are hardly considered as God. By using the term 'divine', I intent to include all of these – the Supreme Being and other divine beings as well as the host of benevolent spirits.

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Struggles of Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia in the Context of the Discourse on Power, Politics and Empire in the Council of Nicaea

Jenne Jessica Revanda Pieter

Introduction

Since March 2024 until now, in the last month of President Jokowi's second term in Indonesia, there have been repeated waves of demonstrations from Indigenous Peoples throughout Indonesia in various places.[1] These demonstrations have occurred periodically until now in various places in Indonesia.[2] The demonstrations demanded that the Indigenous Peoples' Bill be passed. The Indigenous Peoples have been waiting for approximately 15 years since 2009 when they were included in the queue to be passed in the legislative direction. The Indigenous Peoples have to swallow a bitter pill again because their wait has not been fulfilled. Two Presidents with two repeated terms have made the Indigenous Peoples restless. In fact, President Jokowi is one of the presidents expected by the Indigenous Peoples because of his background as a non-bureaucrat or military person, so that almost 12 million Indigenous Peoples' votes were committed to President Jokowi.[3] But until August 18, 2024, President Jokowi's last state speech on Indonesia's Birthday, not a single phrase was found about Indigenous Peoples.[4] The speech contained figures claiming success during Jokowi's leadership period, which were figures obtained through the oppression of indigenous communities.[5]

Indigenous peoples in Indonesia are social groups that have inhabited a certain area for a long time, have unique social, economic, and cultural systems, and have a special relationship with the natural environment in which they live. They are the guardians of traditions, local knowledge, and invaluable biodiversity. The Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago explains that Indigenous Peoples are groups of people who have a history of origin and have occupied customary areas for generations. Indigenous Peoples have sovereignty over land and natural resources, socio-cultural life regulated by customary law, and customary institutions that maintain the sustainability of the life of Indigenous Peoples as indigenous communities.[6] The draft law on Indigenous Peoples explains that Indigenous Peoples are a group of people who have lived for generations in a certain geographical area, have ancestral origins and/or

common residence, cultural identity, customary law, a strong relationship with land and the environment, and a value system that determines economic, political, social, cultural, and legal institutions.[7] The draft law has complete recognition of Indigenous Peoples and can be a reference for upholding the struggle for justice for indigenous peoples throughout Indonesia. However, this has not been realised until now due to economic, political, and power interests that have made indigenous peoples victims.

Economy, Politics, and Power are three complex factors that are interrelated with each other and sometimes become the background of various major events in various parts of the world.

Power is used to influence political and economic policies to protect the interests of certain groups. Behind the curtain, we can see how economic, political, and power interests play their role in producing a decision that benefits and protects the ruler. The Council of Nicaea, held in AD 325 on the initiative of Emperor Constantine the Great, is an important milestone in the history of Christianity. This large meeting of bishops not only discussed theological doctrine but also implied the complex dynamics of power between church and state under the auspices of the Roman Empire. The main purpose of the council was to unite the Church and provide a clear definition of Christian doctrine. However, the decisions resulting from this council had broad implications for the history of missions and evangelism, which were then utilised in the context of colonialism. This paper will try to explain the relationship between the struggles of Indigenous people, missions, and the Council of Nicaea in the framework of the discourse of power.

Method

This paper uses a qualitative research method, with the literature used in the form of literature from the fields of Theology and Culture to explain the three things that have been mentioned above in the introduction. Literature from the field of Theology is used to explain the Council of Nicaea and the Mission, and literature from culture is used to explain indigenous peoples. Several libraries are also used to explain how power factors link these events, as well as provide confirmation in an effort to answer the objectives of the paper.

The current condition of indigenous peoples in Indonesia is very diverse and complex. On the one hand, we see efforts to recognise and protect the rights of indigenous peoples through various government policies and civil society movements. However, on the other hand, indigenous

peoples still face various challenges. The confiscation of land and customary territories is the most urgent problem faced by indigenous peoples in various parts of the world, including in Indonesia. Indigenous peoples are also often victims of human rights violations, such as criminalisation, intimidation, and violence. This happens because they are often considered obstacles to the economic and political interests of certain groups. These things make their cultural identity and traditional knowledge disappear.

In a publication conducted by the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago as a year-end note, it was revealed that 2,578,073 Ha of indigenous territories throughout Indonesia were seized by the state and corporations in the name of investment. According to the data presented, cases of seizure of indigenous territories were mostly accompanied by violence and criminalisation.[8] In analysing these cases, the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago even explained that, if in the previous year the seizure of indigenous territories was used for industrial interests such as mining and forestry, in 2023 the seizure of indigenous territories was used for broader interests.[9] And even these interests use the words green economy or renewable energy. This is the same as a form of green colonialism.

The roots of green colonialism date back to the colonial era, when European powers used environmental arguments to justify the exploitation of natural resources and the subjugation of indigenous peoples. Green colonialism is closely tied to the Green Revolution. Although the Green Revolution was intended to increase agricultural productivity, it had negative consequences for many developing countries. It led to a reliance on Western technology and ideas, which changed local food systems and contributed to environmental degradation.[10]

These activities were legitimised by governments using the discourse of sustainable development. The discourse of sustainable development, while often presented as a progressive and equitable approach, can also be used to perpetuate existing power imbalances. It can be used to justify the imposition of Western environmental standards on developing countries, while ignoring their own cultural and ecological knowledge.[11] Green colonialism is a phenomenon in which environmental conservation and sustainable development practices are used as a tool to control natural resources in developing countries, often at the expense of the rights and interests of indigenous peoples. The relationship between green colonialism and indigenous peoples is complex and has significant

impacts. In fact, indigenous peoples in Indonesia have a very important role in maintaining biodiversity, preserving culture, and maintaining environmental balance.

a. Indigenous Peoples' Living Space: More than just a place to live.

For Indigenous Peoples, the territory that they have inhabited and managed for generations is the heart of their identity, knowledge, and life practices. Indigenous peoples have a very close relationship with nature. They understand the cycles of nature, utilise natural resources sustainably, and have in-depth knowledge of the plants, animals, and ecosystems around them. Indigenous peoples have a unique local knowledge system, which is passed down from generation to generation. This knowledge includes how to farm, hunt, process food, use traditional medicine, and various other aspects of life. The living space of indigenous peoples is also a container for their social and cultural systems. Here, they carry out rituals, traditional ceremonies, and various other social activities that strengthen the identity and values of the community. Aholiab in Cermin Eksisi Masyarakat Kepulauan dalam Pembangunan Bangsa, explains that the Maluku people, as an island society, see land and sea as an inseparable whole. This wholeness is patterned in the system of reason, belief system, and belief system that is clearly depicted in the cosmology and local knowledge of the Maluku people.[12] So that the living space of indigenous peoples is not just a certain area with certain boundaries, but a complete and complex system that is interrelated between humans, nature, and culture.

Indigenous territories are an integral part of the living space of indigenous peoples. These are areas traditionally owned and managed by indigenous peoples and often have clear boundaries that are respected by the surrounding communities. This is why indigenous peoples' living spaces are so important. Indigenous peoples are often the guardians of forests, wetlands, and other ecosystems rich in biodiversity. Indigenous peoples' local knowledge is invaluable in addressing global challenges, such as climate change and environmental degradation. Indigenous peoples' living spaces are where they feel safe, rooted, and in control of their lives. Indigenous peoples' living spaces are the foundation of their cultural identity. One of the biggest threats is the grabbing of indigenous lands and territories for development, plantations, and mining. Climate change, over-exploitation of natural resources, and pollution threaten the sustainability of indigenous peoples' living environments. Modernisation

and globalisation often bring rapid and fundamental changes to the lives of indigenous peoples, threatening their traditional values and practices. Indigenous peoples' living spaces are a valuable asset for Indonesia and the world. Through a deeper understanding of indigenous peoples' living spaces, we can appreciate Indonesia's cultural and natural diversity and contribute to sustainable development.

b. Injustice to the Living Space of Indigenous Peoples: The Story of the Seti Indigenous People, Central Maluku.

Land and indigenous peoples have a very close and inseparable relationship. For many indigenous peoples around the world, land is not just a natural resource or economic asset, but the heart of their identity, culture, and spirituality. Land is the place of origin, ancestors, and the long history of an indigenous community. Through land, they bind themselves to the past and build their collective identity and self-identity. Land is even related to the beliefs of Indigenous Peoples in sacred spiritual power. Indigenous rituals are often carried out in certain places that are considered to have high spiritual value. Land provides natural resources needed for the survival of indigenous peoples, such as food, medicine, and building materials.[13]

Indigenous peoples have traditional knowledge about sustainable environmental management. They understand that the balance between humans and nature is essential for collective survival. Unfortunately, indigenous lands are often the target of conflict and exploitation. Large-scale infrastructure, mining, and plantation developments often displace indigenous peoples from their lands. The growth of cities and the expansion of urban areas also threaten the existence of indigenous lands. Climate change is causing more frequent natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, and landslides, which have an impact on the lives of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples, as groups that have interacted closely with nature for centuries, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Climate change is not only changing their physical environment, but also disrupting the social, cultural, and economic order that has been established for generations.[14]

The story of the Seti Community is real evidence of how injustice towards the space of Indigenous communities continues to occur. Seti is one of the indigenous community groups within the Tewa/Seti language group. Seti is located in the North East Seram Seti sub-district, part of the North East Seram island, including the Central Maluku district- Maluku Province,

East Indonesia. The Seti community knows their land as Setwa, which means peace, but some also interpret it as originating from animals in the forest. Mount Luba is their original place of residence. The traditional way of life that is still held by the Seti community is seen in everyday life. Customs play a large role in the daily life of the Seti community; the community still lives in the role of clans. Their government structure in traditional villages, or called negeri, is a form of customary government with a traditional structure. Several clans from the Seti community still live in the mountains, which they consider to be their "Old Village" (Ambon-Malay: First Village), and several clan groups are still very traditional by living a nomadic lifestyle.[15]

Since 1983, transmigration began on Seram Island, especially in the northern part of Seram Island. Since then, the influx of immigrant communities from outside Maluku (islands outside Maluku Province) has continued to arrive. Transmigration (from Dutch: transmigratie) is a programme created by the Indonesian government to move residents from a densely populated area (city) to another area (village) in Indonesia. People who participate in the transmigration programme are called transmigrants. The official goal of the programme is to reduce poverty and population density on Java and provide opportunities for people who want to work, as well as meet the need for labour to process resources on other islands.[16]

The transmigration programme has received a lot of criticism from local communities whose areas are targeted by the transmigration programme, because there are still many other agendas besides population distribution, namely, natural resource exploration. The latest data from the government regarding the population in the Seti area is 14,293 people, and the indigenous population of Seti is only 2,445 people, or 15% of the total population in the North East Seram Seti sub-district (Central Maluku in Figures: 2023). This greatly affects the democratic process and policy-making in regional development. The Seti Indigenous Community only makes up 15% of the figure in fulfilling the programme's needs. A complementary figure among the majority of existing figures. They become foreigners in their own customary land.[17]

Since 1983, when the transmigration programme was carried out, the Seti indigenous people were forced to move and leave all their ways of life, even their land was taken over by the government and distributed according to the government programme for the entire transmigrant community.

The Seti people were forced to change their traditional lifestyle and cultivation patterns, which had an impact on the traditional food security patterns of the Seti people. This is because the transmigrants brought a government programme, namely, rice fields for planting rice. Changes in planting patterns changed the eating habits of the Seti people, which were originally sago (Metroxylon Sago), bananas, and cassava, changing to rice from rice plants in the rice fields. Along with changes in cultivation patterns and changes in eating patterns, there were changes in their lifestyles, which had an impact on many things. For example, because rice fields are a programme that brings together transmigrants, the local people have to plant rice, which is not their original expertise, compared to the newcomers who are familiar with rice as their local crop. The failure of the Seti people is considered by the local government to be due to ignorance, low human resources, and their laziness, even though the government does not understand the traditional planting patterns of the Seti people well. The transmigration programme resulted in several unfair treatments for the Seti indigenous people, including:

1. Land Acquisition by the government on the basis of the government's transmigration programme. And as good Indonesian citizens, the Seti community is obliged to give. The Seti Indigenous Community is under duress, which makes them lose their rights to their land.
2. Changes in cropping patterns and changes in food security patterns, from sago to rice, have resulted in poverty in the Seti community. Changed identities due to changes in farming/gardening patterns and environmental changes. Changes in farming/gardening patterns that used to be in the forest and produced sago, changed to rice field cultivation, resulting in environmental changes that result in soil infertility, flooding in the rainy season, drought in the dry season, and potential forest fires. For the needs of rice fields, the government changes forests into rice fields. Rice fields require a lot of water, so the government changes river courses into dams so that flooding occurs. Changed agricultural patterns force the Seti community to adapt. This change also has an impact on the processing of food for the Seti community's families.

   Loss of customary forests due to plantations, rice fields, and mining. The loss of the sago tree area along the Kobi River due to the opening of rice fields, which is the main programme to

make the government's transmigration programme a success. The change in the staple crops of indigenous people is only for the reason of increasing input income to the economy of the district, province, and country. Because rice is considered the staple food of the majority of the population in Indonesia and is one of the main ingredients for export to other countries. The stomachs of the majority group are considered more important than the stomachs of the minority group.

3. The naming of the transmigrant village uses the name of the area of origin of the transmigrant village above the name of the land of the Seti indigenous people. This changes the sovereignty of the land of the Seti indigenous people over their land. This has an impact on the total understanding of the Seti indigenous people, especially Seti indigenous women, of the land which is their mother and also the body of women.
4. The path of settlements and garden land in the forest is cut off by the location of transmigrant settlements and rice fields. This forces the Seti Indigenous people to travel further than usual to survive the changes that have occurred. Some of them try to adapt by becoming farm labourers in the rice fields of the transmigrant community, but in the end, many give up; they return to the forest, their land, which for them provides many things, even though they have to walk very far.[18]

In the tension, many Seti indigenous people withdrew. They tried to adapt, but there were too many changes that they had to face, making them unable to adapt. Injustice against the Seti indigenous people is one of the thousands of cases that exist, at least in Indonesia; even many other indigenous peoples have a history of struggle with a history of conflict with the government that unilaterally seized their customary forests.[19] Data presented by several independent institutions throughout 2023 showed that there were 241 conflicts that resulted in the seizure of 638,188 hectares of agricultural land, customary areas, fishing areas, and settlements from 135,608 families. As many as 110 conflict eruptions have sacrificed 608 land rights fighters, as a result of the repressive approach in the agrarian conflict area.[20] This record makes Indonesia the top among the countries in Asia with the highest agrarian conflicts.

From the description above, it is clear that the state, as the one that has the power, acts only for certain interests and orientations.

c. Discourse on Power, Politics and Empire in the Council of Nicaea.

The Council of Nicaea, a monumental event in the history of Christianity, was not only an arena for theological debate but also a reflection of the complexity of the interaction between religion, politics, and power at that time. The presence of Emperor Constantine the Great as the organiser and active participant in this council further underlines the inseparable political dimension of the event. The Council of Nicaea was held at a time when the Roman Empire was successfully reunited under the rule of Constantine. This emperor saw the importance of religious unity to strengthen the political unity of the empire. The emergence of the Arianism movement that questioned the equality between God the Father and Jesus Christ was a threat to the unity of the Church. Constantine realised that theological divisions could trigger political divisions. The Church at that time had a very large influence on society. By controlling the Church, a ruler could consolidate his power.[21]

The significant role of the Emperor in organising the Council of Nicaea.

Constantine not only organised the council but also participated in the theological debate. This shows how great his influence was in determining the outcome of the council. Constantine's main motivation was to create unity within the Church to strengthen the empire. He hoped that by reaching a theological agreement, internal divisions that could threaten political stability could be avoided. Constantine did not hesitate to use his influence and power to encourage the bishops to reach an agreement. He even put pressure on those who disagreed with the majority view. This strengthened the emperor's power. The Council of Nicaea strengthened the emperor's position as the supreme leader, both in state and religious affairs. The decisions of the council that were in line with the emperor's political interests further strengthened his authority. This made the Church a propaganda tool for imperial power. The teachings agreed upon in the council were used as a basis for justifying the emperor's power and uniting the people under one leadership. Thus, the Council of Nicaea marked the beginning of a symbiotic relationship between the Church and the State that would last for centuries. The Church received protection from the state, while the state received legitimacy from the Church.[22]

The Council of Nicaea had a very significant impact on Christian mission and evangelism. The decisions produced by this council provided a strong

theological foundation, formed a more organised church structure, and motivated missionaries to spread the gospel. The Council of Nicaea was not only a theological event but also a political event that had a very significant impact on the history of Christianity and the Western world. The interaction between religion, politics, and power that occurred in this council provides valuable lessons about the complexity of the relationship between the three elements. The Council of Nicaea, held in AD 325, was an important milestone in the history of Christianity.[23] This council succeeded in uniting various understandings of the Trinity and establishing the foundations of Christian doctrine that are still recognised today. Although it had a noble purpose, it has been misused by some parties for colonial purposes. It is important for us to understand the historical context and separate pure Christian doctrine from false and exploitative interpretations. In the current context, we need to build a more inclusive understanding and respect for cultural diversity in religion.

d. Learning from the Past, as a Conjunction between Indigenous Peoples, the Council of Nicaea, and Decolonial Mission.

Connecting a very distant historical event, namely the Council of Nicaea, which took place in the 4th century, with the contemporary issue of injustice towards indigenous peoples in the context of decolonisation. At first glance, these two things seem very different. However, if we dig deeper, there is a common thread that connects the three elements, especially in the context of how power, religion, and cultural identity interact with each other. The Council of Nicaea, held in AD 325, was a significant milestone in the history of Christianity. This meeting not only discussed theological doctrine but also implied the complex power dynamics between church and state under the auspices of the Roman Empire. The decisions made at this council had long-lasting impacts, including in shaping religious and political identities in Europe. Injustice towards indigenous peoples is a global problem that has been going on for centuries. Colonisation, colonialism, and unsustainable economic development have led to the loss of land, the neglect of cultural rights, and discrimination against indigenous peoples around the world.[24]

The Council of Nicaea shows how political power can influence religion. Likewise, in the context of colonialism, religion is often used as a tool to justify colonisation and cultural subordination. Both the Council of Nicaea and the struggles of indigenous peoples were closely related

to cultural identity. The Council of Nicaea sought to establish a unified Christian identity, while indigenous peoples struggled to maintain their unique cultural identities. In both the context of the Council of Nicaea and the struggles of indigenous peoples, there were elements of injustice and resistance. Bishops who disagreed with the decisions of the council resisted, as did indigenous peoples who continued to fight for recognition and justice.[25]

Just as the Council of Nicaea legitimised the rule of Emperor Constantine, colonialism often used religion to legitimise colonisation and the exploitation of natural resources. The Council of Nicaea sought to impose one form of Christianity on all peoples, while colonialism often sought to destroy local cultures and replace them with the culture of the coloniser. In both the councils and in the struggles of indigenous peoples, there was resistance to the dominant power. This resistance was often fuelled by attempts to maintain cultural identity and autonomy.

The colonial approach to interacting with indigenous peoples is characterised by a number of characteristics that reflect inequality, domination, and often the imposition of colonial values and belief systems. Colonialism often adopts a paternalistic attitude, considering indigenous peoples as “children” who need to be “guided” and “educated”. Colonial culture is often considered to be of a higher standard and more advanced than indigenous culture. Racist views that place indigenous peoples as racially inferior are also often the basis of the colonial approach. Colonial missions and evangelism can inevitably occur through forced conversion; converting indigenous peoples to the colonial religion is often done in a way that is coercive and does not respect their original beliefs. Indigenous customs are often changed or adapted to suit the teachings of the colonial religion, creating an inauthentic contextualisation. Colonialism often involves the seizure of indigenous peoples’ land and natural resources for the benefit of the colonial economy. Indigenous peoples are often forced to work in forced labour on plantations or projects, separating indigenous people from their land, destroying social structures, and disrupting traditional governance systems. Indigenous languages and cultures were often suppressed and seen as obstacles to the colonisation process. This colonial approach had a very damaging impact on indigenous peoples.

Understanding the relationship between the Council of Nicaea, indigenous injustice, and colonialism can help us recognise recurring

patterns. By understanding how power, religion, and cultural identity have interacted throughout history, we can better recognise recurring patterns in contemporary conflicts. We can also understand the historical roots of injustice, which can help us build more just and inclusive societies. By understanding the process of decolonisation, we can more effectively support indigenous peoples in their struggles for their rights.

Conclusion

Despite significant differences, indigenous peoples and the Nicene Creed have important common ground in respect for creation, the human relationship to the transcendent, and ethics. By understanding and appreciating differences and seeking common ground, we can build stronger bridges of dialogue and contribute to the development of more just and sustainable societies. Indigenous peoples, with their deep cultural and spiritual roots, have unique cosmological views. They often see nature as sacred, as having a spirit, and as having a close reciprocal relationship with humans. These beliefs shape the way they live, interact with their environment, and understand their place in the world.

The Nicene Creed is not just a collection of words; it is a living and dynamic statement of faith. It continues to be relevant throughout the ages because it touches on the deepest dimension of human existence: our relationship to God, to each other, and to the world.

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Faith and Unity in Times of Religious Polarisation; Experiences in the Context of the Council of Nicaea

Alfian Rico Komimbin

Polarisation in Indonesia

The polarisation within Indonesian society has intensified in recent years, largely driven by various factors, particularly political ones. Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world. As of 2024, the country has a total population of 280 million, with over 207 million people (87.2%) identifying as Muslim.[1] Christianity in Indonesia comprises approximately 19.6 million people (6.9%), with Catholics numbering around 8.4 million (2.9%). Other religions include Hinduism (1.7%), Buddhism (0.7%), and Confucianism (0.05%). Despite its large Muslim population, Indonesia is not an Islamic state, nor a religious state in the conventional sense. The nation's founders succeeded in embracing the noble values of Indonesian society and formulating Pancasila (the Five Principles) as the foundation of the state. Pancasila serves as the state ideology, guiding the principles of national and state life in Indonesia. The Five Principles are: 1) Belief in the One and Only God; 2) Just and Civilised Humanity; 3) The Unity of Indonesia; 4) Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising from deliberations among representatives; 5) Social Justice for all the people of Indonesia. In addition to Pancasila, Indonesia upholds the national motto, *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity).

As a democratic country, Indonesia experiences leadership transitions at both the national and local levels through elections. One of the key moments of societal polarisation occurred during the 2017 gubernatorial election for Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. This election is widely regarded as a pivotal moment in the growing polarisation of Indonesian society. A major factor contributing to this polarisation is identity politics. In this paper, the author uses the term *"identity politicisation"* rather than identity politics. *Identity politicisation* refers to the strategic use of identity-based sentiments by political elites in power struggles. The decision to use *identity politicisation* instead of *identity politics* stems from the recognition that identity politics can also be employed in movements that focus on humanitarian or justice-based causes. By using the term *identity politicisation*, the author seeks to distinguish this more manipulative, elite-driven form of identity politics from those movements that use identity as a means of advocating for human rights or social justice.

