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Nicaea and Rethinking the "Thinkability" of the Presence of God

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Abstract
On the Council of Nicaea's 1700th anniversary, can its creed still be confessed by contemporary Christians in a culture full of "buffered selves" (C. Taylor) and suspicious of long-ago metaphysical worldviews and appeals to transcendence? This essay retrieves the "thinkability" and "experienceability" of the Nicene Creed by (1) considering its place in its usual performative liturgical setting, (2) recalling its provocative historical solution and the still-remaining ontotheological problem, (3) retrieving as much as possible the experience of revelation and salvation that the creed articulates, and (4) applying a performance hermeneutic that considers the creed as analogous to a musical score that needs performance-over-time for its meaning to be thinkable, experienceable, and revelatory.

Keywords
Nicene Creed, presence of God, performance, hermeneutics, ontotheology, relational ontology, Trinity, phenomenality, tradition, discipleship

Prologue

This essay was originally written as a chapter for the volume *Ripartire da Nicea: Per leggere la fede dentro nuovi orizzonti*, published in connection with the 1700th

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anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE).[1] The assigned topic was provocative: "The value of the Nicaea definition for the thinkability (*la pensabilità*) of God's presence today, after 1700 years, in the contemporary world." The volume's original subtitle was even more provocative: "Il concilio che inventò un linguaggio per Dio" (The council that invented a language for God). "Thinkability," an unusual term, precisely names the issue at stake. How do we make the ancient claim of the true divinity of Christ understandable in a contemporary culture that has (seemingly) left behind the metaphysical framework that shaped Nicaea's classic christological expression? It is not only a theological conundrum but a pastoral and apologetical problem. Nicaea's doctrinal definition has played a crucial role not only in the historical development of christological and trinitarian doctrines but also in the development of metaphysical thought within Christianity. But it appears today to be less relevant in an era where more practical and political interpretations of Christian faith claims are dominant. In addressing both the conundrum and the problem, I am conscious of Christian theology's two central tasks: first, to "always be ready to give an explanation [*apologia*] to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1 Pt 3:15), the immediate, on-the-spot reply to questions about one's commitment to the Gospel; second, the long-term task implied by Anselm of Canterbury's *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), probing and articulating the meaning of Christian faith commitments for diverse contexts over the long haul.

The Creed in/and the Liturgy

On the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, it is safe to say that the only contact most Christian believers would have with the Council's hard-won expression in the *Symbolum Nicaenum* of the presence and personal character of God and of Christ's divinity as *homoousios* is when the Nicene Creed is recited at the Sunday liturgy. In the Order of Mass in the Roman Rite, for instance, the congregation's saying or singing of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed comes at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, after the reading of the Gospel and the homily, and before the opening actions of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

One might wonder why we need to emphasize, here at the outset, the liturgical setting of the Nicene Creed. The reason is that this aspect, which should be obvious, is most often ignored or obscured. If Nicaea can be said justly to have "invented a language for God," then most Christian believers today encounter the language of the church's classic doctrinal characterizations of God and Christ in the form of a prayer that they make, not as a theological paradox or metaphysical riddle to be pondered. "Thinkability" is far down the list of priorities. Whether they deeply understand the

1. Anthony J. Godzieba, "Ripensare la 'pensibilità' della presenza di Dio," in *Ripartire da Nicea: Per leggere la fede dentro nuovi orizzonti*, ed. Piero Coda and Stefano Fenaroli, Biblioteca de teologia contemporanea 225 (Queriniana, 2025). This English-language version is published with the permission of Queriniana. The present text includes some revisions made for publication in *Theological Studies.*

confession of faith they make or are befuddled by the creed's language and meaning, they encounter it as something they say—they encounter it in a *performative* state with other persons. "Performance" is understood here in the widest possible sense, as the bodily enactment of a "materiality" that has "spatiality, corporeality and sound quality" and that "comes into being *hic et nunc* and is experienced as being present in a particularly intense way."[2] That situation does indeed make a difference. The performative character of the creed forces us to approach the issue of "the thinkability of God's presence today" from an angle that differs from theology's usual metaphysical/ontological starting point, a starting point that is too abstract, too intellectualist. My aim here is to shift our consideration of God's presence away from a narrow epistemological and metaphysical discussion to a wider and deeper notion of *performativity* or "experienceability."

