

Why should Asian theologians wrestle with the Council of Nicaea? How can we reach back and how best can we move forward?

- **J. Jayakiran Sebastian***

Abstract

This keynote presentation uses the hermeneutical principle of “reaching back in order to move forward” in revisiting and revitalizing the events at the council of Nicaea 1700 years ago, events that have directly and indirectly impacted the life and witness of Christian communities in Asia today. Even as the churches in Asia struggle with questions of identity, denominationalism, colonialism, economic disparities, religious posturing, and the elusive quest for unity, we need to investigate Nicaea in relation to a spectrum of issues: the history of the church in Asia; linguistic analysis; marginalized realities today; the future of the church; and life together as churches in Asia. All this leads us to ask about the role of the past in the present and what this gathering is all about as we deliberate together under the desire for an ecumenical vision of unity, not least unity impacted by the reality of past theological controversies, debates, echoes and their legacies.

Introduction

I’m 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 ago. 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 formalize Christian teaching and Christian theology seen in Trinitarian terms, recognizing, 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

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

enforce politically 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.”³

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,⁴ 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.”⁵ I concluded the book with these words “[r]eaching back in order to move forward would imply that one needs to problematize the present and in so doing one needs to understand and represent the past in order to shape the future.”⁶

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 witness⁷ – 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 past beside past? Could it be recycled in reverse into some kind of future, albeit secondhand? Now these are some questions for you.⁸

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

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 Young Richard Kim, “Introduction,” in Young Richard Kim, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 1 – 16, here on p. 8.

⁴ 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).

⁵ J. Jayakiran Sebastian, *Enlivening the Past: An Asian Theologian’s Engagement with the Early Teachers of Faith* (Gorgias Press, 2009).

⁶ *Enlivening the Past*, p. 176.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Georgi Gospodinov, *Time Shelter*, trans. from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel (Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2022), p. 116.

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.”⁹ 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 451¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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:

1) 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.¹² Some ecumenical international church organizations have bundled up things in talking about “Asia-Pacific” but does this help or complexify 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 essentializing “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 a hybrid 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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Lutheran-Orthodox-Joint-Statement-Filioque-EN.pdf>

¹² 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).

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.¹³ What all this led to at the council was “voting about God”¹⁴ 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”¹⁵ and says “Concerning the Paulianists who have come over to the Catholic Church, the decision is that they must by all means be baptized again”¹⁶ 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?

2) 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”¹⁷ and we need to ask as to what extent the Nicæan creed must remain Greek, even as we consider the implications of language, linguistics, and translation in the shaping of our Christian imagination and our conceptualization 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

¹³ For an outstanding reassessment of the life and work and legacy of Arius see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 2002).

¹⁴ Ramsy MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (Yale University Press, 2006), with the quote on p. 27.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Fortress Press, 1990).

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, colorfully puts it?¹⁸ 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 “ತಂದೆಯ ತತ್ವವು ಈತನ ತತ್ವವೂ ಒಂದೇ”. What is the linguistic domain of ತತ್ವ? The German philologist-missionary from the Basel Mission, Ferdinand Kittel, in his monumental *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.¹⁹ The well-known formula तत् त्वम् असि, 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 Nicæan 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 marginalization or using such skills in smashing the power of the oppressors.²⁰

3) Nicæa and the Marginalized Realities Today

While all may seem esoteric and far-removed from the messy realities of marginalized and suffering people in our own contexts, does Nicæa 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 recognize that so-called academic “respectable” modes of inquiry not only have serious in-built shortcomings and overt and covert

¹⁸ Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (De Gruyter, 2024), p. 219.

¹⁹ Rev. F. Kittel, *A Kannada-English Dictionary* (Mangalore: Basel Mission Book and Tract Depository, 1894), p. 686.

²⁰ 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: Mantramajari* (Pondicherry: All India Books, 1983 [1977]).

“prejudices”, but that such modes of inquiry are deliberately skewed against the knowledge-praxis of the modes of inquiry of those marginalized communities, whose very marginalization was actively promoted by such “scholarship.”²¹

As theologians and public faith practitioners in this context of religious pluralism, most notably explored by Stanley Samartha,²² 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’m 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.”²³

4) 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’s in the same century that saw the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople that the books of the New Testament gradually come to gain ascendancy in various communities through complex processes, resulting in what is called the ‘canonization’ 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.²⁴

²¹ “‘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].

²² S. J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* [1991] third Indian ed. (Orbis Books/Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute, 2000).

²³ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1988), p. 8.

²⁴ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Asia: From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial Age* (Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 262 – 263.

When it comes to the Bible, we continue to wrestle with what Jione Havea and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon call “Bible blindspots.” 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.”²⁵ The range of creative interpretative writings, including from Asia, brought together by these scholars, and also 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.”²⁶

5) 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.”²⁷ 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:

- recognizing 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 tokenization, mansplaining, leadership realities, not least in liturgical and ecclesial functions, the consequences of the feminization 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 recognizing Jesus, born of Mary as “the crucified people”²⁸ in Asian testimonies and affirmations and lamentations?
- recognizing 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,

²⁵ 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.”

²⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, “Introduction,” in Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology* (Orbis Books, 2010), p. 13.

²⁷ In his “Prologue and Perspective” to R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Asian Faces of Jesus* (SCM Press, 1993), p. x.

²⁸ C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Fortress Press, 1996).

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”.

- recognizing 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 pandemic²⁹ has forced us to confront the unexpected but always present reality of death, which is characterized as “the most absolute of absolutes” which “is, in fact, a relative balance between the forces of decay and rejuvenation.”³⁰ 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 recognize the challenge of the creed to “put us in place” so to speak within the world of nature and all that God has made?
- recognizing 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 reenergize and revitalize the Nicæan 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 neighbors, 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.

²⁹ 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.]

³⁰ Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Song of The Cell: An Exploration of Medicine and the New Human* (Scribner, 2022), p. 348.