Identity politicisation has become one of the most significant threats to democracy in Indonesia today. It not only jeopardises democratic processes but also undermines the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Its growing influence, particularly since the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, has made identity politicisation a powerful tool in political power struggles. As Indonesia approaches the 2024 elections, President Joko Widodo has repeatedly warned about the dangers of identity politics, emphasising its potential negative impact on the upcoming general election during his engagements with various political party leaders. President Widodo is keenly aware that a considerable amount of the nation's energy is being consumed in efforts to counter the divisive effects of identity politicisation, which has aggressively permeated the public sphere.

Indonesian political analysts often point to 2017 as the year when identity politicisation surfaced prominently in the country's political landscape. Burhanuddin Muhtadi, a lecturer at FISIP UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and the Director of Indonesian Political Indicators, has described the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election as a political anomaly in Indonesia. Despite consistently leading in surveys conducted by various polling agencies, the pair of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) and Djarot Saiful Hidayat ultimately lost the election, securing only 42% of the vote. Muhtadi highlighted the results of a post-election survey, which revealed that the dominant reason (34%) voters chose their governor and deputy governor in 2017 was that "their religion is the same as mine." According to Muhtadi, the rise of identity politics in Indonesia's electoral dynamics exposes an anomaly between rational decision-making and emotional, identity-based choices. Even in the cosmopolitan population of Jakarta, a city known for its diversity, many voters did not prioritise rational considerations when making their political choices. Instead, they were more influenced by emotional appeals tied to the sentiment of identity politicisation.

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, commonly known as Ahok, has come to symbolise *"the Other"* in Indonesian politics. Muhtadi described Ahok as representing *"the Others"*—a figure marked by a dual minority status. First, as a Christian, and second, as an ethnic Chinese. In the face of identity politicisation, the rationality of voters seemed to fade, giving way to political narratives that played on religious and ethnic sentiments. What is particularly striking from Muhtadi's survey is that, despite widespread satisfaction with Ahok's performance, many voters expressed unwillingness to vote for him because of his religious and ethnic background. Ahok's presence, or rather his political phenomenon,

was seen as a challenge to the political status quo, which had long been controlled by a small elite. His rise was perceived as a disruption to the established networks of resource access and political privilege. This discomfort among the elite found its momentum in the aftermath of the controversial Al-Maidah incident, where Ahok's political misstep further fuelled the narrative against him.

The Ahok phenomenon quickly spread to other regions in Indonesia, where religious and ethnic identities became key factors influencing electoral politics. In his study, Muhtadi selected regions such as DKI Jakarta, North Sumatra, West Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, and Maluku as samples, and concluded that ethnic and religious identity was the most dominant factor shaping voters' choices in elections—especially when candidates differ in ethnicity or religion. As a result, voters often prioritise religious and ethnic similarities when selecting candidates. This voter psychology is well understood by political elites. In Indonesia, voters tend to make decisions based on primordial attachments, with few relying on rational considerations. This creates a significant opening for the politicisation of identity—particularly religious and ethnic identity—by elites seeking to secure power.

The Ahok phenomenon came to an end with his defeat in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the criminal charges related to the Al-Maidah case. However, the legacy of this phenomenon, often regarded as an anomaly in Indonesian politics, left behind persistent issues of segregation and polarisation that continue to affect not just the people of Jakarta, but the Indonesian population as a whole. Following the Ahok episode, Indonesia faced two more general elections: the 2019 and 2024 elections. The 2019 election, occurring in the aftermath of the Ahok phenomenon, was deeply influenced by the politicisation of identity. Even President Joko Widodo, a charismatic leader beloved by many, was not immune to the effects of identity politicisation. This was especially evident in the dilemma of selecting a vice-presidential candidate to accompany him in the 2019 presidential race. The choice of K.H. Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate cannot be divorced from the impact of identity politics, particularly the role of religious identity, specifically Islam. Indonesian political analysts viewed Ma'ruf Amin's selection as an act of political accommodation to the religious identity politicisation that had been so prominent in recent years. At the time, K.H. Ma'ruf Amin was the Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), an organisation central to the Al-Maidah case. As MUI Chairman, Ma'ruf Amin had issued a statement on October 11, 2016, condemning Ahok's remarks as an insult to the Quran and to Muslim scholars, which played a significant

role in the legal proceedings of the Al-Maidah case. This choice was seen by some as a strategic political move by Joko Widodo to neutralise attacks from the growing wave of identity politicisation aimed at him. However, many nationalists were disappointed by this decision, perceiving it as an attempt to accommodate identity politicisation for electoral gain, thereby reinforcing the very forces that had been used against him.

On the other hand, the selection of K.H. Ma'ruf Amin in the 2019 Presidential Election highlights the resurgence and influence of Islamic politics in Indonesia's political landscape. Ma'ruf Amin's candidacy was strongly influenced by pressure from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organisation in the country. In the final stages of choosing a running mate, President Joko Widodo was faced with two options: Mahfud MD and K.H. Ma'ruf Amin. Initially, Widodo had decided on Mahfud MD as his vice-presidential candidate. However, NU exerted significant pressure, with statements indicating that the organisation would withdraw its support for Widodo if he chose Mahfud MD. This raises the question: Did Joko Widodo's politically accommodative decision to select K.H. Ma'ruf Amin succeed in curbing the influence of identity politicisation? The results of the 2019 Presidential Election suggest that Ma'ruf Amin helped boost Widodo's electability among Muslim voters. Widodo's vote share increased by 2% compared to the 2014 election. However, this raises another question: Is this increase in votes a direct result of Joko Widodo's efforts to counter identity politicisation, or did it merely reflect the influence of Ma'ruf Amin's religious credentials and NU's support?

The sentiment of identity politicisation persisted throughout Joko Widodo's second term, despite K.H. Ma'ruf Amin serving as his vice president. This stands in contrast to the hope that Ma'ruf Amin's inclusion in the administration would help diminish the politicisation of identity, especially religious identity. In fact, several studies indicate that identity politicisation remained prominent during the 2019 election and contributed to a significant decline in Indonesia's democratic quality. Research shows that identity politicisation occurred on a massive scale, both nationally and regionally. Joko Widodo's efforts to engage Muslim communities through his partnership with K.H. Ma'ruf Amin did not necessarily reduce the tensions caused by identity politicisation. While this strategy succeeded in reconciling Widodo with certain Muslim elite groups that had opposed him during his first term, it did not quell the politicisation of Islamic identity. The ongoing contestation between radical and moderate Islamic groups continued to fuel this politicisation. This reality was well understood by President Widodo. In response, he shifted his approach from political accommodation to a strategy focused

on law enforcement. This included measures to curb mass actions that exploited religious identity politicisation to disrupt public order. The government dissolved extremist and radical groups, viewing this as the most effective way to prevent these groups from further manipulating religious identity for political gain. However, while this strategy aimed to contain the influence of extremist groups, it did not eliminate the broader phenomenon of identity politicisation.

The continued persistence of identity politicisation in Indonesia, despite various government efforts—including policy reforms, awareness campaigns, cross-institutional and community cooperation, educational initiatives, and other strategies—raises a crucial question: What lies behind the widespread politicisation of identity, especially as Indonesia approaches the 2024 general election? What factors have contributed to the escalation of identity politicisation, which is now being carried out in a structured, systematic, and massive manner? Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, a philosophy lecturer at Georgetown University, identifies "elite capture" as a key factor driving the shift of identity politics from a humanitarian ideology to a weapon that threatens democracy and the unity of the nation-state.[2] Elite capture refers to a situation in which elites shape the political and developmental processes according to their own priorities, often directing resources and opportunities for their own benefit. This manipulation of political and social structures for elite interests has played a central role in the rise of identity politicisation in Indonesia.[3]

Referring to Táíwò's theory of elite capture, the phenomenon of identity politicisation in Indonesia can be understood as a strategy used by certain individuals or groups to fight for access to resources and power. In this context, identity politicisation becomes a tool for securing political and economic advantages. A 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center, titled *The Global God Divide*, interviewed 38,426 people across 34 countries. Released on July 21, 2021, the survey found that Indonesia ranked as the most religious country, with 98% of respondents stating that religion plays a crucial role in their lives. This reality is well understood by political elites, who recognise that religious sentiment is a powerful tool that can be exploited through the politicisation of identity in the quest for power.

Who runs the world? Elites. This rhetorical question is answered by Táíwò in his analysis of elite capture, where he asserts that elites are the ones who shape and control political events. It is no secret that behind every significant political development in Indonesia, elite interests are at play, with various strategies employed to seize power. A prime example of this can be seen in the lead-up to the 2024 general election, particularly in the case of one of the presidential candidates, Anies Baswedan.

Baswedan has become a symbol of identity politicisation, starting with his dramatic victory in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which was heavily influenced by religious politicisation. Having successfully leveraged his identity in 2017, Baswedan applied the same strategy in the 2024 election. While he ultimately failed to secure the presidency, his use of identity politicisation proved to be effective in propelling his candidacy to second place in the race, securing a significant share of the vote. Remarkably, his campaign even outpaced that of the nationalist candidate supported by Indonesia's largest political party. This highlights how identity politicisation, as a tool of elite manoeuvering, can reshape electoral dynamics and influence political outcomes.

The polarisation of Indonesian society is an inescapable reality, shaped by the interplay of globalisation, identity politicisation, and the interests of political elites. Identity politics is deeply intertwined with globalisation, a relationship that Bice Maiguashca describes as two inseparable forces that together contribute to division and polarisation within society.[4] Maiguashca identifies two main perspectives on the connection between globalisation and identity politics. The first group conceptualises this link within the framework of the *Politics of Solidarity*, emphasising shared identity and collective action in response to globalisation. The second group views identity politics as an expression of the *Politics of Difference*, where distinct group identities are emphasised and used to assert autonomy or challenge dominant structures. Each of these schools of thought presents compelling arguments for understanding the complex relationship between globalisation and identity politics, offering different interpretations of how these forces influence societal polarisation.

Both conceptualisations of identity politics—as a *Politics of Solidarity* and as a *Politics of Difference*—acknowledge that identity politics is, in essence, a product of globalisation.[5] As the "biological child" of globalisation, identity politics has become a driving force behind social movements, with diverse groups coming together to fight for collective rights and common causes. Since its emergence in the 1970s, identity politics has been closely associated with social struggles and movements focused on human rights issues. Steph Lawler noted that the term "identity politics" was first used in 1979 in reference to the movement for the rights of people with disabilities.[6] However, some argue that the term appeared earlier, in 1977, in the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, a Black women's feminist group.[7] From this historical context, it is clear that identity politics originated as a new political concept and ideological framework for human rights movements, including those advocating for gender equality, racial justice, disability rights, and more. But how did identity politics, which once served as a tool for progressive

social change, transform into a threat to democracy and national unity, as is seen in Indonesia today? Táíwò's concept of *elite capture* offers a compelling explanation for this transformation. He argues that identity politics, initially rooted in humanitarian struggles, has been co-opted by elites as a political weapon. This shift—from a force for social justice to one that threatens democracy and national cohesion—can be understood through the lens of elite capture, where powerful groups manipulate identity politics for their own gain, undermining the democratic process and the integrity of the nation-state.

The polarisation of Indonesian society, driven by the politicisation of identity—particularly along religious, racial, and ethnic lines—poses a serious challenge to the nation. This polarisation has contributed to rising intolerance and the spread of fundamentalism. As a minority group, Christians in Indonesia are often the targets of persecution and acts of intolerance, including the closure of churches and even the destruction of places of worship. These incidents have become increasingly frequent in recent years. Amidst this climate of deepening polarisation, it is crucial to examine how Christianity in Indonesia responds to the challenges facing the broader society. Furthermore, it is important to consider how Christianity itself is affected by this polarisation. These issues will be explored in the following section.

Christianity in Indonesia: External Challenges and Internal Polarisation

Christianity in Indonesia is a minority religion. As previously mentioned, there are approximately 20 million Christians in Indonesia, making up only about 7% of the country's total population of 280 million. Despite being a minority, the Christian churches in Indonesia see themselves as an integral part of the nation, with equal standing alongside adherents of other religions. The term "creative minority" is often used to describe the role of the church in Indonesia. This concept was first introduced by British historian Arnold Toynbee, who used it to refer to the spiritual dimension of society that fosters continuous social renewal and transformation.

Churches in Indonesia face noticeable internal polarisation. Richard Siwu categorises this polarisation within Indonesian Christianity into two main groups: ecumenical and evangelical.[8] While Siwu's perspective is rooted in the context of Indonesia's colonial history, his classification remains relevant for understanding the current polarisation of Christianity in the country. The polarisation of Christianity in Indonesia is closely linked to the global polarisation of Christianity since the twentieth century. The differences in mission orientations within the Protestant Church after World War II, along with the shift from imperialism and colonialism to nationalism, presented significant challenges for Christianity in

fulfilling its mission and calling. Understanding the factors leading up to 1961 is crucial for mapping the global Christian polarisation, which also influenced Indonesia. In 1910, a missionary conference was held in Edinburgh, leading to the formation of the International Missionary Council (IMC). The IMC's purpose was to address global issues related to missions. In 1928, the IMC held its first conference in Jerusalem, where the mission was no longer seen solely as the expansion of Christianity or efforts to convert non-Christian religions. This marked the beginning of an openness towards recognising truth in other religions. The second conference, held in 1938 in Tambaram (India), developed a theological understanding in which all social, political, and cultural issues were recognised as part of the church's mission. The third IMC conference took place in 1947 in Whitby, Canada, and one of its major outcomes was the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

However, following the Wheaton Congress (1966) and the WCC General Assembly in Uppsala (1968), polarisation began to emerge within the WCC, dividing it into what came to be known as the ecumenical and evangelical movements. This conflict stemmed from two key issues: (1) the integration of the IMC into the WCC and (2) a shift in theological perspectives. Conservative Christians opposed the inclusion of the IMC in the WCC, as it represented a move from a 'church-centred' to a 'world-centred' theological understanding. Ultimately, conservative (evangelical) Christians separated from the WCC and established a new organisation.

The global Christian landscape has significantly influenced the polarisation of Christianity in Indonesia, which is reflected in the country's ecclesiastical institutions. One such institution is the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), formerly known as the Indonesian Council of Churches (DGI). Established in 1950, PGI's primary aim was to create a unified Christian Church in Indonesia. At the time of its formation, the vision of a unified Church was not clearly defined, particularly in terms of the concept of "One Christian Church". Over time, through successive General Assemblies, PGI began to develop a clearer understanding and conceptualisation of this vision. For instance, the idea of "spiritual oneness in Christ" was introduced, as opposed to "structural oneness." However, between the 1950s and 1970s, the importance of structural unity began to gain greater attention.[9] As a result, discussions focused on achieving uniformity in teachings, liturgies, and church systems. Despite these efforts, documents such as the Church System and the Common Understanding of the Faith remained unapproved by PGI member churches until at least 1967.

The impasse over structural unity, as outlined above, prompted Indonesian churches to explore new avenues for realising oneness,

particularly through a shared calling in ministry. This functional approach gained prominence in the 1970s and emphasised the importance of embracing diversity within unity ("oneness in church diversity"). It also highlighted the need for a common agenda, mutual understanding of faith, acceptance of differences between churches, and institutional support for ecumenism.

This theological and ecclesiastical development eventually led to the creation of the Five Documents of Church Oneness: The Principles of Joint Vocation (PTPB), the Common Understanding of the Christian Faith (PBIK), the Charter of Mutual Recognition and Mutual Acceptance (PSMSM), the PGI Constitution, and Towards Theological Independence, Power, and Funds (MKTD2). These five documents, collectively known as the Five Documents of Church Oneness (LDKG), were officially adopted by the churches during the X DGI General Assembly in October 1984 in Ambon. In 2000, the XIII General Assembly of PGI in Palangkaraya merged the PSMSM document with MKTDD to form the Ecclesiastical Oikoumene, resulting in a revised set of four documents, collectively referred to as the Church Oneness Documents (DKG).

In the DKG, PGI outlines the crises and challenges confronting the churches in Indonesia. Three primary crises are identified: the national crisis, the ecological crisis, and the crisis of church oneness. Additionally, the challenge of digital culture is highlighted. The national crisis is manifested in the troubling trend of political power being primarily used to serve the interests of individuals or specific groups. In this context, democracy has been hijacked by politicians who exploit identity-based sentiments, including extreme religious views, and engage in transactional politics masked as democratic processes. The national crisis is further exacerbated by widespread corruption, even amid the poverty experienced by many, and ongoing human rights violations, with past abuses remaining unaddressed.

The ecological crisis is reflected in the depletion of natural resources driven by insatiable greed. Land, including that belonging to indigenous communities, is seized and repurposed for exploitative uses. Vital resources such as water, land, seas, and forests are increasingly controlled and exploited. Biodiversity is being destroyed through large-scale monoculture plantations, while environmental pollution, particularly from industrial waste and plastic, has reached alarming levels, with Indonesia ranking as the second-largest contributor of plastic waste after China.

The crisis of oneness is also affecting the churches in Indonesia. This is evident in the failure to establish "oneness in action" as a shared

understanding that guides the churches in their witness and ministry. There is an overemphasis on individual piety at the expense of socio-ecological piety. This crisis is closely linked to issues of theological independence, power, and funding. Theological institutions have yet to prioritise the development of ecumenical theology, and existing ecumenical forums and networks struggle to manage inter-church conflicts or to empower churches to act as agents of societal change.

Churches in Indonesia also face significant challenges posed by the digital revolution. The disruptive effects of digital technology have not only profoundly impacted business and politics—evident in the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and black campaigns—but have also altered the cultural landscape, with far-reaching consequences for church life. While technological progress is inevitable, without the maturity to manage its effects, the digital revolution could fragment Indonesian society. Amid these crises and challenges, internal polarisation within the churches in Indonesia has also intensified. In addition to PGI, new ecumenical institutions have emerged, such as the Fellowship of Churches and Evangelical Institutions in Indonesia (PGLII), also known as the Indonesian Evangelical Fellowship (PII). Other organisations, including the Fellowship of Pentecostal Churches in Indonesia (PGPI), the Indonesian Baptist Fellowship (PBI), and others, have been formed as well.

These various ecumenical institutions in Indonesia crystallise the polarisation of Christianity into two major groups: the ecumenical (PGI) and the evangelical (PGLII, PGPI, etc.). Beyond doctrinal differences and diverging mission orientations, it is noteworthy that these new ecumenical institutions also seek to garner public and governmental support, striving to be recognised as influential actors in the national life of Indonesia.

The Council of Nicaea and religious moderation in Indonesia

The national crisis represents one of the most pressing challenges currently facing Indonesia. The gravity of this crisis necessitates immediate intervention. This crisis, which manifests in the form of severe societal polarisation, has led to the disintegration of the Indonesian nation's unity. One of the principal responses developed by the government, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, to address this national crisis is the implementation of the religious moderation programme. The Ministry of Religious Affairs defines religious moderation as the cultivation of religious attitudes, behaviours, and practices that avoid extreme positions, both left and right, while consistently adhering to a balanced, middle-ground stance.[10] It is important to emphasise that the focus is not on the concept of religious moderation itself, but on

ensuring that religious practices and attitudes are fair, measured, and non-extremist.

Religious extremism is identified as the principal adversary that religious moderation seeks to combat. The Ministry of Religious Affairs explicitly defines this extremism by delineating two opposing poles: the far-right and the far-left. Far-right extremism includes religious conservatism, fanaticism, exclusivism, radicalism, fundamentalism, and groups that interpret religious texts in a literal manner. On the other hand, far-left extremism refers to secular groups—those advocating for the privatisation of religion, promoting radical rationalism in the interpretation of sacred texts, and placing excessive emphasis on the absolutism of universal freedoms, human rights, and individualism.[11] Both of these extremes are the primary targets of the religious moderation programme.

One pertinent question arises: Can the concept of religious moderation be applied to the Christian faith as well? In light of the internal polarisation within Christianity, is it possible to introduce the idea of ecclesiastical moderation? In the context of Indonesia's multifaceted crises, is it conceivable for the church to embody both ecumenical and evangelical principles simultaneously? From an ecumenical standpoint, the church is called to address global humanitarian issues and crises, responding to them as part of its mission for peace, reconciliation, and unity. However, it must also retain its commitment to the core message of the Gospel.

Although the religious moderation programme is not directly linked to the Council of Nicaea, there is a discernible parallel in the spirit of both. The choice of Nicaea as the site for the council by Emperor Constantine was not arbitrary; Nicaea occupied a neutral position, situated between the two dominant extremes of the time—the Eastern and Western Churches. The council, therefore, represented a moderate approach to resolving doctrinal disputes within the church. The involvement of the government, whether motivated by genuine concern for the Christian faith or by political considerations, played a critical role in the realisation of the council.

In this context, the author identifies a promising opportunity to operationalise and functionally integrate the legacy of the Council of Nicaea into the practice of religious moderation, and by extension, church moderation. From the author's perspective, this conceptual framework offers a prospective means to navigate the middle ground amid the prevailing polarisation—both the societal polarisation in Indonesia, exacerbated by identity politics, and the internal polarisation within Indonesian churches, driven by doctrinal differences, ecclesiastical structures, and institutional interests.

Responding to dual polarisation: from the one God to the Trinity—Echoes of Nicaea?

The "dual polarisation" referenced by the author pertains to two distinct forms of polarisation: the societal polarisation in Indonesia driven by identity politics, and the internal polarisation within the Christian churches. However, in addressing this issue, the author will specifically focus on the *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith* (PBIK) document, which was developed by the Fellowship of Churches in Indonesia (PGI). As previously noted, the PGI successfully formulated the *Church Oneness Document* in 1984, providing a framework for fostering unity among the churches in Indonesia.

The *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith* was ratified at the PGI General Assembly in Ambon in 1984. A minor revision of the document took place during the General Assembly in Palangkaraya in 2000. The most recent formulation, as outlined in the DKG 2019-2024, is presented in the foundational section as follows:

> By the power of the Holy Spirit, who gave birth to the DGI ahead of Pentecost on May 25, 1950, in Jakarta, and through the Tenth General Assembly of the DGI/PGI in Ambon in 1984, which led to the establishment of PGI, we, the member churches of PGI, have united in agreement and are steadfastly committed to fulfilling our duties and vocations as the Church of God in Indonesia, within the atmosphere and spirit of ecclesial communion, not in isolation or individuality. Together, we have entered into the narrative of history and are walking the shared journey as the One Church in Indonesia, continually progressing toward perfection as the One Church of God, across all time and throughout the ages.
>
> We affirm the Apostle Creed and the Nicene Creed, which emerged from the faithful struggles of the early Church. These confessions stand as true and complete testimonies, grounded in Scripture, to the Christian faith, and serve as symbols of the unity of the Church of God across all generations. We also recognise the Confessions of Faith that have arisen within the context of the Church's renewal movements (Reformation), as integral to our heritage, which continually enriches and deepens our faith. We understand that the various Confessions of Faith, born from the struggles of PGI member churches—past, present, and future—in their proclamation of faith, are part of our common testimony, firmly rooted in the Bible.

The *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith* begins with a formulation of the Lord God. It is worth noting the following formulation:

> Indeed, "God is our God, God is One" (Deut. 6:4). There is no God but Him (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7). He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is within them, and He preserves them to the end of time (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 24:1–2; 89:12; 104:1 ff.; Col. 1:16). God reveals Himself in His creative work and in the history of humankind (Ps. 19:2–3; Rom. 1:19–20), and most specifically and perfectly in Jesus Christ, His Only Begotten Son (Jn. 1:18). Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we come to know and worship Him as Father in Jesus Christ, for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God (Rom. 8:14–15).
>
> God speaks to humanity repeatedly and in various ways through the ministry of prophets, and in these last days, He speaks through the mediation of Jesus Christ, His Only Begotten Son (Heb. 1:1–2). In Jesus Christ, God reveals Himself as the One who forgives and saves humanity from the condemnation of sin—by humbling Himself, taking the form of a servant, and becoming like man. In His human nature, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Therefore, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:7–11).
>
> God is present and active in the world and in the Church through the Holy Spirit, who frees humanity from the law of sin and the law of death (Rom. 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:17). The Holy Spirit animates, renews, builds, unites, strengthens, disciplines, confirms, and empowers the Church to bear witness, to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and to lead believers into all truth (Ezek. 37; Acts 1:8; Eph. 3:16–17; 4:3–4; Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 12:7, 12; 14:26, 33; 2 Tim. 1:7; Jn. 16:8–11, 13). Therefore, we confess, glorify, and bear witness to the One and Eternal God: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Isa. 43:10; 44:6; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13; Phil. 4:20; Heb. 13:8; Rev. 4:8).

It is important to emphasise that in this formulation, the phrase "One God" is used to describe the Lord God, rather than referring to the Trinity. This choice cannot be separated from the efforts of the churches in Indonesia to express their faith in a way that is contextually relevant to the pluralistic society of Indonesia. According to the minutes of the

discussions and interviews with those who formulated this expression, it was revealed that the phrase "One God" was deliberately chosen to avoid potential criticisms from Muslims, who might argue that Christians believe in three gods. While this may be seen as a pragmatic consideration, it is rooted more fundamentally in biblical teachings that emphasise the oneness of God.

In November 2024, the PGI held its 18th General Assembly. One of the key issues to be addressed is the renewal—or more accurately, the reformulation—of the *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith*. Based on the latest draft that has been circulated, a significant change has been proposed in the formulation of the Lord God, transitioning from the concept of "One God" to that of the "God of the Trinity." The full revised formula is as follows:

1. **The Trinity: One Essence, Three Persons.** The Church affirms and acknowledges the one God, eternally existing in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 3:13-17; John 15:26; 17:22). These three Persons are distinct yet share one essence and a unified will, eternally loving one another. Each Person is distinct from the others, yet none is separated from the others. The Church believes in the Trinity as the God of Fellowship and the Missionary God—God, as one divine communion, extending His love to all creation. Through the abundant power of this love, the Triune God reveals Himself to all creation through the Son, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church exists to glorify and bear witness to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is embraced by faith across diverse traditions and cultures, which, while rooted in a common belief, is also interpreted in ways that resonate with the pluralistic contexts in which the Church exists.

2. **The God of Fellowship.** The Church's recognition of the Trinity as the God of Fellowship calls it to understand itself as the creation and possession of the Triune God. Thus, the communion of the Church is derived from the communion of the Trinity (John 14:26; 16:13-15; 2 Cor. 13:13). The fellowship of the Trinity, which manifests the differences, equality, relationship, and unity among the three divine Persons, serves as the foundation for the Church's own mission of fostering communion marked by diversity, equality, relationship, and unity. The Church is invited to live for a world that God loves, honouring both differences and unity among all people and all creation. Our participation in the fellowship of the Trinity compels us to live in a manner that reflects God's choice to be

fragile along with all of creation, through the loving power of the Holy Spirit and in the person of Jesus Christ.

3. **The Missionary God.** The Church's recognition of the Trinity as the Missionary God calls it to understand itself as a communion of believers who are created, saved, and sanctified by God, who, in His abundant love, gave Himself through the sending of the Son—born as true humanity—empowered by the Holy Spirit. God the Father sent the Son in the Holy Spirit, directing His abundant love toward all creation (John 3:16; Acts 10:38). The essence of the Church as a missionary communion is rooted in its participation in God's mission. Therefore, the Church is called to engage in all efforts to advocate for abundant life (John 10:10b), which is characterised by justice, equality, peace, and the integrity of creation. These actions are part of the mission of the Triune God for all creation. The unity of the Church is revealed in its active participation in God's mission.

The significant revision in Chapter I, shifting from "The Lord God" to "The Trinity," has become one of the most discussed topics in the ongoing process of disseminating this revision, which will take place throughout 2024 in various regions across Indonesia. On one hand, this change underscores the profound influence of the Council of Nicaea in shaping the formulation of a new *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith* in Indonesia. On the other hand, this shift can be understood as part of the Indonesian churches' ongoing efforts to express their confession of faith in a more contextually autonomous manner, free from the pressure to address misconceptions held by adherents of other faiths. It is essential, however, that this shift not be interpreted through a lens of exclusivism, but rather understood within the broader spirit of ecumenism.

The doctrine of the Trinity continues to be a pivotal point of contention within Christianity in Indonesia. Engaging with this doctrine is undoubtedly a complex and challenging endeavour. As noted by Joas Adiprasetya, one of Indonesia's foremost theologians, discussions and debates surrounding the Trinity are often open-ended, with no definitive resolution. It is perhaps with this awareness that the reformulation of the *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith* takes on even greater urgency in light of the current social polarisation in Indonesia. Such a reformulation offers a unique opportunity to foster deeper theological reflection and to cultivate a more inclusive, ecumenical approach to Christian identity within the Indonesian context.

Conclusion

The polarisation within Indonesian society is marked by a dual division. On the one hand, societal polarisation is primarily fuelled by the political

landscape, which often capitalises on religious, racial, and ethnic sentiments. On the other hand, there is a growing internal polarisation within Christianity itself, which is becoming more entrenched and institutionalised. As a result, Christianity in Indonesia faces two interrelated challenges: first, its role within the pluralistic nature of Indonesian society, and second, the pluralism that exists within the Christian community.

In the midst of this polarising environment, the legacy of the Council of Nicaea takes on significant theological and pastoral relevance. The inspiration drawn from the Council resonates with the practice of religious moderation in Indonesia, while its theological formulation of the indivisible Trinity of God finds its meaningful application, operationalisation, and contextualisation within the diverse Indonesian context. Through this, the Christian faith and unity emerge as a doctrinal expression that is both deeply rooted in the Indonesian context and firmly established within the lives of Indonesian Christians, fostering both theological coherence and ecclesial solidarity.

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Relevance of the Nicene Creed in an Age of Secularism and Technological Progress

Abraham Mar Seraphim Metropolitan

Introduction

The Nicene Creed stands as a monumental achievement in the history of Christianity, not merely as a statement of belief but as the very bedrock upon which the identity of the Church was built. As John Behr aptly writes, "The Nicene Creed was not simply a document, but a lifeline for a Church in turmoil."[1] The Creed's legacy extends beyond doctrinal formulations to its role in uniting the Christian community. Frances Young points out: "The Nicene Creed's influence did not stop with the fourth century. Its power lies in its capacity to transcend its immediate context, offering a universal language for Christians across different cultures and traditions."[2] Young's observation highlights the Creed's enduring relevance, which has allowed it to serve as a unifying statement of faith across the whole of Christendom. Its continued use in Christian liturgy today speaks to its ability to adapt and resonate with successive generations. But in today's rapidly evolving world, one may wonder whether the Nicene Creed, with its ancient origins, holds any relevance. As society moves towards secularism and technological advancement, doctrines formed centuries ago may seem distant or disconnected from modern realities.

This paper seeks to explore the Nicene Creed's importance in the contemporary context, particularly in an age marked by secularism and scientific progress. By addressing how the Creed fares in these modern paradigms, it aims to show that far from being obsolete, the Nicene Creed provides a foundational anchor in navigating the ethical, spiritual, and philosophical challenges of our time.

Relevance of the Nicene Creed in the Age of Rising Secularism

The idea of secularism differs significantly between the West and India. While Western secularism often advocates for a strict separation of religion and state, Indian secularism promotes equal respect for all religions, allowing state intervention to ensure fairness and prevent discrimination. This inclusive model fosters pluralism, embracing diverse religious groups to encourage peaceful coexistence and interfaith dialogue within a multi-religious society. In this context, the Nicene Creed

becomes particularly relevant, as it upholds a vision of the Triune God that resonates with India's pluralistic framework.

Trinitarian theology offers a framework for mutual respect and understanding. The *Missio Dei*, understood as the mission of the Triune God, provides an integrated approach and helps the Church to bear witness to the Triune God in a pluralistic context. Yet, Trinitarian theology has not always occupied a central space in Indian theological discourse, which has often been predominantly Christological. While a focus on Christ is essential, an overemphasis on one person of the Trinity risks presenting a fragmented view of God, which may ultimately hinder the church's mission and witness.

Indian theologians like Metropolitan of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the late Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, highlighted the importance of a holistic Trinitarian theology. He stated: "Holistic theology is Trinitarian theology, and holistic mission is Trinitarian mission, comprising both personal ministry and social ministry, conversion and Christian nurture, the whole person and the whole world."[3] This perspective connects the material needs of individuals with their spiritual growth, advocating for a balance between personal freedom, social justice, and the quest for equality, fraternity, and liberty.

The work of theologian Leonardo Boff further enriches this discussion. He emphasises that "Relational trinitarian theology gives us a vision of God as a dynamic community of mutuality, openness, difference, and love that makes space for others to participate."[4] This Trinitarian relationality comes as a critique of ideologies that promote hegemony, concentration of power, and disregard for diversity and plurality. In a society where religious fanaticism seeks to impose homogeneity, the relational openness of the Trinity stands as a powerful counter-narrative.

Boff argues that the Trinity is not only a model for our participation in the divine life but also an inspiration for social structures in this life. He insists that the divine communion of the Trinity, which exists in the reciprocity of love, serves as inspiration for social structures and relationships. It motivates and indeed demands structures which are characterised by participation, inclusion, equality, reciprocity, and respect for individual differences.[5]

As India's secularism faces growing challenges from religious fundamentalism and social discord, the Nicene Creed's relevance is more

crucial than ever. It not only articulates the nature of the Triune God but also offers a profound model for societal engagement based on mutual respect, diversity, and unity. In a pluralistic society like India, the Creed's Trinitarian vision stands as a reminder that the Church's mission is not to align with political powers or agendas that could compromise its spiritual foundation but to embody a deeper, transformative witness rooted in love, inclusion, and equality. In doing so, the Church can bear witness to a vision of secularism that truly respects diversity and fosters justice. The Nicene Creed, far from being merely a historical document, provides a living framework for engaging with India's complex social and religious landscape. It challenges the Church to uphold its spiritual mission while advocating for structures of society that embrace participation, reciprocity, and dignity for all, ensuring the Church remains a beacon of unity and hope in a fractured world.

Relevance of the Creed in an Age of Science and Technological Progress

In an age dominated by scientific discoveries, technological advancements, and secular ideologies, some may question the relevance of this ancient Creed. Can a declaration that was forged in an era of emperors and councils still hold significance in a world of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and space exploration?

The flag bearers of pro-technologies envision a post-human era, where technology like AI and genetic modification may redefine humanity. The aspirations of techno-posthumanism fall nothing short of apotheosis itself, the self-making of today's human into tomorrow's deity. "Having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn Homo sapiens into Homo deus,"[6] touts best-selling author Yuval Harari.

Technological progress raises many questions about humanity's future and our place in creation. While various aspects could be explored, we should be aware of key ideas: futurum(becoming) versus adventus(coming), and the Orthodox understanding of Theosis. These concepts, rooted in Christian eschatology and the Nicene Creed, provide a vital counter-narrative to the promises of technological utopianism, reminding us of God's ultimate plan and our calling to share in divine life, rather than relying solely on human innovation.

Eschatology: Futurum (becoming) & Adventus (coming)

Through the Creedal statement 'We look… for new life to come,' the Church affirms its belief in the glorious reign of the Kingdom of God. But

the proponents of technological progress present a stark contrast and project the concept of 'futurology.' Ronald Cole Turner highlights the words of Carl Braaten, who sharply defined the difference between futurology and eschatology: "A crucial difference between secular futurology and Christian eschatology is this: The future in secular futurology is reached by a process of the world's becoming. The future in Christian eschatology arrives by the coming of God's kingdom. The one is a becoming and the other a coming."[7]

The futurists, according to Ted Peters, believe in 'futurum', which means human energy and ingenuity can, through technological genius, overcome the inertia of fate and transform reality for the better. These futurists invest their faith in *futurum*, and through technological progress, they plan to take hold of the steering wheel of evolution and drive both natural and human history to a destination they design.[8]

However, the Church, rooted in the Nicene Creed, envisions a Christian future of *adventus.* The future in Christian eschatology arrives by the coming of God's kingdom. The one is a 'becoming'(futurum) and the other a 'coming'(adventus). Adventus is God's future. God's ultimate future nullifies what has been evil in history, selects what has been wholesome, and transforms the present creation exhaustively, totally, and consummately. Jesus's Easter resurrection from the dead provides the model, the prolepsis, of the advent of the new creation. A new creation, including eternal life, is a gift of God to those of us who are subject to death. It is a gift of divine grace, not the achievement of human technology.[9]

Theosis or Technological Theosis?

The Creed also affirms, "For us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and became man." This part emphasises that through Christ's redemptive work, humanity is offered the opportunity for transformation and communion with God, foundational to Theosis. But today's technology projects the idea of 'Self-Divinisation' or 'Technological Theosis.'

Brandon Gallaher, in his article, 'Technological Theosis', focuses on two mutually opposed aspects—'Godmanhood' and 'Mangodhood'. Mangodhood is characterised by self-worship, the self-deification of humanity. Mangodhood is the mirror inverse of salvation or Theosis. Then there is Godmanhood,[10] which is called in Patristic teaching theosis

or theopoiesis (divinisation/deification) made possible through the Godman, Jesus Christ. When becoming genuinely Christ-like, we employ the famous term of Vladimir Solov'ev, "Godmanhood." Gallaher calls Mangodhood 'Satanic'!

Theosis as "Godmanhood" was understood as the accomplishment by God of the mystery of his embodiment, perfectly realised in Christ, always and in all things. Mangodhood, in contrast, was declared an instance of the sort of sham human auto-divinisation we see in Genesis 3 with the Fall of humanity through its temptation by the serpent, who weaves human beings into his ploys by both lies and illusions.[11]

The Church must distinguish between deification by divine grace and auto-deification. Classic Orthodox theology emphasises the patient self-work of *askesis*[12], which involves cutting back the self and rooting out passions so that our true selves in Christ can flourish. This journey allows us to know the world as God does and resemble Him. In contrast, auto-divinisation represents an impatient attempt to seize divinity through human intellect, manipulating nature to elevate ourselves beyond our humanity.

True theosis, modelled by Jesus, comes as a divine gift through loving obedience and dependence on the Creator, not by seizing divinity.

The key question is: Are we striving to be like God in power or goodness? The serpent in Genesis tempted humanity to chase power apart from God, leading to self-sufficiency and destruction. In contrast, Christian theology calls us to holiness and goodness through union with God. True deification comes from imitating Christ, not pursuing power apart from Him. The Church must engage with technology as a gift from God, used for moral progress and the common good, but resist the temptation to elevate it as an ultimate end.

But on the other hand, as Ted Peters mentions, transhumanists think they see in religion an archaic commitment to the past, to the status quo, to resistance against anything new.[13] This image is misleading. Christian theology strongly affirms change! The reluctance to embrace progress on the part of theologians does not come from a posture of resistance to change. Rather, it comes from an entirely different source: a critique of those who put their faith in progress, especially technological progress. Deane-Drummond makes this clear: "We need not totally reject

technology but appreciate its proper limits according to particular goals that express the common good."[14]

While the theories emerging from technological progress may appear naive and counter to Christian theology, the Church cannot turn a blind eye to the technological advancements shaping our world. The Church will inevitably face challenging questions in the future, but it must not compromise its foundational faith as expressed in the Nicene Creed. This faith, which has been handed down through centuries, should remain the guiding light, even in a rapidly changing technological landscape.

Also, technology can indeed be a tool for moral progress, helping to create a society where it is easier to live in goodness and truth. Advancements in artificial intelligence or virtual reality can foster empathy, streamline resources, and improve human life in ways that reflect God's creative intention. But the Church must remain vigilant, ensuring that such technologies are used for the common good and not for exploitation, oppression, or moral decay. Pope Francis' comment on technology is pertinent. 'If we get the moral part right, then God's technological gifts to us will align as well. If we get the technology right, but not the morality, then we will all surely die.' Therefore, the Church's role is to engage thoughtfully with the advancements of our time, ensuring that technological progress is guided by the timeless truths of our faith. In doing so, the Church can address the moral and ethical challenges that arise without deviating from the foundational teachings of the Nicene Creed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Nicene Creed remains crucial in navigating the challenges of an age shaped by science and technological progress. As the Church faces futuristic ideologies like post-humanism, transhumanism, and techno-utopianism, it must hold firm to the understanding of true divinisation—union with God through holiness and love, not through self-deification or the pursuit of power. While technology offers immense potential for societal and moral progress, it must be embraced with discernment, ensuring it serves the common good rather than promoting a distorted sense of human superiority.

The Church's task is not to resist change or progress but to ensure that advancements align with divine grace, grounded in the timeless truths of the Creed. As technological innovations continue to reshape the human

experience, the Creed provides a moral and spiritual compass, reminding the faithful that salvation and transformation come through God's grace, not human ingenuity. By remaining engaged yet cautious, the Church can help guide humanity toward a future where technology enhances life while preserving the essence of what it means to be truly human: created in the image of God and called to union with Him.

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[1] John Behr, The Nicene Faith: Formation of Christian Theology (Crestwood, NY: St.Vladmir's Seminary Press, 2004), 112.

[2] Frances Young, The Making of the Creeds (London: SCM Press, 1991), 95.

[3] Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, "More Cross-Currents in Mission," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 7, no. 4 (1983), 176.

[4] Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 149.

[5] Leonardo Boff, "Trinity," in Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 78.

[6] uval Noah Harari, Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 21.

[7] Ronald Cole-Turner, "Transhumanism and Christianity," in Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 198.

[8] Ted Peters, "Homo Deus or Frankenstein's Monster? Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics," in Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics, ed. Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman (London: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group,Inc, 2022),.

[9] Ted Peters, "Homo Deus or Frankenstein's Monster?, 4.

[10] Godmanhood means 'becoming Christ-like' or attaining 'Theosis'. This famous term was employed by Vladimir Solov'ev. See, Jeremy Pilch, 'Breathing the Spirit with Both the Lungs': Deification in the Work of Vladimir Solov'ev(Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

[11] Brandon Gallaher, "Technological Theosis?: An Eastern Orthodox Critique of Religious Transhumanism," in Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics, ed. Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman (London: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group,Inc, 2022).

[12] askesis involves spiritual disciplines like fasting and prayer that purify the heart and mind, ultimately leading to the transformative experience of deification (theosis). This process aligns the believer more closely with God's divine nature, fostering a profound union with Him.

[13] Ted Peters, "Transhumanism and the Posthuman Future: Will Technological Progress Get Us There?," in H+/-: Transhuman and Its Critics, ed. Gregory R Hansell and William Grassie (Philadelphia: Metanexus Instuite, 2011), 159.

[14] Celia Deane-Drummond, Christ and Evolution (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

Echoes of Nicaea in Augustine's *City of God* and Its Implications for Asian Ecumenism

Lal Dingluaia

I. The Significance of the Nicene Creed:

The Nicene Creed is an important faith affirmation that transcends denominational barriers and has been recited by Christians as a confession of faith all over the world on a regular basis. Starting from the basic affirmation that "Jesus is Lord and saviour"[1], creedal statements evolved from an oral confession into standardised written formulae due to the expansion of the church and doctrinal controversies.[2] The Council of Nicaea in 325, regarded as the first ecumenical council, marked a new stage in creedal developments where we see the beginning of solemn church meetings "to frame formularies giving utterance to their agreement on matters of faith." Unlike the prior "summaries of faith" seen locally, these synodal or conciliar creeds were intended to be authoritative for the wider church. Meant to resolve doctrinal conflict, "each confession came to build upon the previous one, taking up material from the earlier creed while adding some new phrases, thus turning the existing material against whichever opponent the newer creed was targeting."[3] Particularly, the Nicene Creed was given "a place of special honour at the church councils" at Ephesus (431, 449), Constantinople (448), and Chalcedon (451), where "the assembled bishops repeatedly affirmed the unique authority and sufficiency of the Nicene Creed, and praised the 'fathers' of Nicaea for their unimpeachable faith." [4] While the Council of Nicaea has been subjected to diverse and conflicting interpretations, [5] the resultant Nicene Creed is still regarded as the touchstone of orthodoxy among the majority of Christians even today.

II. How is the Church signified in the Nicene Creed? Although it is very difficult to reconstruct the actual accounts of the Council of Nicaea, the so-called Arian controversy—where the eternal relation between God the Father and the Son was the crux of the matter—initiated the production of the Nicene Creed. Having a threefold structure that proclaims faith in "one" God the Father, "one" Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, the main body of the Creed focuses upon the nature and works of Jesus Christ. It was remarked that in the article that focuses on the eternal nature of Jesus Christ, we see a "particular density of technical vocabulary" while the rest of the Creed "is comparatively unremarkable, consisting of traditional affirmations, expressed in a self-consciously scriptural idiom."[6]

The Creed culminated with the confession that "the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematises" those who deny this affirmation. Unlike previous church pronouncements where a synod spoke in the first-person plural ("we condemn"), it was the "Catholic and Apostolic Church" that performed this act in Nicaea. These qualifying adjectives "Catholic" and "Apostolic" highlight the eminence of the decree: the anathema was pronounced against the recent and particular minority view of the heretics by the "universal" Church that stood in one unbroken and continuous line with the apostles.[7] Besides, Emperor Constantine's interest in the proceedings of the Council[8] also lent significant weight to the pronouncement.[9]

At the Council of Constantinople in 381, however, the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed without implicating the anathema. Supplemented with the confession of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, new clauses like the "marks" of the church, baptism, the resurrection, and eternal life were added.[10] Although a rich variety of images[11] have been offered by the New Testament to describe the church, the Nicene Creed affirmed that "we believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church." In line with the point above, we can infer that the first two clauses – one, holy – were scriptural expressions while the next two clauses – catholic, apostolic – were reaffirmations of the eminence of the decree. Referring to the church as "holy" was part of the standard baptismal formulas[12] while the *Epistula Apostolorum* (c. 140-150) was asserted to be the first instance where the church was mentioned in a profession of faith.[13] However, in contrast to the "proto formula" of 325, the affirmation of "oneness" of the church in the beginning highlights the Creed's conciliatory tone and the unity of the church in matters pertaining to faith. The "four marks of the church", though rooted in scriptural and liturgical past, should therefore be regarded as a dynamic contextual formulation that encompasses the socio-political and theological acumen of Christians in their changing environment.

Concise and lucid, these four "marks" of the church are inseparable and essentially related to each other. But, in the light of separations and differences among churches that have been reciting this Creed on a regular basis, what should we really mean by confessing the oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church? We shall try to give an answer in the light of Augustine's *City of God* and see the implications of his insights for ecumenism in Asia.

III. Why Augustine and why the City of God? At the outset, it may be good to briefly explore Augustine's own engagement with, and his contribution towards, the Nicene Creed. Firstly, Augustine knew the

conciliar Creed of Nicaea, though he rarely cited it in his works. This rarity can be down to his pastoral concern and the relevance of the Creed for his interlocutor: it has been asserted that the technical terminology *ousia* introduced by the Council of Nicaea was ambiguous and even regarded as "a mine of potential confusion."[14] Two of his works from the earlier and later parts of his ministry are a good example. *Faith and the Creed* was an address to a plenary assembly of the episcopate of North Africa that met in Hippo in 393.[15] While a Latin translation of the Nicene Creed had been submitted for approval and solemnly recited at the start of this council, Augustine's speech is based on the confession of faith - a fusion of the Nicene and Romano-Milanese creeds - as Christians knew it from their baptism. Deeming it a comprehensive expression of the faith, he demonstrates that "the creed not only addressed the intellect but also nourished spirituality."[16] Later, we see a rare citation of the Nicene Creed in a debate with Maximinus the Arian (427/8), where Augustine said:

> The Father and the Son are, then, of one and the same substance. This is the meaning of that "homoousios" that was confirmed against the Arian heretics in the Council of Nicaea by the Catholic fathers with the authority of the truth and the truth of authority… I should not, however, introduce the Council of Nicaea to prejudice the case in my favour, nor should you introduce the Council of Ariminum that way. I am not bound by the authority of Ariminum, and you are not bound by that of Nicaea.[17]

So, while Augustine once preferred the common version of the creed over the more intricate idioms of the Nicene Creed in addressing the African bishops, he also considered it futile to allude to the Creed in a debate with someone who did not subscribe to the authority of Nicaea.

Secondly, despite these limited and measured references, Augustine's theological postures were largely determined by a Nicene Trinitarian theology, as opposed to a Trinitarian doctrine of Arianism. It was stated that in Augustine's lifetime, "the controversies over trinitarian language … were not remote or academic."[18] In fact, his *Confessions* narrates how "Justina, mother of the boy-king Valentinian, was persecuting your man Ambrose in the interest of her heresy; she had been led astray by the Arians." Though not "converted" yet, Augustine was still "excited by the chaos and disturbance in the city."[19] Since his mother was with Ambrose, Augustine would surely have been aware of the issues at stake. And as a bishop, it was noted that Augustine's works are "repeatedly concerned with anti-Nicene trinitarian theology" and that he "made acceptance of Nicaea as the centrepiece of his polemical writings and, in particular, to regard the acceptance of *homoousios* as the touchstone of orthodox

trinitarian doctrine."[20] We can therefore say that Augustine's theology has been determined by a Nicene Trinitarian theology from the start.

Thirdly, Augustine makes a sequential link between the doctrine of the Trinity and the church. For him, "due order in the profession of faith required that the Church should be named after the Trinity, like a house after the one who lives in it, a temple after its god, and a city after its founder."[21] And in studying the ecclesiology of his anti-Donatist sermons, Ployd highlights Augustine's dependence upon a Nicene Trinitarian theology. Focusing on his "defence of charitable ecclesial unity against the rigorism of the Donatist schism", Ployd argued that "Augustine uses pro-Nicene principles and exegesis to construct his understanding of the church against the Donatists." Accordingly, "Augustine depicts a church whose identity and integrity are grounded in the life and work of the triune God, rather than in the relative moral purity of human bishops and the closely guarded boundaries of the visible communion."[22]

Finally, one critical outcome of Augustine's long reflection on the Trinity is the Western form of the Creed, where the *filioque* clause was inserted. In *On the Trinity* (399-422/6), he suggests that the Holy Spirit can only be really distinguished from the Son if we say that He proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*, as from one source: "when the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Father, it is to be so understood that His proceeding also from the Son comes to the Son from the Father. For if whatever He has, the Son has from the Father, then certainly He has from the Father that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from Him."[23] Without elaborating further, we can say that this insight is the fruition of Augustine's arduous engagement with the mystery of the Trinity, which has been set in motion by the intricate idioms of the Nicene Creed.

Beyond his contributions to the development of the Nicene Trinitarian theology, *City of God* is important as Augustine reimagined theology in the context of change and uncertainty. The work was prompted by the sack of Rome in 410, which posed a serious existential question to both the pagans and the Christians. Before this time, Augustine subscribed to the idea that associated the Roman Empire with a Christian order which the Scriptures foretold.[24] This optimism was enhanced by Constantine's endorsement of Christianity and the summoning of the Council of Nicaea, which seemingly initiated a new era of harmony between emperors and bishops, and between the state and the church. But Augustine gradually altered his optimistic endorsement of a legal, institutional enforcement of Christianity against pagans and heretics until the sack of Rome forced him to reconsider his stance even more radically. Already losing his

"enthusiasm for the alliance between the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, at just the time when it had become effectively cemented,"[25] Augustine expressed the new stance that he adopted toward the Roman Empire in the *City of God*.

Theologically, this has been forged between two opposing stances, the triumphalist Rome-Eusebius theology and the apocalyptic tradition more favoured by the Donatists.[26] Instead of giving prominence to the political ascension of Constantine, Augustine "began to invoke the incarnation of Christ as a decisive moment in God's action in human history."[27] Augustine also asserted that the realisation of God's purposes neither depends upon the fate of Rome nor of any earthly society.[28] The apocalyptic prophecies refer to the final ending and not to any particular historical catastrophe.[29] We can therefore say that *City of God* is an innovative undertaking where Augustine reimagined ecclesiology in the context of change and uncertainty.

IV. Echoes of Nicaea in Augustine's City of God

City of God was initially prompted by the criticisms levelled at *tempora christiana*[30] by "pagan" intellects who attributed the sack of Rome to the Christian religion. In response, Augustine wrote the book, which "deconstructs the ideology of Rome as the eternal city, whose peace and justice are the peace and justice of the world", and presented a Christian version of events in the light of his reading of the Scriptures. He asserts that the heavenly "City of God", whose security is eternal and where perfect peace will be established, stands in contrast with the earthly "city", which aims at dominion, and though served by all nations, "is itself dominated by that very lust of domination".[31]

One principal theme that Augustine develops, and which finds systematic expression in the book, is the concept of the church as the "city of God". In Christian circles, the technical term to indicate the church was the Greek term *ekklesia,* transliterated into Latin as *ecclesia.* This term already existed in the Latin language to indicate an assembly. While Tertullian once used the term *curia* in the sense of a reunion, the Latin terms *comitia* and *convocatio* are used to designate these called-out people.[32] In the creeds that Augustine used in his works, we see reference to *sanctam ecclesiam*.[33] But in this book, Augustine at times equates the famous expression "city of God" with the church, although there is no perfect identity between the "heavenly city" and the earthly church, which is "a reality in process".[34]

Augustine's concept has been forged in the crucible of the complex North African context, where the church had certain distinct emphases, shaped

by the views of Tertullian and the martyr-bishop Cyprian. As Tertullian stated, "What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem?" and "There is nothing more alien to us than the State", their idea of the church centred on the purity of the community, which demands separation from all worldly things, political and intellectual.[35] For Cyprian, who asserts that "there is no salvation outside the Church", a schismatic bishop is deprived of all ability to administer valid sacraments so that the baptism of heretics and schismatics defiles the recipient.[36] And as the fortunes of Christians changed between persecution and patronisation by the State, their views found expression in the so-called Donatist schism. As Pose asserts, "Donatism began as a revolt against what many Christians in N. Africa considered a betrayal of the faith by their own leaders, and continued as a protest against the effects of the *Christiana tempora* initiated by Constantine."[37] On its ecclesiological implications, Evans remarks that the Donatists "asserted that they alone were now the true Church, which was 'holy' and 'apostolic' while Augustine considered it important that the Church should also be 'one' and 'catholic.'[38] The stances that Augustine adopted against the Donatists have been embedded in his *City of God*. So, how much does "City of God" conform to the Nicene's affirmation that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic?

Firstly, regardless of divisions in the empirical church, Augustine affirms that the "holy city" is truly one since the deepest foundation of the "city of God" lies in the Trinity.[39] Regarding citizenship, "there is a city of God, whose citizens we long to be because of the love with which its Founder has inspired us."[40] This God-inspired love is essential to the community as "a city is nothing other than a multitude of men bound together by some tie of fellowship", while "people" is the association of a "multitude of rational creatures bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love."[41] The oneness of the church lies in the common love that binds the members together.[42] As every religious society has some visible sign of unity, Augustine considered the sacraments as the elements that bind the church into unity.[43] But here also, love is the decisive factor.[44] Thus, love became the hallmark of unity: in love, the church as the body of Christ is united to its head. In other words, the church is one not by virtue of the absence of schism and divisions but by and through loving God and our neighbour.[45]

Secondly, against the Donatists' insistence upon the purity of the church, Augustine adopted a "wider and more patient view of the nature of the Church's holiness, never condoning sin yet recognising that men could not act as final judges."[46] Taking a cue from Tyconius, a Donatist, Augustine

describes the empirical church as a mixed body[47] where good and bad people co-exist. While defining good and evil in an absolute way, as the Donatists did, can destroy the unity of the church, Augustine maintains that every member of the institutional church is not a member of the city of God.[48] In other words, one should not insist upon the purity of the church at the expense of ecclesial unity because the city of God in her pilgrimage is a reality in process that will find fulfilment only in the Heavenly City.

Thirdly, while the Donatists insist on being "a tiny remnant"[49] for the sake of purity, Augustine emphasises the Catholicity of the Church. Asserting that the word "catholic" comes from the Greek words καθ όλον, meaning 'according to the whole,' the Catholic Church is that which has "spread over the whole earth", extending into the uttermost part of the earth.[50] As a community which transcends space and time, all the righteous of our history make up the Church,[51] while the work of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost also affirmed and testified the catholicity of the Church.[52]

Finally, deviating from his engagement with the Donatists, we can discern resonance of the Nicene affirmation that the Church is apostolic in the *City of God* when Augustine deals with the authority of Scripture. Asserting that the apostles cite not only the text from Hebrew but the Greek *Septuagint* (LXX),[53] Augustine compared the merit of the LXX with other translations as well as Jerome's. Insisting on *Hebraica Veritas*,[54] Jerome translated the Old Testament from the Hebrew, and the Jews acknowledge its reliability while contending that "the translators of the Septuagint were in many respects in error". Yet Augustine insists that "it is the judgment of the churches of Christ that no one person should be preferred to the authority of so large a body of men." He also insists that "any other accurate translator of these Scriptures from the Hebrew into any other language whatsoever must agree with the Septuagint" since "the highest expression of prophetic meaning lies with the Septuagint".[55]

We can see the importance of his argument when we consider a prevalent notion in some Jewish circles[56] that the Scriptures inspired by God's Spirit came to an end with the last prophetically inspired writers, thereby refuting some books in the LXX along with the Christian literature currently in circulation.[57] If affirming the Church as apostolic basically means continuing in the teaching and practice of the apostles, Augustine's endorsement of the LXX can assert this in two related ways.

First, beyond the Jewish Scripture, there are books inspired by the Holy Spirit that Christians came to regard as authoritative in matters of faith and practice. In fact, it is basically through them that Christians can have access to the teaching and practice of the apostles. Second, the key issue is not solely about the status of the LXX but of privileging the examples of the apostles and the corporate "judgment of the churches of Christ" in discerning "the highest expression of prophetic meaning" in Scripture, which is Christological. In other words, it is this Christological reading of the Jewish Scripture by the apostles that determined the status of the LXX for the church. Seen from this perspective, Augustine's stance on the LXX can be seen as an affirmation that the Church is apostolic.

V. Implications for Asian Ecumenism:

In this paper, we have seen how Augustine reimagined ecclesiology amidst the change and uncertainty of his time and articulated them systematically. Let me conclude by suggesting four brief points that Asian Christians can draw from *City of God* to affirm and enrich our personal and communal identity in Christ.

1. *Unity inspired by God's love*: Although Paul urged Christians to strive for unity as there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5), we see how the church in North Africa violated this call for unity due to various factors. Feeling the pain of that division, Augustine discerns a "united" community in history, inspired and bound together by a common agreement to the object of their love. This "synchrony" is foundational to the "city of God" where the members were drawn from diverse races, backgrounds, and eras. The unity of Asian churches from diverse and pluralistic backgrounds will also be hindered until God is the common object of our love. Conversely, if we are bound together in and by the love of God, this common love can cultivate a spirit of unity that will transcend theological differences and cultural identities.

2. *Holiness as the mark of distinction but not separation*: Against the Donatists' insistence upon the purity of the church- an otherworldly holiness that avoids contaminations, Augustine asserts that the church is a mixed body. This insight implies that we should not act as the final judges upon others because our measure tends to be shaped by our socio-political, religio-cultural, and gender bias. And being "the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14), our holiness should be a mark of distinction that serves others, and not lead to a lack of connection.

3. Catholicity as withness and for-allness: In today's "globalised" world, "hegemonic" catholicity, which promotes monoculture, can

resemble what Augustine refers to as "that very lust for domination", which is not congruent with the "City of God." Rather than a lust for authority and dominance, the Catholicity of the Church should be grounded in ministry and service, which engender an enriching diversity and creative plurality and fulfil the call to love God and our neighbours.

4. *Apostolicity and the givenness of Christianity*: While Augustine reimagined ecclesiology in the context of uncertainty and new challenges, "City of God" was not a normless and boundless act of speculation but firmly rooted in the self-giving life and work of the Triune God as affirmed by the apostolic faith. And as the venture for ecumenical solidarity demands that we reimagine ecclesiology in Asia, we should maintain a right balance of being faithful to our theological heritage and being relevant to our contemporary context.

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[1] According to Kinzig, "These christological statements gradually came to be assembled to form homological 'building blocks', which in turn were combined with traditional divine attributes relating to God the Father, such as his omnipotence and his activity as creator. Thus slowly dyadic and triadic homologies developed as evidenced in Christian writings from the first three centuries." Wolfram Kinzig, A History of Early Christian Creeds, (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024), 606.

[2] Kelly asserts that the New Testament already contains "creed-like slogans and tags" which evolved from the contexts of baptism, the catechetical instruction preceding baptism, preaching, liturgy, anti-heretical and anti-pagan polemics, and the formal correspondence of Church leaders with their flocks. These contexts also "determined their style, substance and structure" to some extent. JND Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 1972), 13-14

[3] John H. Leith, Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present, 3rd edition (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 28.

[4] Mark S. Smith, The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Councils, AD 431-451, (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 1.

[5] See the chapters: "Introduction" and "Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea" in The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea (CCCN) ed. by Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: CUP, 2021) on some of the issues regarding the interpretations of the Creed as well as the Council in modern scholarship.

[6] Smith, The Idea of Nicaea, 11.

[7] See Wolfram Kinzig, "The Creed of Nicaea: Old Questions, New Answers" in The Ecumenical Review, 75/2: April 2023.

[8] See H.A. Drake, "The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council" in CCCN on the role that he played.

[9] According to Galvão-Sobrinho, "Constantine's interference in the conflict and the establishment of an "official" doctrine "criminalized" theological dissent… After Nicaea, bishops had to learn to deal with a force that insisted on making their affairs the affairs of the state and a matter of public security." Carlos R. Galvão-Sobrinho, Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 91.

[10] On the emergence of the pro-Nicene alliance that endorsed the Nicene Creed in the Council of Constantinople, see Mark DelCogliano, "The Emergence of the Pro-Nicene Alliance" in CCCN.

[11] These include Christ's body (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18); the Bride (Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 21:2); the building, temple, or household of God (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Tim. 3:15); the new or heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2), etc.

[12] A baptizer would ask the candidate: "Dost thou believe also in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church?" On the relation between creeds and baptism, and how "there was apparently something approaching a settled form for the baptismal questions" as early as St. Justin (c. 100-165), see Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 35, 38, 46, 96.

[13] Angelo Di Berardino (ed.), We believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010), xvii. For the evolution of this simple creed, see Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 82.

[14] See Roland J. Teske, "Introduction" in Arianism and Other Heresies, ed. by John E. Rotelle (NY: New City Press, 1995, WSA 1/18), 120. But on why this non-scriptural term is preferred, see Smith, The Idea of Nicaea, 13.

[15] He later stated: "[I]n the presence of the bishops who ordered me to do this and who were holding a plenary council of all of Africa at Hippo Regius, I gave a talk as a presbyter on faith and the creed. I turned this talk into a book... In it the discussion of these things is carried out in such a way as not to reproduce the text of the words which is given to the competentes to be memorized." Revisions 1.17.

[16] Michael Fiedrowicz, "Introduction" in Faith and the Creed, ed. by Boniface Ramsey (NY: New City Press, 2005, WSA 1/8) 153.

[17] Debate with Maximinus, 2.14.3; cf. 2.18.1.

[18] Rowan Williams, "De Trinitate" in Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia (ATA), ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 845.

[19] Confessions, 9.7,15.

[20] Michael R. Barnes, "Anti-Arian Works" in ATA, 32-33; see also fn. 17 above.

[21] Enchiridion, 15.56.

[22] Adam Ployd, Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons (New York: OUP, 2015), 1.

[23] On the Trinity, 15. 26.47; in City of God, 13.24, he stated: "Therefore, when the Lord breathed on the disciples, saying, 'Receive ye the Holy Spirit', He certainly wished it to be understood that the Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of the Father, but also the Spirit of the only-begotten Son Himself. For the same Spirit is indeed the Spirit of the Father and of the Son…the same Spirit belongs to both."

[24] See R. A. Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), particularly chapter two, for a thorough treatment of Augustine's association of the Roman empire with a Christian order during this period; also R. A. Markus, "'Tempora Christiana' Revisited", in Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (eds), Augustine and his critics (London: Routledge, 2000) for a "revisit" of this theme.

[25] Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (California: UCP, 2000), 338. According to Markus, Augustine's "working life coincided, almost exactly, with the legal establishment of Christian orthodoxy as the empire's official religion." While Augustine thought that scriptural prophecies are being fulfilled, "it is the euphoria about the official Christianisation that is gone." Markus, "'Tempora Christiana' Revisited", 199, 211.

[26] See Markus, Saeculum, 53, 56.

[27] P.C. Burns, "Augustine's use of Sallust in the City of God: The Role of the Grammatical Tradition", in Karla Pollmann, Allan D. Fitzgerald and Mark Vessey (eds), History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God (HASI), (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), 108.

[28] See City of God, 4.7.

[29] See Markus, Saeculum, 53; also City of God, 20.11.

[30] Though this is a fluid concept, in this context it will denote the "present time" when Christianity supplanted traditional religious beliefs of the Romans. See Revisions, 2,43 on Augustine's version of why he wrote the book.

[31] See R. W. Dyson, "Introduction" in Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans, trans. by R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), xxix; City of God, 1 Preface; C. Conybeare, "Terrarum Orbi Documentum: Augustine, Camillus, and Learning from History" in HASI.

[32] Di Berardino, We Believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, xxiii.

[33] For a reconstruction of baptismal creeds in his writings, see J. T. Lienhard, "Creed, Symbolum" in ATA, 255.

[34] We find this in City of God, 8.24; 13.16; 16.2; see also Tarsicius J. Van Bavel, "Church" in ATA, 169-176.

[35] G.R. Evans, "Introduction", in Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Book, 1972), xxix-xxx.

[36] See Gerald Bonner, St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1986), 280-82.

[37] See E. R. Pose, "Donatism", in Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity, Second English Edition, 3 Vols, ed. by Angelo Di Berardino, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 1: 736, 740.

[38] Evans, "Introduction", xlix

[39] "In this Trinity is the origin, the instruction and the blessedness of the holy City …For if we ask, Whence comes it? God founded it; or Whence comes its wisdom? God enlightened it; or Where lies its happiness? In the enjoyment of God. It has its form by subsisting in Him; its enlightenment by contemplating Him; its joy by abiding in Him." City of God, 11.24.

[40] City of God, 11.1.

[41] City of God, 15.8; 19.24

[42] "Since, therefore, true sacrifices are works of mercy shown to ourselves or to our neighbours, and done with reference to God…it surely follows that the whole of the redeemed City- that is, the congregation and fellowship of the saints- is offered to God as a universal sacrifice for us through the great High Priest Who… offered even Himself for us in the form of a servant, so that we might be the body of so great a Head." City of God, 10.6.

[43] "'We, being many, are one body in Christ.' And this … is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, by which she demonstrates that she herself is offered…to God." City of God, 10.6.

[44] "[H]e who is in the unity of His body- that is, in the fellowship of the Christians, who are the members of Christ, Whose body the faithful customarily take when they communicate at the altar- may truly be said to eat the body of Christ and to drink the blood of Christ…. Whoever, then, has Christ in his heart, so that no earthly or temporal things- not even those which are lawful and permitted- come before Him, has Christ as his foundation. If he does put such things before Christ, then, even if he seems to have the faith of Christ, Christ is not in him as a foundation, since, for him, other things come before Christ." City of God, 21.26.

[45] "[B]oth the individual just man and the community and people of the just live by faith, which works by love: by that love with which a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and his neighbour as himself." City of God, 19.23

[46] Frederick W. Dillistone, "The Anti-Donatist Writings" in A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine, ed. by Roy W. Battenhouse (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 186.

[47] "In this world, the two cities are indeed entangled and mingled with one another; and they will remain so until the last judgment shall separate them….In this wicked world, and in these evil days . . . many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. Both are as it were collected in the net of the Gospel; and in this world, as in a sea, both swim together without separation, enclosed in the net until brought ashore. City of God, 1.35;18.49.

[48] Among those very enemies are hidden some who will become citizens…On the other hand, while she is a pilgrim in this world, the City of God has with her, bound to her by the communion of the sacraments, some who will not be with her to share eternally in the bliss of the saints. City of God, 1.35

[49] According to Bonner, "At the time of the Diocletianic persecution there were traditores in every part of the world, but in Africa alone had the Church broken off relations with them. Thus, in every other part of the world the Church had become infected with the guilt of traditio and had thus ceased to be the Church. Bonner, St. Augustine of Hippo, 284.

[50] Maureen A. Tilley, "Ad Catholicos fratres or De unitate ecclesiae" in ATA, 150; According to Augustine, "This way, therefore, is not the way of one nation, but of all nations. The law and the word of the Lord did not remain in Sion and Jerusalem, but went forth thence to be spread abroad to the whole world." City of God, 10.32.

[51] "For as long as this Heavenly City is a pilgrim on earth, she summons citizens of all nations and every tongue, and brings together a society of pilgrims in which no attention is paid to any differences in the customs, laws, and institutions by which earthly peace is achieved or maintained." City of God, 19.17.

[52] "Thereafter, when ten days had passed, He sent the Holy Spirit, as He had promised; and the greatest and most striking sign of the Spirit's coming to those who believed was that each one of them spoke in the tongues of all nations. In this way, it was shown that the unity of the Catholic Church would be fulfilled in all the nations, and that she would therefore speak in all tongues." City of God, 18.49.

[53] "It is with good reason, then, that, when making use of the testimony of Scripture, the apostolic authority is found to cite not only the Hebrew text, but the Septuagint also." City of God, 15.14.

[54] Basically meaning "Hebrew truth", Hebraica Veritas occurs around 85 times in Jerome's extant writings. Though Jerome first used the expression in his preface to the Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim, "the concept is already present in the Roman letters." A. Kamesar, Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: A Study of the Quaestionaes Hebraicae in Genesim (Oxford: OUP 1993), 42.

[55] City of God, 18.43; cf. 18.44 where he stated: "Hence even I, in my small measure, follow in the footsteps of the apostles; for they themselves quoted prophetic testimonies from both - that is, from both the Hebrew and the Septuagint; and I have deemed it right to make use of both as authorities, since both are one, and both divine."

[56] Those most concerned with the priestly functions in Judaism hold this notion, particularly in the Hasmonean era. See L.M. McDonald, "Critical Issues in the Formation of the Hebrew Bible", in C.A. Evans, J. Neusner, A.J. Avery-Peck (eds), Earliest Christianity within the Boundaries of Judaism (Boston: Brill Academic Pub. 2016),80.

[57] Martin Hengel, The Septuagint as Christian Scripture (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 45. This is more an attempt "to fence out, rather than to fence in". See Bruce M. Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament: It's Origin, Development, and Significance (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 110. Goshen-Gottstein asserted that there was never an official act of introducing certain writings into the canon for Judaism. "The issue was rather which of the various writings which groups had regarded as 'inspired' should be left inside the canon." M. Goshen-Gottstein, "Scriptural Authority, Biblical Authority in Judaism", in David Noel Freedman (ed), Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 5, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1018.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence In an Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

Annie George

Gender-based violence has already been widespread and endemic. Androcentric bias is particularly evident and systematic in the context of male violence against women.[1] Feminist theory posits that both violence and sexuality are socially constructed to uphold the interests of male dominance. Additionally, non-violent expressions such as pornography contribute to the maintenance of patriarchal structures and ideologies.[2]

In the subcontinent of India, where I reside, there were 4,45,256 crime cases against women registered during 2022, showing an increase of 4.0% over 2021 (4,28,278 cases). The majority of cases were as follows: 'Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives' (31.4%), 'Kidnapping & Abduction of Women' (19.2%), 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' (18.7%), and 'Rape' (7.1%). The crime rate registered per lakh women population was 66.4 in 2022 in comparison with 64.5 in 2021.[3]

In the 21st century, digital existence[4] has become a non-debatable reality, deeply shaping how societies function. Digital technologies led to positive worldwide social and cultural changes, but they also facilitated abusive behaviours. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) has thus become recognised as a complex worldwide phenomenon, a "global-scale problem"[5] with devastating results. With the introduction of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) models, UNESCO reports that, along with unimaginable gains in its productivity, GAI has accelerated the production of content and interactions that foster or intensify gender-based violence. GAI has amplified existing methods and increased the potential avenues for technology-facilitated gender-based violence.[6] This brings various health, safety, political, and economic consequences for women and girls and other infringements of rights and freedom[7] on their families, communities, and society. To prevent TFGBV, women and girls self-censor their online activities, which silences their voices and undermines democracy. This poses concerns for the overall protection and promotion of human rights and for the safety of women and girls, which shows the urgency of a synchronous responsibility of the ecclesia to uphold human dignity and justice. This collective approach reflects the belief that the Church, as expressed in the Nicene Creed, is "one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

This paper deals with the global issue of TFGBV in the era of GAI and looks at how churches can address it collectively. The first section deals with the

definitions of key terms, followed by clarifying why technology-facilitated violence is considered violence, how technological advancements shape violence, forms of TFGBV, and theological and ethical considerations.

I. Definitions

This session deals with the definitions of violence against women, technology-mediated violence, and Generative Artificial Intelligence.

A. *Violence Against Women*

The UN defines violence against women (VAW) as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."[8] It is a distinct and separate category of violence as it recognises gender inequality, particularly the historical domination of men and the subordinate status of women and girls in society that serves to maintain an unequal balance of power.[9] UNESCO research shows that among journalists, women are more likely to be abused than their male counterparts. Race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity/expression, socio-economic status, like caste, disability, refugee status, and viewpoint on human rights and women's rights can intensify their susceptibility to violence.[10]

B. *Gender-based Violence*

Gender-based violence (GBV) is primary violence against women (VAW); however, it includes violence against children and men as a result of their ascribed gender identity or gender expression or perceived gender.[11] The different types of GBV are as follows:[12] psychological violence, sexual and physical violence, cyber violence which includes threatening or degrading comments, sharing sexually explicit pictures without consent, stalking in online environments, microaggressions like teasing, name-calling, sexist and racist comments or jokes which are considered minor but can harm the physical and psychological welfare of individuals. GBV can occur against men, women and LGBTQA++, but in this paper, the scope will be limited to GBV against women.

Why does this paper confine itself to examining TFGBV against women? There are various reasons for the limitation of the scope:

- Women often face unique vulnerabilities and disproportionately higher risks in the digital landscape.
- Because of the existing systemic gender inequities, violence against women can be perpetuated and amplified online.

- Also, social norms and stereotypes can contribute to increased exposure to harassment, abuse, and exploitation through technology.
- Marginalised women often hesitate to report abuse due to stigma, victim-blaming, or a lack of robust systems to address their complaints.
- So even though men also experience technology-facilitated violence, the scale, intensity, and nature of violence against women differ.
- So, by addressing TFGBV against women, we can:
    - Protect a vulnerable demographic.
    - Promote equality and inclusivity in digital and real-world spaces.
    - Create safer and more accountable technological ecosystems for everyone.

C. *Technology-Facilitated Violence*

Technology-facilitated violence and abuse[13] (TFVA) are behaviours perpetrated online, offline, and with the use of digital technologies to enact, mediate, or perpetrate interpersonal harassment, abuse, and violence. According to the UN Women, Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is "any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated, and amplified" using information and communication technologies or digital tools[14] which results in psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation.[15] It is not a manifestation of coordinated online harassment; it is the testbed and origination point for the ever-evolving methods of harassment, sophisticated attacks…"[16] The uniqueness of this is that women and girls are attacked for simply being online and for being girls/women. The similarity between TFGBV and real-world violence is that they are both focused on the most vulnerable and the disempowered.[17] It happens in both public and private contexts in different human relationships: between strangers, acquaintances, friends, family members, and intimate partners. How is Cyberviolence different from Technology-Facilitated Violence? Cyberviolence refers to violence in control and networked systems. The term "cyber" refers to a virtual environment. The term implies a world separate from the physical world, one that is located in cyberspace. We live in a society where digital experiences are as relevant and integrated as physical ones. Besides, the term technology encompasses network devices and other devices. Technology Facilitated Violence (TFV) implies violence in digital and networked spaces such as the Internet, as well as violence perpetrated by different forms of technology, such as video and audio.[18]

D. *Generative Artificial Intelligence*

Generative Artificial Intelligence is a subfield of Artificial Intelligence which can analyse and interpret data and generate content in the form of words, images, music, and digital content. The use of deep-learning models like ChatGPT-3.5, ChatGPT-4.0, Gemini (previously Google Bard), and CoPilot (earlier Bing) is revolutionising how people access information, produce, receive, and interact with content in an unprecedented way.

II. Why is Technology-Facilitated Violence named as Violence?

Because of the minimisation of non-physical abuse[19] and the limited societal view of violence that only encompasses physical attacks, there is a question of whether TFV can be called violence. It is challenging to categorise harmful technology-facilitated behaviour as violence, as there is no physical contact between the perpetrator and the targeted person(s).[20] However, technology has become a tool to shape the form in which violence can happen and continues to shape new abusive strategies. Offline cultural norms and practices are represented and taken for granted in online platforms, and established social norms shape the development of technological developments.[21]

Even before the advent of social media and smartphones, the feminist scholar Liz Kelly[22] proposed a comprehensive view of sexual violence against women to include physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological domains as they are deeply interconnected. To her, all forms of sexual violence, from the more common, everyday abuses women experience to the less common experiences which are labelled crimes, are serious and have effects on the survivors. The idea that violence exists on a continuum suggests that harmful behaviours, even those that may not involve physical force, are deeply connected to physical abuse and can have equally severe or even more debilitating effects on survivors. Such behaviours, whether physical, psychological, or technology-facilitated, communicate domination, intimidation, and control to women who are targeted, thus negatively influencing their autonomy. Moreover, such behaviours contribute to societal norms that minimise and normalise violence through a larger system of behaviours.

Both physical and psychological actions, which can degrade, control, and cause fear in women, are part of the larger system of behaviours of sexual violence against women. The continuum of violent behaviour has been applied to Technology-Facilitated behaviours, thus naming them as violence as they have the characteristics of causing harm to women.

III. How Technology Promotes Spaceless and Widespread Violence and Perpetration

If violence within the home is immediate and direct interpersonal violence, the violence that characterises modern technological violence

is non-physical and thus remote.[23] Technology is used not only to facilitate familiar forms of gender-based violence like domestic abuse, verbal harassment, and even sexual assault, but also the digital space has become a space for new and distinct forms of violence and harassment against women and other marginalised groups.[24] Individuals can be assaulted by misspelling the name or using the victim's nickname, but as the attack gets attention, others can easily identify the person. Thus, it makes it difficult for victims to escape violent relationships.[25]

According to Dragiewicz et al., perpetrators of violence use technology to enact coercive control that transcends fixed borders and boundaries, which they call Technology Facilitated Coercive Control (TFCC). Victims are exposed to TFCC any time they access a device, digital media, or profile, and the use of technologies can imply "abuse and monitoring are hard to 'escape.'"[26] TFV permeates victims' homes and bedrooms, vehicles, their phones, and workspaces. It often takes place online, but it also extends into physical spaces and can escalate to acts of femicide.[27] Dragiewicz et al.[28] opine that the impact of such coercive control becomes even more invasive and widespread in various ways:

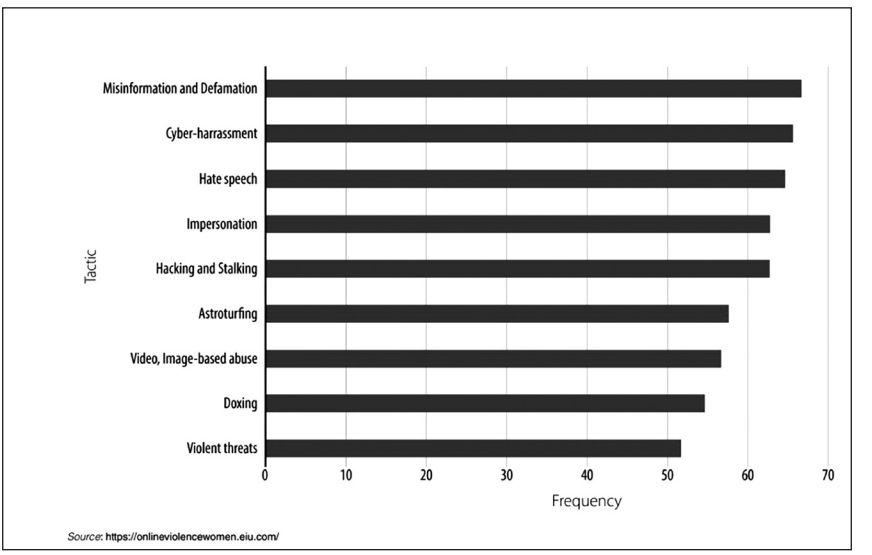
- Individuals within the perpetrator's network participate in the attack.
- Perpetrators can recruit others to monitor victims with the help of technology, and victims' online peer-support groups can be infiltrated by friends or families of perpetrators.
- Content flagging used to report harmful content can be used to attack victims by disabling their accounts and by mass reporting their posts.

Miller[29] talks about how our "continual, omnipresent" online presence and ceaseless archiving of our data, actions, and interactions make victims increasingly vulnerable as "being with" others is outside of time, space, and embodiment. Online social interactions are multiplied but remain disconnected from our physical presence, resulting in "dangerous surprises" as people become brave enough to become "keyboard warriors." This violence, facilitated through the use of technology, is spaceless, and its perpetration is also spaceless and has no borders.

IV. Forms of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Violence against women includes sexual violence, domestic and family violence, prejudice-based hatred, and online othering. TFV happens through text, images, and unwanted digitally-enabled or enhanced surveillance and monitoring, using various devices and platforms from basic digital tools, such as texting, email, and social media, to more

advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), GPS tracking, and drones. TFVA is in various forms: sextortion-blackmail by threatening to publish sexual information (photos or videos), image-based abuse (sharing intimate pictures without consent), doxing (publishing private personal information), cyberbullying, online gender and sexual harassment, cyberstalking, online grooming for sexual assault, hacking, hate speech, online impersonation, and survivors of abuse being tracked using technology in order to inflict further harm.[30] The findings of research done by UN Women are depicted in the graph, which shows nine common ways in which online violence happens against women.[31] Three rampant ways of TFGBV, as seen below, are misinformation, defamation, and cyber harassment.[32]



Alexis Henshaw further gave three other forms of TFGBV:[33] Synthetic deepfake or cheap fake pornography: images and videos are widely circulated to humiliate or silence the victims. Revenge porn: the non-consensual distribution of authentic, sexually explicit photos or videos without the permission of the victims. Zoombombing is the intentional disruption of online gatherings using profane and graphic material. The disproportionate targets were events convened by or about women, people of colour, and LGBTQI+ populations.

With GAI, content—whether it be photoshopped images, harmful screeds, or personal messages—is fully automated and not created by humans. UNESCO points out that gender stereotypes and bias in large language models (LLMs) can generate outputs that reinforce stereotypes without overtly offensive content. GAI provides tools to mitigate attacks, but it

presents the risk of enabling TFGBV and increasing online harassment and abuse, including doxing and the creation of deepfakes.[34] Automated attacks and the generation of convincing content in various forms to represent multiple voices can cause harm through hate speech, cyber harassment, misinformation, and impersonation and have a dangerously wider reach by going viral, which can debilitate victims.

UNESCO lists six ways of violence using GAI:[35]

a. Convincing Fake Media: GAI enables the creation of convincing fake media in various languages, which can be used to target high-profile women in hacking and stalking attempts.
b. An increase in fake media content. The amount of mis- and disinformation circulated removes our ability to identify low-quality media. There is an increase in auto-generated harassing images, messages, and chats, including deepfake pornography, sent to victims. In South Korea, 95,820 deepfake porn videos were identified from different sources, out of which 53% were their singers and actresses.[36] The Washington Post reports the findings of NewsGuard, an organisation that tracks misinformation, that "websites hosting AI-created false articles have increased by more than 1,000 per cent, ballooning from 49 sites to more than 600," since May 2023.[37]
c. Unintended harms: Due to the embedded gender bias, without any intentional perpetrator, harmful sexualised images can be sent to individuals without their consent or prompting. See Melissa Heikila's experience.[38]
d. Synthetic Histories and Compositional Deepfakes: Believable synthetic histories are created using multiple, different, but supporting fabricated media sources. This is an emerging threat of GAI. Images, audio, video, and text are generated to reinforce the engineered real-world events.
e. Interactive Deepfakes: Impersonation through deepfakes is a common form of TFGBV. With interactive deepfakes, one can create a convincing real-time online presence without an individual's consent. The number of artificially manipulated photos has increased by 550% between 2019 and 2023, demonstrating their alarming accessibility and potential for misuse.[39] High-quality deepfake technology is now readily available, enabling a wider user base to commit fraud or cause harm on a larger scale.
f. Malware: Code generation available in LLM enables people to generate malware to steal personal information for doxing, hacking, and stalking their victims.

V. The Impact of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Pew Research[40] foresees significant improvements in scientific advances, healthcare, and education by 2035. AI integration will bring "smartness" to all objects and organisations, and personal digital assistants will ease our daily lives. Accessibility of data will improve human rights. Various industries, including visual effects, entertainment, and education, can benefit from the diverse range of applications that deepfakes possess if used without malicious intent.[41] Globally, AI enables human connections through social media and creates labour efficiencies through automated tasks.[42]

But there is another side to the impact of TFV and GAI. Pew Research findings warn of the potential harm of GAI by 2035: the weaponisation of social media platforms, massive unemployment, the spread of global crime, lack of human connectedness, population-level stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation.[43] In the Global South, the absence of laws to address GBV and the lack of reporting mechanisms intensifies the fear of embarrassment and re-victimisation among women.[44] Dragiewicz et al. noted that when technology is used to harm, dominate, and control people, it can have a cumulative effect on the person targeted. It has an overarching effect of breaking down the agency in the person and feelings of domination, which can have a physical and psychological impact on the person targeted.[45] According to Powell and Henry, technology-facilitated sexual violence not only extends and reinforces its harm to victims but also makes the violence visible to others without the consent of victims.[46]

The harm that follows TFV depends on whether it is acute or chronic harm. If it is an acute harm, the attack on the individual will not be sustained; rather, the attention dies down. Also, the attack is more on the event and not on the individual. However, chronic harm refers to constant attacks on the person and is intensified over time, and is extremely personal harassment of the individual using coded language. TFGBV is a form of chronic abuse. The sheer volume of attacks makes it almost impossible for the victims to stop the harm.[47]

Henry and Powell[48] expressed that virtual violence in technology-mediated spaces or the sociospatial world has the same effect as geospatial violence, even though they are not directed at the physical body. Even though it is non-physical, it causes real psychological, physical, and social effects that impact a person's mental health, personal relationships, social position, and personal safety. Words and images that cause fear and feelings of threat and insecurity are more than just expressions and will affect the overall well-being of individuals, reinforce subordination, normalise violence against them, and dehumanise victims.[49]

The impact of victims' experiences of violence will be shaped by the place and space they occupy when experiencing TFGBV. Socially or geographically isolated people often rely on technology for communication; they will opt out of or feel compelled to disconnect from devices or digital media, which means a loss of support and assistance.[50]

All forms of image-based abuse cause "severe and unique dignitary and expressive harm[51]" to victims as their images and identities are used for entertainment and objectification. With GAI tools available to anyone, anywhere, and anytime, the harm it can cause to victims will be exponential compared to physical harm and TFGBV before the introduction of GAI. The table summarises the potential harm malicious actors can create with the help of simple GAI tools. [52]

	Risk	Text Generative AI model	Image Generative AI model	Multimodal Generative AI model
Cyber-harassment templates	Exploit Accuracy	Medium		Medium
	Ease of Use	Medium		Medium
	Impact	High		Medium
Hacking/Stalking methods	Exploit Accuracy	Low		Medium
	Ease of Use	Medium		Medium
	Impact	Medium		High
Synthetic Histories	Exploit Accuracy	Medium		
	Ease of Use	Low		
	Impact	Medium		
Image-based abuse	Exploit Accuracy		High	
	Ease of Use		High	
	Impact		High	

VI. Gender-Based Violence As a Challenge to Synchrony and Collective Witness of the Church

The impact of GAI-mediated TFGBV brings various challenges to the synchrony and collective witness of the Church. Because of the complex nature of GAI-mediated violence, it can be difficult to come to a common approach across ecclesial communities, especially when trying to address these issues from a pastoral, ethical, and theological perspective. Either everyone is not aware of the extent of damage this can cause to women,

or many do not care, as they are preoccupied with the daily concerns of life. Ecclesial bodies may struggle to provide a coherent and united response, as views on technology and gender ethics vary widely across denominations and cultural contexts. Rapid technological advancements in AI tools make it harder to derive clear and unified ethical boundaries, which leads to conflicting opinions and a lack of collective action. Varying legal standards and societal norms regarding GAI technologies and intellectual, financial, and legal backups of GAI companies often make it difficult to seek justice in court against these companies.

In some cases, the church is preoccupied with various institutional, structural, and infrastructural concerns that prevent leaders from being empathetic to the silent sufferers and the voiceless. Women, because of shame and threats to personal and family dignity, may not openly share the grievous nature of problems they face. Cultural understanding of women as "mother earth" who silently suffer violence makes others close their eyes to the need for restoration and healing in women. Also, this understanding hinders others from holding perpetrators of violence accountable and seeing the need for transformative justice. Providing pastoral care in the context of GAI-mediated GBV can be challenging and can be particularly difficult when victims and perpetrators are separated by physical distance. The anonymity of the perpetrators and the wide reach of GAI platforms can further complicate efforts to offer care, protect victims, and implement church discipline or reconciliation processes.

A lack of coherent ethical action aligned with the theological understanding of human dignity can undermine the church's collective witness, which displays internal inconsistencies in addressing gender-based injustices and violence. The difficulty in maintaining ecclesial synchrony becomes more apparent when the church does not have a common understanding about the implications of TFGBV in the era of GAI for community life, human dignity, and justice. This can affect how others see the public witness of the church. Communities may perceive the church as complacent, apathetic, out of touch with reality, or ineffective in confronting contemporary issues, leading to a loss of trust and credibility in its mission to uphold justice and human dignity.

Gender violence perpetuated through AI tools has no borders. So, to address this global issue, the churches can come together despite their differences and geographical differences. This collective effort is a witness to the commitment of the church to unveil unjust practices and restore

the victims of violence. This aligns with the kingdom principle that any advancements at the cost of dignity are unjust. The synchronisation of ecclesial identities is a tangible response to the call of the Nicene Creed to be "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" and a clear and loud voice of shared identity and mission.

VII. Theological and Ethical Considerations

Technology-facilitated violence (TFV) in the era of GAI, especially gender-based violence, requires us to look at theological and ethical considerations. These will enable us to address the misuse of AI technology and the moral responsibilities of individuals, communities, and institutions in mitigating harm and promoting justice.

A. Theological Considerations

TFGBV in the context of Generative AI invites our attention to key theological concepts: imago dei and human dignity, sin, power, accountability, justice, and protection of the vulnerable.

i. Imago Dei and Human Dignity

The first statement in the Bible about humans indicates the divine intent to create them in God's "image and likeness,"[53] even though there are only a few direct references to this after the creation account.[54] There is agreement among scholars regarding the image to indicate reflection, but disagreements regarding what is reflected. Also, patristic and medieval scholars saw the two terms image and likeness as having different theological implications, but contemporary scholars see them as synonymous. There is consensus in the following aspects: "The image of God includes all human persons, sin has affected the image in some way, the image in the New Testament is a Christological concept, and the image of God is teleological."[55] It is good to look at the four approaches to understand the meaning of imago Dei: [56]

- The structural approach views the image as a human capacity for rational thought, even though human thought is differentiated from divine rationality. When the emphasis is given to rationality, it can potentially marginalise those with limited rationality. Also, violence harms the rational faculties of victims. Violent behaviours disregard the capacity for rational thought and moral agency in perpetrators, which leads to the dehumanisation and objectification of others.

AI tools are used to create digitally fabricated violence and abuse, identity manipulation, and persistent harassment that transcends physical boundaries. Then, victims cannot escape violence as it is accessible to anyone who connects online. This can constantly disrupt victims' ability to concentrate, make decisions, process information, think clearly, or remember details. Pew Research findings confirm this fear: AI-mediated convincing misinformation and disinformation can give rise to deceptive or alternate realities, which will threaten cognitive abilities as "reality itself is under siege".[57] Further, Pew Research anticipates that increasingly sophisticated AI can lead to job loss, which can give rise to poverty and the diminishment of human dignity.[58]

- The functional approach sees imago Dei as having to do with what human beings do rather than what they are. Human beings can fulfil God's purpose through stewardship and dominion over creation. AI tools can help to fulfil or distort God's purpose in us and others. However, when AI tools are used for violence, for example, harassment, image-based abuse, or cyberbullying, these actions are not intended to extend care for others but to impair their dignity, freedom, and sense of agency to participate and contribute meaningfully in online communities. This punishes, silences, and humiliates women, forcing them out of their online presence and debilitating their ability for stewardship and dominion.[59]
- The relational dimension of human beings related to God, other humans, and creation contends that image has to do with "relations." Sexually different human beings are to reflect the relationship inherent in the Trinity. Technology is to be used to uphold others' dignity and to protect others. However, GBV through AI-mediated interactions, like deepfakes, and digital harassment can damage relations, human interdependence, and interconnectedness, and opportunities for intimacy and trust. Such digital interactions corrupt and exploit relationships.
- Another approach to imago Dei is that it is applied to the entire person—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—not just to one aspect. AI tools can be used to promote the well-being of others; at the same time, AI-mediated interactions like online harassment and bullying, and nonconsensual deepfake pornography undermine the holistic well-being of individuals, which can even lead to "self-harm or suicide."[60]

The image of God can be understood as God manifesting his presence in creation through his covenantal relationships with human persons, whom he has created as personal beings to serve as his representatives in the creation and to whom he remains faithful despite their sinful rejection.[61] Violence distorts the dignity and worth of individuals and dehumanises the victim, reducing them to objects of exploitation, manipulation, and abuse. It impairs individuals' ability to form covenantal relationships with human persons, to serve others, and to trust others, and thus distorts the image of God.

ii. Sin, Power, and Accountability

Theologically, violence is a manifestation of sin. The use of AI to create and publish fabricated or genuine content while remaining anonymous and unaccountable reflects the opposite of God's intended purpose of power. When dominion is understood as stewardship and serving, and caring for others, AI-mediated violence portrays how AI becomes a powerful tool to perpetuate violence and control and oppress others. This distorts human relationships and harmony and leads to exploitation and dehumanisation, not empowerment and liberation. This promotes fear, shame, and a lack of freedom.

Further, the patriarchal structure can legitimise male dominance using AI tools to silence women. This is a distortion of the biblical understanding of mutual submission and respect. Besides, harm targeted towards individuals can disturb the functionality of communities and institutions, leading to a culture of silence and complacency. As women and marginalised communities are often the most vulnerable to these forms of violence, this further amplifies power imbalances and reinforces existing inequalities, as perpetrators can anonymously exploit or manipulate others online. The Biblical teaching of repentance and justice towards restoration is mitigated when perpetrators continue to remain anonymous to avoid accountability.[62]

iii. Justice and Protection of the Vulnerable

Society has various laws to promote the welfare of vulnerable populations. This is consistent with the biblical paradigm of protecting the vulnerable and seeking justice (Isaiah 1:17; Micah 6:8). Women are uniquely susceptible to attack or harm, which makes them vulnerable[63] and causes them to be disproportionately affected by GAI-generated violence and exploitation. Theologically, there are three reasons for us to help the

victims of violence: (1) they need it and deserve it, (2) God commands us and invites us to do so, and (3) it is essential to experience the fullness of life for the community.[64] Besides, God has a preferential concern for the weak and the unprotected. This shows the urgency to respond to God's mandate to pursue justice to guard the vulnerable. Justice for faith communities is manifold: holding perpetrators responsible for their actions, giving them opportunities for restoration, promoting the welfare of the victims, and ensuring protection for the vulnerable.

B. Ethical Considerations

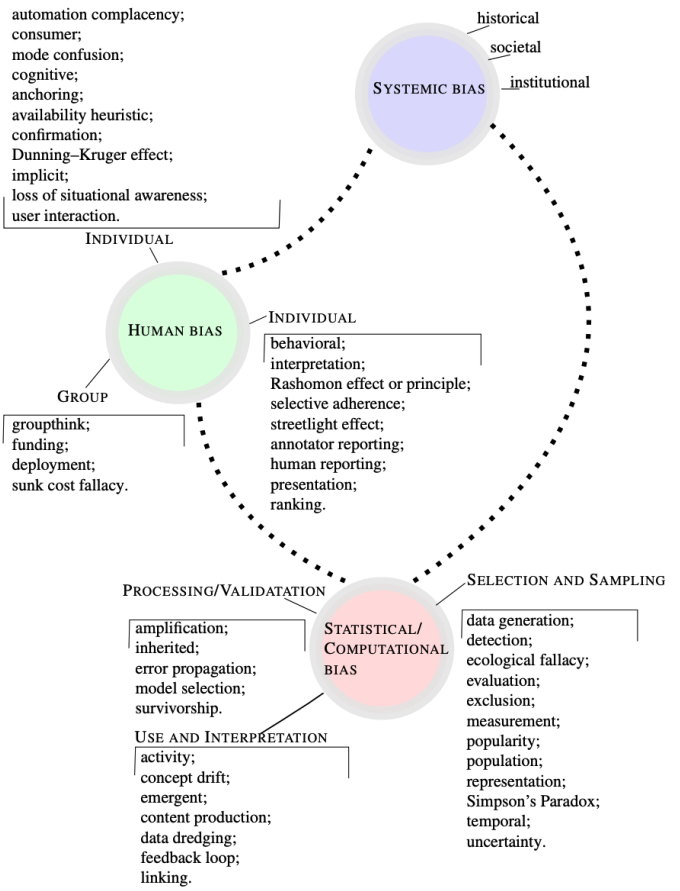
The ethical implications of GAI in TFGBV are multifaceted, touching on issues of privacy, consent, bias and discrimination, and the misuse of technology.[65]

i. Privacy and Consent

There are various ethical concerns regarding privacy and consent with the development of GAI. Generative AI has made it easier to create deepfake content and other forms of digital manipulation without the victim's knowledge or consent. This represents a grave violation of privacy and autonomy, as it often exploits images or data without permission. This violates privacy, promotes false representation without consent, and threatens principles of respect and autonomy. Pew Research[66] portrays surveillance advances, sophisticated bots embedded in civic spaces, the spread of deepfakes and disinformation, advanced facial recognition systems, and widening social and digital divides as looming threats. Their findings foresee crimes and harassment spreading more widely, and the rise of new challenges to human agency and security. Ethical concerns of AI are usually an afterthought; thus, data about the people will be used to control them, not to empower them to "act freely, share ideas, and protest injuries and injustices." [67] This raises grave ethical concerns as misuse of technology can exploit vulnerable populations and reinforce existing power imbalances. This needs to be addressed with mechanisms to protect individuals from such abuse and hold violators accountable towards restoration.

ii. Bias and Discrimination

AI systems are not neutral as they deliver embedded or inserted bias, inaccuracies, and discriminatory outcomes.[68] The figure below shows that the bias in AI is complex and multi-faceted.[69]



Search engine technology is also not neutral. In addition to processing big data, it prioritises results based on user preferences and location. AI algorithms can reflect biases and deepen inequalities, considering the ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status of users.[70] This warns us not to indiscriminately accept AI-generated content, as it can exponentially promote bias much more than human-generated content. This fuels the post-truth phenomenon, where objective facts are overshadowed by misinformation, and traditional metanarratives are replaced by constructed virtual narratives.

iii. The Misuse of Technology

According to Pew Research findings, the choice to use AI tools for good or evil determines how it will impact the world.[71] Malicious use of

powerful AI tools raises ethical questions about the moral responsibilities of developers, platforms, and users. Unlike painters who create art, AI generates an image based on a text prompt that will reflect the information fed into it by others. Then the question of ownership and accountability of AI-generated content emerges, especially with generated misinformation: who owns the generated content? Who should be held accountable for the content, especially if it is fake? Thus, malicious use of technology and unintentional harm caused by embedded harm in AI tools cannot be ignored.

VIII. Addressing Gender-Based Violence in the Generative Artificial Intelligence Era

What has been done to address this issue of GBV in the GAI era? Even though GAI offers new avenues to address GBV through prevention, detection, and support services, communities and organisations work to mitigate violence. Considering the global scale of the problem of gender-based online harassment, several countries agreed to form a Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, which was founded at the 66th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).[72] UNESCO[73] suggests that GAI-mediated TFGBV requires "an ecosystem of actors and cooperation" or a multi-stakeholder approach to address this issue. They are as follows: content distributors (e.g., social media companies), policymakers and governments, civil society organisations,[74] individual actors, and GAI companies that are content generators. All have a role to play in mitigating the harm. Further, the complexity of TFGBV requires examining the situational or systemic factors which are at play to promote violence.

UNESCO provides the following suggestions to various stakeholders to mitigate and stop TFGBV:

A. Content distributors can:
    i. Give due diligence to human rights issues, especially gender-related risk mitigation measures
    ii. Better reporting mechanism to report falsified content
        a. Protection methods do not remove the victims from the public sphere, but rather empower them to find long-term solutions.
        b. Proactive methods of falsified content detection, like auto-checking, watermarks, and content identification
        c. Transparency and access to third-party controls can be improved to ensure innovation in user protection. For example, automated bots monitor for abusive language,

filter out harmful content, or provide warnings about suspicious behaviour.
   d. Collaborate with independent observers and groups to monitor and address violence.
   e. Options for users to swiftly report harmful content
   f. Provide information about the tools and products to the users.

1. Civil societies and independent researchers can:
   a. Include GAI-based harm identification and protection toolkits
   b. Advocate for the protection of at-risk people to governments and policymakers
   c. Create awareness in the community regarding the misuse of GAI through campaigns
   d. Address the root cause of abusive behaviour and identify its patterns
   e. External, unbiased monitoring bodies can evaluate how well content creators and distributors address TFGBV.

2. Policymakers can:
   a. Organise online or physical gatherings of users of GAI to gather feedback and suggestions.
   b. Review laws and regulations related to content creators and content distributors.
   c. Organise media and information literacy programmes and campaigns with multiple stakeholders to stop distributing, reacting to, or interacting with harmful content.

3. Platform users can:
   a. Be vigilant about falsified content
   b. Report harmful content to the platform
   c. Be proactive in protecting their data; for example, women can ask the platform to remove their pictures.
   d. Learn about falsified online content through Media and Information Literacy Programmes.

At the same time, Dragiewicz et al. noted several barriers to effective legal responses to technology-facilitated violence.[75] The rapid pace of technological change—rapid innovations that bring applications and devices to abusers— is constantly changing, numerous, and cheap. Consequently, the legislation cannot respond to rapid technological advancements. Besides, because criminal and civil law are jurisdiction-dependent, it may not be clear who is responsible for responding to crimes that cross national or state boundaries. Thus, existing laws,

policies, and frameworks to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls have not kept pace with technological developments.[76] At this juncture, what can the church do to address such scenarios, thus promoting ecclesial synchrony and collective witness?

1. **Naming violence clarifies** and enables people to situate violence within their cultural understanding. A theological response to accountability means creating a culture where sin is named, power is stewarded responsibly, and justice is sought actively. This helps to recognise and condemn GBV in our society today. As Christians, these understandings cannot be shaped solely by legal definitions, but they can provide useful legal remedies and help shape societal views on violence.[77] Naming leads to clarity in understanding within the church, which can lead to work aimed at preventing and responding to GBV effectively.
2. **Develop Theological and Ethical Frameworks to address GAI**: Churches can create theological and ethical frameworks specifically addressing the implications of GAI on GBV. This addresses inherent power imbalances and the misuse of authority in a patriarchal society by affirming the biblical understanding of *imago Dei* in both men and women and calling to embrace unity beyond gender distinctions (Gal. 3:28).
3. **"Equip the Saints:"** Clergy and lay leaders need training on how to handle TFGBV in the digital era, including understanding the potential misuse of GAI and providing pastoral care (Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens") that recognises the unique nature of technology-facilitated abuse. Training can help to identify the root cause and patterns of abusive behaviour and provide prevention strategies. Training can include information on various technological tools which promote safety, support reporting mechanisms, and enable other protective measures. The need for education, advocacy, and change in societal attitudes toward TFGBV is also a critical component of changing social attitudes of blaming victims for their victimisation.[78] Churches can share resources and knowledge in various educational programmes.
4. **Promote Ecclesial and Ecumenical Collaboration**: The church as the body of Christ can collaborate across denominations and cultural contexts to create a unified response to TFGBV, ensuring that policies, guidelines, and resources reflect the shared commitment to justice and human dignity. This can lead to work for systemic changes in society.
5. **Jointly Advocate for Safe Digital Spaces**: Coalitions of Christian communities can partner with technology companies, other stakeholders, and advocacy groups to promote safe digital spaces

and to address the misuse of GAI. Collectively, they can create policies and ethical guidelines consistent with the church's mission and witness.

6. **Restoration of Victims and Perpetrators**: The church has a pastoral responsibility to care for (James 1:27) those affected by violence. The church is the place to offer healing, restoration, and reconciliation (Isaiah 61:1-3) through care for victims as they walk towards recovery to regain their sense of worth and dignity. The church can protect the vulnerable, be the voice of the oppressed, and be a haven for victims to heal and seek justice. Besides, the church can mediate between victims and justice systems, advocating for reforms and healing practices. This can help to develop policies and partner with organisations that combat GBV.

   However, if perpetrators are not brought towards transformative justice, they will continue to inflict harm and violence. So, the witness also includes inviting such people towards restoring their covenantal relationships with God and humans, to love their neighbours, and thus fulfil God's invitation to be stewards of creation. The Church has an "international network of communications" and a "potential network of cross-cultural relationships."[79] These resources can be utilised in providing pastoral care to the victims and perpetrators of violence.

Conclusion

If the church stays silent and passive in "a time such as these," it can be misinterpreted as complacency to the struggles of those affected by TFGBV. As we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done," we invoke our moral and theological responsibility to speak out, advocate for justice, and protect the vulnerable locally and globally. By standing together and proactively engaging in this and other contextual challenges, the church can strengthen its collective witness and promote peace and justice in a manner that aligns with Christ's teachings and mission.

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Towards A New Nicaea:
A Biocentric Movement for Cosmic Wholeness

Adrian Melville Aaron

The Nicene Creed is a faith affirmation of the early church and a very important landmark in the history of Christian theology. The Nicene Creed also functions as a basic theological foundation for many Christian denominations. The Nicene Creed emerged out of a particular complex context. It includes theological controversy, Greek philosophy, church hierarchy, and the politics of the Roman Empire. Galerius, in the year 311 CE, issued the Edict of Toleration on his deathbed, allowing Christians the right to exist again to set up their places of worship, provided that they do not offend against 'good order'.[1] In the year 313 CE, Emperor Constantine and Licinius met at the Milan Conference concerning the security of the state and declared that Christians and all others should have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favoured.[2] The early Christian community grew from a persecuted church, which affirms the famous statement uttered by Tertullian, ''the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,'' to a state church with wealth followed by privileges. As the number of Christians grew in the empire, Emperor Constantine saw a division becoming inevitable in the church unless he swiftly moved to settle the theological controversy through the Nicene Council. Constantine was able to work out his agenda by politically manoeuvring for his own advantage. He saw that division in the church could lead to the disadvantage of political stability. Therefore, we see the clear marriage of the politics of the Empire and the theological triumphalism of the Ecclesia. The Roman coin, denarius, depicts on one side the globe in the hand of the emperor, while in his other hand is the sceptre. This is a symbol of domination. Imperial politics is always a system of domination, exploitation, plunder, and rape of the earth. It manipulates all forms of life at the expense of the masses and of the biocentric life system.

Issues faced in the Sri Lankan context

There is a global ecological crisis around the world. We experience this in our own country in several ways. There is illegal sand mining taking place in rivers, chemical waste from certain industries is channelled to either streams or soil, thereby poisoning them, and our forests are under threat due to hydro-power plants in high biodiversity areas without an Environmental Impact Assessment. The Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance, sections 3 and 6, strictly forbid any development activity in nature reserves, such as building permanent or temporary structures, deforestation leading to the removal of plants, destruction of fauna and

flora, and filling marshy land. The human-elephant conflict is another issue that we face in Sri Lanka, and the frequent flooding is due to heavy rainfall that has changed usual weather patterns significantly. We have been tampering with nature and have caused disaster and damage to the ecosystem. The politicians who ruled our country have caused massive destruction for many decades. They have lived as political parasites and given favours to their cronies.

The need for an Ecological-Biocentric Nicaea

Our theological task is to explore the Nicene Creed and have a fresh reading to face the present challenges of the contemporary world. Anthropocentric domination has serious consequences for life as a whole. The damage it has caused to Mother Earth is irreparable. This anthropocentric view of subjugation has impelled modern humans to exploit, manipulate, and rape the Earth. The biocentric system that gave life to all forms of creatures has now become a victim of the dominant system of the Empire. This has continued for centuries, taking for granted the view that this can continue without conscience and accountability. Our planet Earth is the only one that has life and is facing massive threats to all forms of life. We are experiencing an ecological apartheid. More than ever, it is essential to conscientise people into the view that all life is sacred and we all have an obligation to protect, preserve, and sustain this Earth for generations to come. Therefore, it is mandatory to respond to this clarion call for a biocentric ethic. The creation theology of the Nicene Creed is not merely a mechanistic view of nature, but creation in continuation.

***Creatio Continua*: God as Maker of Heaven and Earth**

Thomas Aquinas of the 13th century, in his doctrine of creation, first part in question 45, Article 1, and question 104, Article 1, discusses creation as production and God's continuous action in preserving creatures. Also, in his Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I, chapters 16 – 21, he states that God is not only the cause of the beginning of the universe but also its sustainer. So, for Aquinas, God's creative act is an ongoing process, and the world depends on God's will in every moment and not merely at its inception.

Karl Barth, a 20th-century theologian, in his Church Dogmatics Vol. III/1, The Doctrine of Creation, stresses God's ongoing involvement in creation; for him, God's creation is not a static event that occurred some time ago but an ongoing act of God's self-revelation and will. He emphasised the relational aspect where God remains active and present within creation. Barth doesn't subscribe to the view that creation functions independently of the creator. Also, in his Church Dogmatics Vol. III/4, he goes on to

emphasise *creatio continua* as the sustaining power of God's Word. He rejects a purely mechanistic view of nature.

Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian of the 20th and 21st centuries and a prolific writer of theological literature, in his book *A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (1985) argues that creation is a continuous, ongoing dynamic process that involves the continuous presence and action of God. He describes God as both transcendent and immanent in creation, sustaining and renewing it through the Spirit. For Moltmann, *creatio continua* is linked to the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Spirit is the power that sustains life, renews creation, and directs it towards its eschatological fulfilment.

In another book, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (1992), he argues that Spirit is the source of life and vitality of creation and brings forth fullness of life. For Moltmann, the Spirit is engaging in the ongoing renewal of the earth and all living creatures, and the interconnectedness of creation and redemption is inseparable.

Therefore, we should bear in mind that neither for Aquinas, nor for Barth, nor even for Moltmann, does God function as the model of the Deist, which means a Clockmaker-Clock model where the designer and the design are independent and without connectivity. All three great theologians saw God as being involved in creation, and that is a continuous task of the ongoing creation.

Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit scientist and a theologian. He was well known for his work as a palaeontologist. He never went for a walk without his geologist's hammer and naturalist's magnifying glass.[3] In his book, *The Divine Milieu*, he stated that God is the animating force behind every single event.[4] His understanding of matter was that God was incarnating the world of matter, or the whole world was 'becoming incarnate'.[5] Another book of his was *The Hymn of the Universe*, in which he writes about how he imbued his daily mass with a cosmic function and a planetary dimension. In his explorations in Asia, he says, ''I have neither bread nor wine, nor altar, I will myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your, priest will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world.''[6] For Teilhard, Christ is not primarily an antidote to human sin but a new stage in evolution, organically related to the whole cosmic process.

A New Nicaea: A Biocentric Cosmic Wholeness, The Story of the Squirrel Grove

Attin ants are an impressive tribe that has worked a pact with certain fungi. The ants and fungi are ''symbionts,'' dependent on one another

and each contributing to mutual survival. Douglas John Hall is a systematic theologian of the United Church of Canada who calls for ''the ontology of communion'' within creation's matrix of interrelatedness. In this sense, the well-being of one species is dependent on the well-being of the other. This leads us to the point of respecting all forms of life and confirms that all life should be treated as sacred. Therefore, we must strive to discern that all life forms are in a pilgrim ethos. Evolution is the history of an extended family, and we are all symbionts on this ''Earth Community.''

Drawing insight from our own spiritual wells, some Buddhist insights

The Buddhist scriptures of the Agganna Sutta teach us how greed developed in the world, and dhamma is the antidote for greed. In this Sutta, the Lord Buddha states how human actions can disrupt natural order and calls to return to a moral and ethical living. Buddhism speaks of the well-being of all life and reverence for life. It calls on all to practice non-violence (Ahimsa) to all beings, compassion (Karuna) to all beings, and practice simplicity and contentment.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Master, once said, ''The earth is not something separate from us, but we are earth itself.''

Symbols and Hierophanies

Rabbi Abraham Heshel was prophetic in his stance when he stated that humankind will not perish for lack of information, but it may perish for lack of appreciation, of acknowledgement, respect, value, care, and because of maltreatment of humans and other kinds.[7] There is plenty that we can learn from natural phenomena. Nature is a powerful source of communication and gives us natural symbols full of creativity. Rocks, rivers, and trees can become hierophanies for us, the disclosure of Ultimate Reality.[8] Trees can remind us of old stories to affirm life and new stories which provide fresh energy as a symbol of resistance, enabling us to face life during times of discouragement.

The Hebrew scriptures begin with the Tree of Life, and the Christian scripture ends with the Tree of Life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2).

The Bodhi Tree for the Lord Buddha provided shelter, a place for reflection, meditation, and enlightenment. That's why Buddhists continue to venerate the Bodhi tree as a sign of respect and a sacred object to the Buddhist community.

Viktor E. Frankl was an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and a Holocaust survivor. One day, he was having a conversation with a woman on her

deathbed. This young, sick woman was experiencing loneliness. She could see a tree through the window. In her conversation with Frankl, she said that she was not concerned with her religious life. Now, in my loneliness, the only friend is this tree, and the tree speaks to me. Frankl asked, What does the tree say? And she said, 'The tree says to me, I am life, I am life, I am Eternal life.' To find meaning in life is to find the will to live. This tree became a symbol of hope during the last few days of her life.

Conclusion

An ecological audit is an important principle to evaluate where all forms of life stand in relation to the whole Earth. Our quest should be to integrate with all forms of life into an eco-friendly system. God's covenant with Noah was an inclusive covenant. More than ever, we need to listen to what the Earth has to tell us. Aldo Leopold, a naturalist, once said, ''Education, I fear, is learning to see one thing by going blind to another.''[9] Many centuries we have handled nature and messed up in style. Now it is time to learn from nature lessons that we have never learned. The Earth is the home for all life. The New Nicene Creed we look for should affirm a biocentric home where no one is a threat to anyone and every constituent of the entire Earth, whether animate or inanimate, lives and finds space and being in a beautiful symbiotic relationship. Pope Francis in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, says ''May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.[10] This is a utopia which is brought about by the grace of God's evolution revolutionising the Earth and marching forward. This I call a utopianised eschatology, the cosmic reality unfolding day by day. This is a New Nicene Creed where all beings are included, one with a renewed Earth ethic.

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1 *Documents of the Christian Church : Selected and Edited Henry Bettenson, Oxford Press, 1943, pp.21-22*

2 *Ibid. p22*

3 *The Divine Milieu : Teilhard de Chardin, Harper and Row publishers 1960, p.19*

4 *Ibid. p24*

5 *Hymn of the Universe : Teilhard de Chardin, Harper and Row Publishers, 1961, p.10*

6 *Ibid. p19*

7 *Earth Community, Earth Ethics : Larry L. Rasmussen, WCC Publication, Orbis Books,1996, p.195*

8 *Ibid. p195*

9 *Ibid. p188*

10 *Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, LAUDATO SI, On Care of our Common Home, p.17*

Echoes of Nicaea and the Humanity of the Cross: Emerging Posthuman Asian Context

Amritraj Joshua Paul

Introduction

As ecumenical Christian bodies across the globe are enthusiastically commemorating the 1700th year of Nicaea, it is highly commendable and appreciable that the Congress of Asian Theologians under the aegis of CCA is playing a crucial role in echoing the reverberations of Nicaea's theological heritage, especially for faith and unity in the contemporary 21st-century context. Emerging out of the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325 CE,[1] the uniqueness of the Nicene Creed is that it unites Christians from the Eastern and Western parts of the world. Apart from its universal acceptance, it is part of our historical heritage and also functions liturgically to express the one faith of the Church. As early as 1983, the Vancouver assembly of WCC recognised the need to "confess this message (of the apostolic faith) together in ways understandable, reconciling, and liberating to their contemporaries."[2] Similarly, the Faith and Order Commission of WCC acknowledged that:

> The apostolic faith must always be confessed anew and interpreted in the context of changing times and places: it must be in continuity with the original witness of the apostolic community and with the faithful explication of that witness throughout the ages.[3]

In light of the task to reimagine and renew its faith confession and expression in the contemporary context, this paper attempts to discern the echoes of Nicaea in conversation with posthumanism. As our world is transitioning through a posthuman condition,[4] we are witnessing the emergence of the ***technosapien*** within a ***technocultural*** context. With the blurring of the lines between the human and the machine or the natural and the artificial, the chorus for the recognition of the 'posthuman' is growing stronger. What does the ancient Nicene Creed have to do with contemporary posthumanism?

The paper begins by briefly highlighting the contemporary posthuman Asian context, after which it deliberates on the 'ontological' tension between Nicaea and Posthumanism, especially by discussing Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of immanence. Following this, it proceeds to delineate two views that privilege posthuman immanentism in the contemporary context, ***viz***., intersubjectivity and transjectivity, leading to the discussion of 'posthuman issues' in theological anthropology. In this context, the paper vouches for a re-reading of Nicaea to make the case for 'relational ontology' by recourse to ***theologia crucis***, and

parallelly invoking Athanasius. In light of this discussion, the prospects of relational ontology to effect reconciliation between humanity and technology for redemptive and restorative purposes by way of a relational and reconciliative hermeneutic of humanity are discussed. The paper concludes with a call to re-envision theological anthropology's concern for the "human person" created in the ***imago Dei***, and to remind ourselves of humanity's responsibility towards the world of technology in the light of God's teleological design understood concretely in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Emerging Posthuman Asian Context and the Ontological Tension with Nicaea

According to Pramod K. Nayar, posthumanism radically decentres the traditional notion of "a sovereign, coherent, and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by, and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines."[5] To understand the emerging posthuman context, all one needs to do is to take stock of the recent works that have been published in this regard. Apart from major handbooks on posthumanism,[6] the areas and disciplines that scholars have been engaging with from a posthuman perspective are very broadly ranged.[7] Recently, the Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, at the University of Ljubljana, deliberated on the theme of "Humanism, Posthumanism, and Transhumanism in the East Asian Past and Present."[8] The range of topics discussed is so intriguing that it interrupts our "anthropological/humanistic slumber." William Brown, in his discussion of 'Subaltern' imaginings of artificial intelligence, observes how a (South) Indian movie like ***Enthiran*** (The Robot, 2010) challenges Eurocentrism in science fiction and vouches for human and non-human co-dependency and connectedness, ultimately leading to an egalitarian world.[9] At the economic and development front, as a nation, we are striving hard to enhance the quality of life by engaging cutting-edge technologies like AI, quantum computing, and semiconductors.[110]

If there is one idea or thought that cuts across posthumanism and Asian cultures in general, it is the idea of "interconnectedness." Asian cultures are integrative and inclusive by nature. Their worldview, both religiously/philosophically and existentially, is seen to co-evolve and be interlinked with their immediate ecosystem and the whole cosmos. They view life and reality holistically and interconnectedly. However, under the influence of posthumanism across the disciplines of Literature and Cultural Studies, Environmental and Ecological Studies, Technology and Economics, including religion/theology, one theme that has been radically disrupted is the theme of 'what it means to be human.' From the point of Christian theology, especially, with the emergence of the posthuman, which presses for the integration of the human and the machine, the understanding of humanity as created in the ***imago Dei*** is

strongly critiqued and challenged. Putting this in the context of Nicaea and posthumanism, the tension between them is 'ontological' in nature.

Generally speaking, Nicaea's worldview was informed by Neo-Platonic Ontology, which played up the hierarchical distinctions and binary dualism between God and humanity/creation.[11] God was envisioned as absolutely transcendent in relation to creation. By invoking the category of ***logos*** and infusing it with the Christian affirmation of the 'word became flesh,' the formulators of the Creed found a basis to affirm humanity's affinity and relationship with God.[12] Metaphysical dualistic categories eventually legitimised a hierarchical structure in the patristic discourse on theological anthropology. Though it is true that Nicene theology took recourse to Neo-Platonist ontology, in the context of their times, this was perhaps the best possible methodological framework available to articulate the deity of the Son. However, it prioritised metaphysical discourse on divine substance.

Posthumanism, on the other hand, seeks to reject the idea of a transcendent other (God) altogether. It argues for a continuum within the natural order in response to binary dualism, eventually leading to the subtle effacing of the human to vouch for mere 'being.' Though the prime engagement of posthumanism emerged in the context of the relation between the human and the machine, recent discourse problematises the narrative around "human exceptionalism." Posthuman(ist) thinkers fault human exceptionalism of premodern and modern anthropology for the issues we face in our societies.[13] In response to this realisation, posthumanism radically questions the hierarchical power relations between humans and creation by recourse to what is known as the philosophies of immanence. As an alternative to dualistic ontology, which was characteristic of Nicaea, the posthuman concern is to vouch for a new ontology of immanence. A leading voice that informs the posthuman immanence is Gilles Deleuze.[14]

Understanding Deleuzian Posthuman Immanentism

A new ontology of immanence is derived from Deleuze's rhizomatic approach to becoming in contrast to an arborescent mode of existence. A rhizome (think of ginger) grows freely without being tied to a particular centre. It grows horizontally/non-hierarchically, reflecting a world of multiplicities without leaving traces of the source of its roots. In contrast, an arborescent mode of existence is hierarchical in nature. This structure has a clear centre (root) which gives the sense of direction to the whole body.[15] Rhizomatic imaginations/thoughts are not restricted by any particular hegemonic or dominating centre. They have the potential to collapse all hierarchical modes of existence, and open up the possibility for all forms of 'becoming.' In the words of Deleuze and Guattari:

> We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them… Thought is not arborescent, and the brain is not a rooted or ramified matter. What are wrongly called "dendrites" do not assure the connection of neurons in a continuous fabric… Many people have a tree growing in their heads, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree.[16]

The goal is to "derail" and problematise all forms of dualisms and to move beyond them to explore the world of multiplicities and interconnectedness. The new ontology that emerges from a rhizomatic approach to imagining reality is monistic in nature, where the prime intention is to argue for a continuum between the entities of apparent binaries. It is not human and/or machine, or even the hyphenated human-machine that is being argued for, but rather the idea of the ***humachine***, ***technosapien***, ***technosocial***, or the ***Cyborg***. Here, the idea is to challenge an anthropocentric world view by negating human exceptionalism and to demonstrate the material embeddedness and interconnectedness of all being.[17]

A crucial aspect of the Deleuzian philosophy of immanence is the negation, or rather the de-transcendentalisation of any transcendent being.[18] There are tendencies within Christian theology via the Deleuzian idea of immanence[19] to reduce the whole of existence to the plane of immanence. In other words, existence may be imagined only in relation to the immediate natural environment, and any notion of God as the "transcendent Other" or "Wholly Other" must be denied. The claim is that this is not a denial of God, but the rejection of a particular understanding of God, ***viz***., the transcendent God.[20] God, rather than being the "Pantocrator,"[21] "expresses himself [***sic***] in all creatures internally."[22] Such an imagination is intentional in problematising the hierarchical relation between God and humanity and prioritising the interconnectivity between them, thus prioritising intersubjectivity.

Christine Daigle, on the other hand, engages Deleuze to propose the idea of the "Transjective self." Though her concern is not theological, she presents a de-monarchialised human, where humans are not the crown or the lords over creation, but are entangled beings. They are entangled with materiality in its dynamism and vibrancy. She introduces the compound term 'transjective' to capture the idea that "beings are transsubjectively and transobjectively constituted."[23] A transjective being transgresses or moves across its subjective and objective sites or modes of existence and hence is constituted by the dynamic flux that transpires between the subjective and material entanglements.[24] Daigle's transjective self does not do away with the notion of the self completely, and also provides space for the traces of the self to affirm the agentic capacity of the self. The posthuman self in Daigle's imagination is a "field

of tensions" which is "being done and undone, both by ourselves and by other beings we are entangled with, doing and undoing them as well."[25]

Posthuman Issues in Theological Anthropology

The common denominator between monistic ontology, in the idea of intersubjectivity and transjectivity, is the aspect of the haecceity of existence.[26] Human existence is in a state of rhizomatic becoming where the line maintaining the integrity between God and humans is blurred, and multiplicity is the fundamental unity. The logical conclusion of the hermeneutic of transjectivity or the absence of transcendence (De-othering God) is the weakening of the integrity of the divine and human identity in the God-human relationship. Theologically speaking, it not only negates God's aseity[27] but, in doing so, it also discards the ***imago Dei*** and constructs a posthuman (Cyborg, technosapien, etc.) based on aporetic constructions. Posthuman immanentism shifts the focus from an ontology of being to an ontology of becoming, with the former prioritising a hierarchical framework, while the latter proposes a 'flat hierarchy.' The deeper issue, however, is the tension between binary-dualism (which was characteristic of Nicaea) and continuum (which is characteristic of posthumanism). Theologically speaking, by implication, it is the tension between transcendence and immanence in relation to the God-human-creation dynamics.

A deeper problem in the posthuman discourse in relation to theological anthropology is the way it understands what it means to be human. Nicaea affirms that the one Lord, Jesus Christ … "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became ***truly human***." Christian theological anthropology affirms the creation of humanity in the image of God (***imago Dei***). To be human first and foremost is to be in an image. In line with Athanasius – and the larger Patristic thought – I take the image to mean 'Jesus Christ.'[28] Related to this is the aspect of the fall. Posthumanism remains silent regarding the fallen state of humanity. At best, it faults human exceptionalism as the cause for all the chaos in the world. According to Christian theological anthropology, in our fallen state, we bear traces of 'true humanity' which is seen in Jesus Christ. In affirming that Jesus Christ became ***truly human***, we are affirming that he became what we were meant to be. Herein lies the clue to redress the ontological tension between Nicaea and Posthumanism. The following section explores a reimagination of Nicaea ***via*** the framework of ***theologia crucis*** to redress the posthuman caricature of transcendence.

Re-reading Nicaea *via* the Theology of the Cross

Implicit to the Nicene Creed is the theology of the cross.[29] According to Khaled Anatolios, two key works of Athanasius, ***viz***., ***Contra Gentes***

and ***De Incarnatione***, are "first and foremost an ***apologia crucis***."[30] However, by re-reading Nicaea through the lens of ***theologia crucis***, the prime focus is not to read it apologetically, but hermeneutically. In the context of engaging posthuman immanentism, the focus is on ***how*** the continuum between God and humans is mediated by way of ***theologia crucis***. From a historical-theological point of view, the theology of the cross serves as the epistemological and methodological point of departure or the framework from which the whole "Christ-event" is interpreted.[31] Embedded within the gospel accounts of the Christ-event are deep theological themes and truths. Theology of the cross preoccupies itself with extracting and systemising these themes ***via*** the criterion of the cross – which was the framework through which Jesus Christ envisioned his life and ministry. Though the cross is a sign, a symbol, and the prism through which humanity comes to know and understand God, this knowing (epistemological) and understanding (hermeneutical) dimension is mediated not just through the event of the crucifixion, but by the Christ-event itself. The cross – figuratively and literally – becomes the ***decisive*** criterion for making sense of the whole Christ-event in a concrete manner.

By capturing the whole Christ-event, ***theologia crucis*** mediates how 'grace' functions to sustain the continuity between God and humanity despite the "fleeting subjection to dissolution."[32] Embedded within the Nicene Creed is a clear outline of the theology of the cross. It traces the contours of the Christ-event, reflecting the value of humanity to God. By the act of the incarnation, the Christ-event serves as the point of intersection between two worlds. In the words of Karl Barth, "the one known and the other unknown."[33] Humanity – or the known world – has fallen out of union with its Creator. There exists a disjunction between them. The world of the Creator – the unknown world – meets humanity at the intersection point of the Christ-event. The intersection between God and humanity in Christ "presses for recognition."[34] Nicaea, in anticipation of this gap, recognised the true humanity of Jesus Christ to address the quandary of humanity.[35] The basis for this was the deity of Jesus Christ.[36] Without the Christ-event, God and humanity would forever remain on two separate planes.

At the core of the Christ-event is the dispensation of the grace of God (Jn. 1:16-17). Athanasius, in elaborating on the incarnation, presupposes the doctrine of creation by the Word. In Athanasius' scheme of thought, humanity is incapable of "independent perseverance." Yet based on God's 'mercy,'[37] humanity was given "an added grace… making them in his own image and giving them also a share in the power of his own Word."[38] The crucial aspect of this "added grace" is that of 'participation.'[39] For Athanasius, the quintessential truth of humanity is its creation in the image of God. To be created in the ***imago Dei*** is to share in the "image

of the Image of God." Anatolios makes the observation that though Athanasius employs the terminology of governance (ἡγεμονία), he uses it primarily in relation to creation as a whole but never uses it to refer to "God's activity in relation to humanity."[40] Contrary to critical notions, there is reason to read Athanasius as privileging a 'relational ontology' as against a hierarchical ontology.[41]

The crux of Athanasius' argument is that more than any metaphysical imagination of humanity, in the light of the incarnation, it is the 'relational dimension' that must be emphasised. Theology of the cross helps us recognise that Nicaea's affirmation of the deity and incarnation of Jesus Christ, rather than signifying a ***hierarchical ontology*** between God and humanity, signifies a ***relational ontology*** between them in the person of Jesus Christ. The prime concern was to safeguard the ontological relation of the Son with the Father so that humanity's scope for redemption (salvation) could have a concrete basis. Taking our cues from Athanasius in the light of the Christ-event, contrary to hierarchical or monistic ontology, 'relational ontology' serves as a more meaningful framework to envision what it means to be human. Rather than prioritising God over humanity, the emphasis is on relationality, which is funded by the continuity of grace.

Nicaea, Posthumanism, and the Question of True Humanity

Posthumanism seems to be targeting a caricature of the transcendence of God to prioritise pure immanentism. On the other hand, Christian theology needs to be self-critical about its own vulnerability in attracting criticisms due to its overemphasis on metaphysical categories. Yet posthumanism raises a valid point in reminding us of the tensions in the human-machine relationship. However, its convenient erasure of the fall necessitates the reinforcement of 'humanity' as imagined in the light of the theology of the cross to preserve the continuity between God and humanity. At the same time, it is unfortunate that the fall/sin becomes the dominant narrative in some discourses on theological anthropology. To use a term that is familiar to the world of digital technology, the theology of the cross provides the scope to imagine an ***Interface Christological Anthropology*** which facilitates humanity's assimilation into the very being of God, while God remains ever present among humanity, effecting their lives every moment. Relational ontology, inherent to which is the aspect of grace, facilitates the continuum between God and humanity, slowly yet consistently revealing God's teleological design for humanity (1Jn. 3:2).

Such an imagination presses for a relational and reconciliative hermeneutic of humanity. A relational hermeneutic of existence in the sense that, without negating or over-privileging the otherness/transcendence of

God, it grounds the reality of God in a way that human experiences can relate to. Jesus Christ is not just the medium of correspondence to the redemptive activity of God, but he is also the one who enables humanity to be co-respondents to God's redemptive and restorative purposes. This co-respondence is intrinsic to the ***imago Dei***. In this regard, a viable alternative to intersubjective and/or transjective reality is that of proleptic existence.[42] Proleptic existence accentuates the teleological dimension of humanity, ***viz***., that humanity is God's covenant partner and recipients of God's grace. The paradox of humanity is that though it is radically corrupt (hamartiological dimension), it is also constituted by God's covenant promises (teleological dimension). Through the reality of sin, it is grace that facilitates and preserves the continuity between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as it is imperative to recognise the fallen state of humanity, without either trivialising or condoning sin or absolutising it, we must see it to be relativised in the light of God's telos for humanity.[43]

On the other hand, a reconciliative hermeneutic of humanity reinforces humanity's responsibility towards fellow humanity and technology. The idea of reconciliative humanity stems from the idea of God's reconciliative nature. This is especially true of the perichoretic relation between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Beyond the understanding of 'change or exchange,' reconciliation means to continuously reach out benevolently to the other.[44] The Triune God's nature or being is such that the persons of the Godhead are always in a state of benevolent reaching out, overflowing in a relationship of deep communion between them. God, being a communion of love, is benevolently and kindly disposed to the other. In other words, reconciliation is communion. This eternal benevolence, the communion and reconciliative nature of God, is made concrete and tangible through the true humanity of Jesus Christ, which is mediated through ***theologia crucis***. Such a reading leads to the construal of – ***humanitas crucis*** – the humanity of the cross.

The logical implication of this relational ontological meaning of reconciliation is that prior to the consummation of reconciliation through the cross, it is important to acknowledge the 'reconciliative' nature of God. The Christ-event as imagined from the point of the cross serves as a commentary on how the Creator God reaches out to humanity, making concrete the continuum of grace. It is the reconciliative God who initiates and effects reconciliation in the God-human-cosmos relation. By virtue of the same, it is possible to extend this reconciliative nature between humans and technology. Extending this to the relationship between humans and machines, the emphasis is on human initiative and responsibility towards the world of technology to effect redemptive and restorative purposes. In other words, we need to press for a synergy

between humanity and technology to envision human and digital wellness. The problem with emerging forms of posthumanism is that inherent to them is a subtle form of dehumanisation – that which negates humanity as the Creator intended them to be. The relational and reconciliative image derived from the Christ-event serves as the pattern and basis for demonstrating true humanity in a context of emerging posthumanism. In light of the above discussion, the following section highlights two key implications for envisioning humanity and digital wellness.

Humanity of the Cross and the Scope for Envisioning Humanity and Digital Wellness

Firstly, we need to re-envision what it means to be human in a posthuman context. At its core, the humanity of the cross seeks to affirm the 'human person.' In a world where emerging technologies are "playing God" in terms of creating new life[45] and even replicating/substituting human reasoning processes (AI), the idea of the human person is becoming as fluid as ever. In this context, a leading crisis is that of 'identity.' Based on aporetic constructions inherent to the posthuman imagination is a subtle form of 'othering' between the human created in the ***imago Dei*** and the human constructed according to ***imago posthumana***. With digital oligarchies imposing, in the words of Deleuze, "societies of control,"[46] digitisation gathers information about ourselves and codifies it, producing a new "codified/digital self", eventually leading to a homogeneous posthuman self. In such a context, we need to re-envision humanity by reverting to the collective wisdom of Nicaea in recognising the purpose of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

To echo the words of Faith and Order:

> While metaphors of human beings as nothing more than information processing machines may be useful in a limited technical sense, they do not address the richness of the human condition and experience as manifest through specific cultural and social contexts. The human person is based on a network of relationships constituted through provisional, embodied, contingent, meaning-producing interactions with significant others. The human relationship with the Other, who is God, also has these characteristics.[47]

It states further that:

> The vision of AI widely articulated through popular science fiction narratives ends either with idolatry (that ultimately we are obliged to serve the machines we have created) or hubris (that

> we find false salvation through our own heroic achievements). God's salvation is an embodied event of human solidarity that is a counter-witness. Still, the potential for sin is found within the bounded and contingent condition of being human.[48]

At the end of the day, we are real humans living in a real world. To be truly human is to be conscious of and sensitive to the real issues (existential and spiritual) of humanity. In becoming ***truly human***, Jesus Christ fully identified with us. The humanity of the cross radically transforms us to the point of seeing ourselves as one with those who are deprived of justice, equality, identity, dignity, and humanity itself. Vinayaraj highlights how posthumanism fails to address the questions raised by marginal communities about dehumanising social systems and phenomenologies of violence.[49] The humanity of the cross serves to engage the "agonies of the colonial bodies of the world."[50] This realisation must inevitably lead to the dispensation of our God-given responsibility towards humanity.

This brings us to the second aspect – that of reminding ourselves of our responsibilities towards the world of technology for digital wellness. Re-envisioning humanity in the light of a re-reading of Nicaea via ***theologia crucis*** must reinforce an affirmative ethics of human responsibility towards the world of digital technology, which comes with immense prospects and potentialities. Yet participation in the ***imago Dei*** comes with the privilege and responsibility of ethically and justly using technology for constructive and redemptive purposes.[51] Inasmuch as we are co-creators and co-responsible for technology, we must find ways to harmonise and synergise the potentialities of humanity and technology to serve humanity better. In line with Faith and Order's affirmation:

> We are called to a relationship of loving care with the wider creation, acknowledging and taking responsibility for our place within the dynamic interconnected and interdependent whole of creation. The fact that God created all things good means that this co-responsibility, however exacting it may be, will always occasion delight and celebration.[52]

Today, as we strive to navigate our way through a world of huge possibilities in the context of emerging technologies, we must never forget that as we struggle to make sense of humanity in the context of violence, wars, poverty, pain, and sufferings of various kinds, the good news of Jesus Christ is that he became incarnate "for us and for our salvation." Theological Anthropology must facilitate this hope by constantly working towards the reconciliation between humans and machines by acknowledging the "one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen."

Conclusion

At a time when human imagination of the ontological unity between the Father and the Son came under threat, Nicaea intervened to steady the ecumenical church's affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. Nicaea serves as a pattern for the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in the contemporary context to engage with emerging ideas that are critical of its confessions. Today, as we confess Nicaea anew in the context of posthumanism immanentism, which is informed by Deleuzian philosophy of immanence, we do it by recognising and acknowledging that at its core Nicaea is founded on a relational ontology which sustains the continuum between God and humanity, and mediates to us the meaning of true humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. In the explication of this faith, we press for a relational and reconciliative hermeneutic of humanity, highlighting the urgent need to affirm the human person and human responsibility towards the world of technology.

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[1] The Creed of Nicaea refers to the original creed as formulated in 325 CE, while the Nicene Creed refers to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 (the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople). By Nicene Creed, this paper refers to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381. For the text of the Nicene Creed refer the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC)/International Consultation on English Texts (ICET). "Praying Together," English Language Liturgical Consultation, accessed Sept 2, 2024, https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/a42fbdb2/files/uploaded/praying.pdf.

[2] David Gill, ed. *Gathered for Life: Official Report, VI Assembly of World Council of Churches* (Geneva/Grand Rapids: WCC/Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 45.

[3] Faith and Order Paper No. 153, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Cree (381)* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 2.

[4] Posthumanism is generally understood as the merger of humans with technology "creating a new and superior posthuman species." See Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (New York: Routledge, 2016), x. Also see Cary Wolf, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2010); Promod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014); Peter Mahon, *Posthumanism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

[5] Promod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (UK: Polity Press, 2014), Chapter 1, Perlego. Nayar differentiates between transhumanism which is understood more in terms of prosthesis to human identity, and [critical] posthumanism where technology is integral to human identity.

[6] See especially Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Jacob Wamberg, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2020), and Stefan Herbrechter et. al., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Chad, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). Apart from this there are a host of introductory/intermediate and advanced level monographs on this subject by a host of scholars like Christine Daigle, Francesca Ferrando, Katherine Hayles, Peter Mahon, Pramod K. Nayar, Rosi Bradoiti, etc.

[7] A casual perusal of the titles on the themes and topics that scholars have engaged will reinforce this point. Today posthuman discourse engages idea like Humanism, Technology, Environmental concerns, Politics, Feminism, Human Rights, questions of Identity, Disability, New Materialism, Education/Pedagogy, Medicine, Robotics, Aesthetics, Music, Films, etc.

[8] For brief details see Maja Maria Kosek, *Humanism, Posthumanism and Transhumanism in the East Asian Past and Present* (Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press, 2023). This was held from May 19-21, 2023.

[9] See William Brown, "'Subaltern' Imaginings of Artificial Intelligence," in *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence*, eds. Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 183.

[10] The latest news tells us that Tech giants like Google and Nvidia are all geared up to enhance AI focus and invest in India. See PTI, "Tech giants Google, Nvidia to enhance AI focus, investments in India," *The Hindu*, 24 Sept 2024, https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/tech-giants-google-nvidia-to-enhance-ai-focus-investments-in-india/article68676353.ece. Accessed 24 Sept 2024.

[11] For a brief discussion of the influence of Neo-Platonic philosophy in Early Church theology/anthropology see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Classical Approaches to Theological Anthropology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Oakey (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 11-34.

[12] For a recent work which details the philosophical and dualistic background to theological anthropology in the Patristic period see J. Patout Burns et al., *Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), Introduction, Epub.

[13] Humanity by elevating themselves to a superior status in relation to creation and 'othering' them, grossly abused and assaulted creation. This logic of domination and exploitation is funded by the vision of dualistic ontology that sustains a transcendence-immanence binary not only between God and humanity/creation, but also between humanity and creation.

[14] Gilles Deleuze (1925-95) was a strong proponent of the philosophy of immanence. Though many club the thoughts of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari together (*Deleuzoguattarian approach*), this paper engages Deleuze in particular. In relation to his influence on posthuman thinking see Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald, *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

[15] The hierarchical structure is represented by the movement from root to trunk to branch to leaf.

[16] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Platitudes: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 15.

[17] See Christine Daigle, "Deleuzian Traces: The Self of the Polyp," in *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence*, eds. Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 41-62.

[18] See Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Dalit Theology After Continental Philosophy* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 100-101.

[19] As briefly highlighted above, the Deleuzian idea of immanence vouches for an anti-hierarchical and anti-organizational ontology. Here the emphasis is more on interconnectedness and multiplicities, rather than any form of transcendence.

[20] Vinayaraj states that "It is not denying God; rather, it is denying God as the 'transcendent Other' who has no ontological relationship with the creatures." Vinayaraj, *Dalit Theology*, 101.

[21] Pantocrator/Pantokrator in Eastern thought is the idea that God/Christ is the Omnipotent/Sovereign Lord of the Universe. The emphasis in on the "All-Powerful" nature of God, thus reinforcing the hierarchy between God and humanity.

[22] Vinayaraj, *Dalit Theology*, 101.

[23] Christine Daigle, *Posthumanist Vulnerability: An Affirmative Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2023), 29.

[24] Daigle, *Posthumanist Vulnerability*, 30.

[25] Christine Daigle, "Deleuzian Traces: The Self of the Polyp," 47.

[26] In Deleuzian terms haecceities are "pure becomings." It more of a mode of individuation. It is a process of becoming in the plane of immanence, which is also called the plane of consistency or composition. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Platitudes*, 266. In simple terms it refers to the "thisness" of a thing.

[27] Aseity refers to the state or quality of being independent and autonomous. According to Paul Tillich "There is no ground prior to him [*sic*] which could condition his [*sic*] freedom… A conditioned God is no God." See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 248. For a detailed discussion on the aseity of God see Part II of Tillich's *ST*, Vol 1.

[28] See Athanasius, *CG*, §2, §46.

[29] It is interesting that Matthew Steenberg notes "Nicaea can never be read as a coherent source text for Christian anthropology. Nor, in its own right as a document, does it offer much in the way of refining an anthropological approach to theology… But the creed of Nicaea is important to our understanding of theology as anthropology in the early Church for exactly these reasons." See Matthew C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 126.

[30] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge [1998], 2005), 29. Emphasis in the original.

[31] In line with Karl Barth, by "Christ-event" I mean God's self-revelation to humanity in a singular event by which God objectifies Godself to humanity calling for a corresponding action on the part of humanity in obedience of faith. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et. al. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers [1957], 2010), § 28.

[32] See Athanasius, *CG*, §41. This is one among the many of Athanasius' description of sin.

[33] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press [1933], 1968), 29.

[34] Barth, *Romans*, 29.

[35] This was precisely the argument of Athanasius – that "Christ became what we are that we might become what he is." See Athanasius, *DI*, §9, §16.

[36] In the words of the Nicene Creed – "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made."

[37] Here the Gk text reads as "ἐν οἷς πάντων τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς τὸ ἀνθρώπων γένος ἐλεήσας..." → "And among these creatures, of all those on earth he had special *pity* for the human race..." Emphasis added.

[38] Athanasius, *DI*, §3. Translation adapted from Robert W. Thompson, ed. and trans., *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 141.

[39] Athanasius states that God "gave them a portion/share even of the power of His own Word."

[40] See Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 60.

[41] 'Relational Ontology' is used by John Zizioulas, Sarah Coakley, Khaled Anatolios, Allison Marie Covey etc. Myk Habets claims this idea to be present in T. F. Torrance's interpretation of Patristic thought. It is no surprise that this idea emerges as a common denominator to interpreting Early church thinkers, reflecting the fact that more than preoccupation with metaphysical concerns they were relational in their thinking.

[42] Prolepsis in simple terms means that which to happen in future is pre-actualized in the present. Ted Peters has developed his whole theological system by way of a proleptic explication of the gospel. Using the category of prolepsis, he explicates how the gospel announces the preactualizing of the future consummation of all things in Jesus Christ. See Ted Peters, *God-The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). For the discussion on Proleptic Humanity see 301-304.

[43] Here I build on the Barthian idea that in Jesus Christ grace sustains humanity's continuum with God. Barth, *CD III/2*, 43-44.

[44] See Büchsel, "ἀλλάσσω," *TDNT* I:254.

[45] The discipline of Genetics and the diverse sub-disciplines associated with it.

[46] See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, 59 (Winter, 1992): 3-7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828. For an insightful discussion of how digital oligarchies are imposing "posthumanist confinement" see Avanti Lele, "Posthumanist Confinement: Big Tech's 'Societies of Control,'" *EPW*, 56/12 (March 2021): 12-14.

[47] Faith and Order Paper No. 199, *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), §70, 11.

[48] Faith and Order Paper No. 199, *Theological Anthropology*, §71, 11.

[49] See Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Faith in the Age of Empire: Christian Doctrines in a Postcolonial Sensibility* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2020), 48.

[50] Vinayaraj, *Age of Empire*, 48. Dalit theologians like Sathianathan Clarke and Philip Peacock acknowledge the value of "humanization founded on God-in-Christ." They affirm this to be profoundly theological and pertinent to the Dalit cause. See Sathainathan Clarke and Philip Vinod Peacock, "Dalit and Religious Conversion: Slippery Identities and Shrewd Identifications," in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, eds. Sathianathan Clarke et al. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 191.

[51] Implied in the ethics of caring for the world of technology is how we engage with and responsibly employ the potentialities of the STEM disciplines which produced tools like Genetics, AI, ML, IoT, CS, ChatGPT etc.

[52] Faith and Order Paper No. 199, *Theological Anthropology*, §90, 15.

PART-IV

CATS-X Communique

COMMEMORATION

Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now, always, and forever!

We, the Congress of Asian Theologians (CAT-X), organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), lift our hearts to the Lord our God in thanksgiving for the memorable and meaningful commemoration of the historical event of the Nicaea 325 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 24 to 29 October 2024.

Zion Cathedral ELCM Compound, KUL, celebrating its centenary, hosted the inaugural session commemorating 1700 years of the Council of Nicaea. Ecumenical Worship Service in the Cathedral offered a fitting celebration to commence the Congress, bringing together 126 participants from various Churches and theological institutions, showcasing the Church as a communion of Churches. Dr Mathews George Chunakara, General Secretary, CCA, welcomed all the participants of CATS-X, and Rev. Bishop Reuel Norman O. Marigza, Moderator, CCA, presided over the meeting. Many Prelates and Church Leaders addressed the gathering on the occasion, and Dr Anna Alisha Mathew Simon, Vice Moderator, CCA, proposed a vote of thanks.

The theme of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X) was ***Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith and Embracing Unity***, comprising three sub-themes: i) Ecclesial Synchrony: Oneness in Faith, Witness, and Withness, ii) Biocentric Solidarity: Covenantal Bond for Cosmic Wholeness, and iii) Cyber Synergy: Envisioning Humanity and Digital Wellness.

The CATS-X assembled in Kuala Lumpur echoed the Nicene Council of 325 held in Asia 1700 years ago, a rightful reclaiming of Asian contribution to the enduring faith, and it invited the Churches to have a renewed encounter of faith in Christ for the integration and transformation of the world towards the full flowering of God's creation. It offered an opportunity for a cross-section of Asian theologians to explore ways to strengthen ecclesial synchrony, solidarity,

and synergy through visible union and communion of the Churches towards a shared witnessing by the missionary disciples of Christ in the world, giving glory to God, establishing peace on earth, and rendering hope to human beings.

CONFESSION

The Congress of Asian Theologians confessed the Symbol of the Nicene Creed and reflected on it in the Churches' changing contexts and emerging needs. Using the hermeneutical principle of "reaching back to move forward," the members revisited and revitalised the events at the Council of Nicaea 1700 years ago, and confessed the need to investigate Nicaea through a spectrum of issues: the history of the Church in Asia; linguistic analysis; marginalised realities today; environmental issues, artificial intelligence, the future of the Church; and life together as churches in Asia. While confessing the Nicene Symbol in unison, the members expressed the need to read the text in the evolving context and make it more liveable and engaging: bringing the past and drawing the future into the present for a joyful witnessing of identity, integrity, solidarity, and unity in diversity, modelling the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CELEBRATION

During the five days of the Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians, we celebrated the Nicene Creed in word and worship. Assembling on the occasion of the 1700 years of the first Nicaea Council held in 325 gave inspiration and impetus to revisit, renew, and rejoice in the Symbol of faith, conferring on us a vision of enduring and dynamic faith and unity in our missionary journey. The Nicaean Symbol is an epiphany of the history of salvation and the mystery of Christ, accompanied and perfected by the Holy Spirit till the second coming of the Lord. We celebrated the Nicene Creed unfolded and unfolding in the contemporary contexts and challenges, ever broadening our horizon to continue the mission of Christ in all circumstances, including in the age of artificial intelligence. The Nicene Creed was the core of our discussions, deliberations, and celebrations.

We celebrated the rich tapestry of understanding concerning biocentric solidarity, such as embodying sacred cosmic solidarity, the queer proposal for climate justice and gender justice, and biocratic celebration as the benchmark of being blessed. We also discussed topics such as creation care, Bible and cosmology, God as Creator, eco-justice and indigenous realities, local ecumenism, the prophetic role of the communion of churches, and interfaith peace aspects. While the Biblical narratives and the Nicene Creed emphasise the element of God's role as Creator, the presenters brought a vast array of information. They enabled the participants to be in a mood of celebration. The Asian cultural and ideological aspects were interwoven within the philosophical and theological outlook of the presentations.

We celebrate the Nicene Creed as a revolutionary benchmark in the development of Christian doctrine, fostering unity, encounter, and clarity during a time of significant theological turmoil. We celebrate discussions on the historical Nicene Creed, not only reflecting the complexities of interfaith relations but also exemplifying the ongoing quest for mutual understanding and respect between diverse religious traditions and communities.

We celebrate the new way forward in understanding things such as microbiomes and cell signals in Biblical interpretation, religious AI for human flourishing, and digital theology. We also had moments of overwhelming joy and serious reflection when themes such as faith in times of polarisation, posthuman Asian context, Nicene Creed in an age of science and secularism, Nicaea and City of God in the Asian context, biocentric movement for cosmic wholeness, and technology-facilitated and gender-based violence were taken up for discussion. As a community of theologians, we celebrated the rich resources brought from different Asian countries in closer connectivity with the Nicene Creed and ecumenical integration.

We celebrate the Council of Nicaea as a historical milestone of the Christian faith, providing helpful insights on responding to our current challenges.

The daily morning and evening worship with biblical reflection matched to the day's theme was a unique and

memorable celebration of the Nicene Creed, opening our hearts to the vast and incredible mysteries of the epiphanies of God's love and life for the world and humanity. Another rare moment of ecumenical experience was the Sunday worship fellowship celebrated in different churches with the people of God in KUL.

COMMITMENT

We acknowledge and embrace the Nicene Creed as the foundation and overarching faith proclamation of the Churches through the centuries, manifesting the communion of Churches and cultures. We affirm our commitment to the Nicene Creed as an authentic and authoritative articulation of the Church's faith and mission. We recognise the role of the Creed as the pillar of identity, unity, and continuity with the early Christian community. We nurture and foster our Christian identity as echoed in the Nicene Creed and faith witness through self-giving to other cultures and religions as a mark of our being oneself, growing, and going out for the flourishing of all in the wisdom of God.

We work towards the flourishing of the Body of Christ in Asia in collaboration with other cultures and religions without distorting the truth we profess in the Nicene Creed. We call on churches to continue building bridges of understanding towards other faiths and demonstrate sensitivity in engaging with different cultures. We submit to God's providential work for harmony and will work with hope, love, and worship as we encounter challenges of disunity and hardship.

We seek transformative existence and faith witness reflecting the triune God's truth, beauty, and glory in relationships within the Body of Christ, other faiths, and the world. We commit ourselves to the value of life of creation above and beyond human life. We affirm the biocentric solidarity, ekklēsial and societal involvements, wholeness in the cosmic order by accepting the world's interconnectedness.

We commit ourselves to a prophetic imagination incorporated in our hermeneutical and theological engagements for wider ecumenism and solidarity. We explore our faith in the neuro-cybernetic era as it is being shaped by the new demands of the new developments in the world, benefitting digital ecclesiology and artificial intelligence.

We acknowledge the humanity and the glory of the cross, capable of reinterpretation and realisation of the faith housed in the Nicene Creed. We commend ourselves to the Nicene Creed by renewing and reinterpreting it in an age of science and secularism and, by its light, to discover ecumenism flourishing in Asia.

We commit ourselves to constructive discourse, encouraging respectful engagement and highlighting the core tenets of Christianity. Indigenous Christians, in the face of numerous challenges, have consistently upheld the Nicene Creed, a foundational declaration of faith formulated by the early church fathers over 1700 years ago. Indigenous Christians are committed to the Nicene Creed, a historical testament, and their holding on to it despite contemporary pressures and cultural obstacles is a remarkable demonstration of their dedication to the core tenets of Christianity. This enduring adherence not only reflects their reverence for tradition but also signifies a profound connection to the universal church, affirming the Creed's significance across generations.

We consider the Nicene Creed to be a paradigm for cosmic wholeness, incorporating challenges of gender-based issues in the Asian context. We commit ourselves to taking the Council of Nicaea as a "prototype" of ecumenism, demonstrating both the challenges and aspirations of achieving Christian unity through the Ecumenical Councils.

We consider the Creed the living and life-giving abode of our oneness, wellness, and witness in our faith journey; it is a pledge and a bond of commitment. We commit ourselves to the care of the migrants and marginalised, and establish the Reign of God, reflecting the image of God in everyone.

At the close of the Congress of Asian Theologians 24-29 October 2024, we in one voice thank, praise, worship, and honour the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Giver of new life – for the accompaniment, enlightenment, and empowerment in these five days to the theologians of ecumenical Churches in Asia gathered at WP Hotel, Kuala Lumpur for the greater glory of God, peace on earth. We journey together in faith, hope, and charity, engaging in our ecumenical and evangelical mission for the world.

CATS-X Participants

1	Abraham Mar Seraphim Metropolitan, His Grace Dr	Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church
2	Adrian Melville Aaron, Rev.	Diocese of Colombo / Cathedral Institute for Education and Formation
3	Alagendren Jeyananthan, Rev.	Methodist Church of Sri Lanka
4	Albert Sundararaj Walters, Rev. Dr	Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM)
5	Alfian Rico Komimbin, Dr	Graduate School of Theology of the Christian University of Indonesia in Tomohon (UKIT)
6	Amritraj Joshua Paul, Dr	South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS)
7	Anish Kulakkattumadathil Joy, Dr	Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary
8	Anna Alisha Mathew, Dr	St Thomas Mar Thoma Church Klang
9	Annie George, Dr	Senate of Serampore / Faith Theological Seminary
10	Anthony Gordon Franklin-Ross, Rev.	World Methodist Council
11	Biju Parekkattil Mathai, Rev. Fr	Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary
12	Bishop Daniel, His Grace	The Coptic Orthodox Church Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions
13	Bishop Park Jung Min	Korean Methodist Church
14	Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza	United Church of Christ in the Philippines
15	Blateiskhem L Nongbri, Rev. Dr	John Roberts Theological College
16	C. Laltanpuii, Ms	Senate of Serampore College
17	Cardinal Sebastian Francis, His Eminence	Bishop of Penang (Malaysia), The Roman Catholic Church / FABC
18	Chananporn Jaisaodee, Rev. Dr	The Church of Christ in Thailand
19	Chung-Hyun Baik, Prof.	Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary
20	Cyril Mar Baselios Metropolitan, His Beatitude	Malabar Independent Syrian Church
21	Danilo A. Borlado, Rev.	Convention of Philippine Baptist, Inc.
22	Demianus Ice, Rev. Dr	Gereja Masehi Injili di Halmahera (GMIH)
23	Dethsacda Aphayamath, Rev.	Lao Evangelical Church (LEC)

24	Donald Bala, Rev.	Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS)
25	Eleazar S. Fernandez, Prof.	Union Theological Seminary
26	Farhana Anthony Nazir, Rev. Dr	Christian Study Centre
27	Him Sithet, Rev.	Kampuchea Christian Council (KCC)
28	Hong Seung Man, Rev. Dr	Presbyterian Church of Korea
29	Hyeong Kyoon Kim, Rev. Dr	Presbyterian Church of Korea
30	Imtisowa Ayangla, Rev	Nepal Baptist Seminary / CBCNEI / ABAM
31	Irene Umbu Lolo, Rev. Dr	Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Gereja Kristen Sumba (STT GKS)
32	J. Jayakiran Sebastian, Rev. Dr	United Lutheran Seminary
33	Jason Lam, Dr	Melbourne School of Theology
34	Jeanet Faller, Dr	Silliman University
35	Jear Niklas Doming Karniatu Nenohai, Mr	Centre for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies, Gadjah Mada University
36	Jenne Jessica Revanda Pieter, Rev.	Faculty of Theology of Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku (UKIM)
37	Jensey Mojuin, Rev.	Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM)
38	Jeo Joseph, Fr	Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church
39	Jerry Pillay, Rev. Prof. Dr	World Council of Churches
40	Jerson B. Narciso, Rev. Dr	Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches
41	John Charles Gilmore, Rev. Dr	National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA)
42	James Min Dein, The Rt Rev.	The Church of the Province of Myanmar (Anglican)
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The Tenth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS-X) deliberated on the theme, 'Echoes of Nicaea: Enduring Faith, and Embracing Unity', as well as subthemes focusing on: 'Ecclesial Synchrony: Oneness in Faith, Witness, and Withness', 'Biocentric Solidarity: Covenantal Bond for Cosmic Wholeness', and 'Cybergenic Synergy: Envisioning Humanity and Digital Wellness'. Several academic papers addressing contemporary issues related to the main theme and subthemes linked with the emerging Asian realities and theology in contexts presented at the summit are included in this volume.



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