The more usual liturgical encounter with Nicaea's accomplishment is an example of this point. Throughout the entire course of the liturgy, both the individual believer and the community become integral participants not only in a celebration of the Paschal Mystery but also in a performance of what Johann Baptist Metz famously called the "dangerous" and "liberating" memory of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that forms the heart of the Christian tradition.[3] That memory provides the necessary "background horizon" for the liturgy's sacramental efficaciousness. This performative participation offers the believer a way to imagine one's self much differently than the contemporary view of the human person that the philosopher Charles Taylor has called the "buffered self" in the "immanent frame." This view, Taylor demonstrates, springs from the origins of modernity and is the hallmark of contemporary Western culture: the bounded and disenchanted self that results from the "exclusive humanism" of the modern secular order. Unlike the premodern "porous self" that was open and vulnerable to transcendent influences and forces (the chief of which were acts of God), the buffered self is "disengaged" from any possible transcendence that lays "beyond the boundary" and rather "giv[es] its own autonomous order to its life."[4]

The purely immanent, narrow frame of reference of this disenchanted autonomy, however, does not produce the sense of "fullness" that we desire. To meet the demands of that desire, we must look beyond framing life as pure immanence and pursue the possibility of spiritual ascent "beyond the boundaries."[5] The liturgy and one's active participation in it provide such a wider and deeper frame. This suggests a much

2. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Transforming Spectators into *Viri Perculsi*: Baroque Theater as Machinery for Producing Affects," in *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, ed. Peter Gillgren and Mårten Snickare, Visual Culture in Early Modernity (Ashgate, 2012), 87–97, at 89.
3. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, rev. ed., trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Crossroad, 2007), 105–7.
4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007), 38–41.
5. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 770–72.

different portrait of the person—a self rooted in Christ's eucharistic presence; in the sacrifice, sufferings, death, and resurrected life that have made that perduring presence possible; and in the Trinity of love toward which the liturgy's intentionality points.

In the introductory rites of the Roman Catholic liturgy, the believer is greeted as a member of the Christian community and called to acknowledge the offer of grace as well as the need for confession of sin. Thus, from the outset, the believer is reimagined as other than self-sufficient and autonomous, indeed as a sinner among sinners, indebted to others and dependent on the forgiveness of God that comes as a gift. The believer's life is then projected into the memory of God's actions in the economy of salvation that are narrated in the Liturgy of the Word and assented to by the recitation of the creed. The Liturgy of the Eucharist then gathers up this memory and confirmation. Its various "episodes" point the participants in the direction laid out by the Eucharistic Prayer, the recollection of Christ's sacrifice and "the center and summit of the entire celebration."[6] What follows afterwards unpacks step-by-step the intensity of Christ's presence at that summit and guides the participants toward communion with Jesus and with all other believers—the unity for which Jesus is reported to have prayed at the Last Supper (Jn 17:21–23).

Is this participative communion still possible today? More to the point of our topic, can the believer, in the midst of being an active participant in the liturgy, still experience the enabling presence of God and make the liturgical confession of the son of God as *homoousios* (consubstantial, one in being) with the Father? Can the believer still experience the real implications of this confession today, especially if Taylor's claim about the predominance of "exclusive humanism" is the case?

My question echoes the famous blunt and probing question that Romano Guardini posed in the immediate wake of Vatican II's momentous liturgical reform.[7] Can "modern man" still celebrate the liturgy?

> Is not the liturgical act and, with it, all that goes under the name of "liturgy" so bound up with the historical background—antique or medieval or baroque—that it would be more honest to give it up altogether? Would it not be better to admit that man in this industrial and scientific age, with its new sociological structure, is no longer capable of a liturgical act? And instead of talking of renewal ought we not to consider how best to celebrate the sacred mysteries so that modern man can grasp their meaning through his own approach to truth?[8]

Guardini's point was that "modern man" no longer shares the worldview of the original sources of the liturgy and its symbolism. That accusation becomes even more severe when combined with Taylor's sketch of today's buffered selves in the

6. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, Liturgy Documentary Series 2 (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), §78.
7. Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.
8. Romano Guardini, "The 'Liturgical Act' Today," *Antiphon* 5, no. 3 (2000): 46–48 at 48 (orig. *Herder Correspondence*, July 1964), https://doi.org/10.1353/atp.2000.a941088.

immanent frame. In a secular age, even the mere possibility of an awareness of divine transcendence and grace seems to be out of reach. What can be said of the inaccessibility of the liturgy can be applied to Western culture as a whole after the famous nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practitioners of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) made their sustained critique of Christianity as mere anthropology.[9] The widespread influence of this critique renders the Nicene Creed's metaphysical horizon of thought and belief either inaccessible, unacceptable, or ultimately unbelievable for many today. Our contemporary context leads us back to the "thinkability" and "experienceability" issue and the question of the value of the Nicene definition today.

Nicaea's Accomplishment and the Remaining Problem

Over a half century ago, Friedo Ricken characterized the council's accomplishment as "the *homoousios* of Nicaea as the crisis of early Christian Platonism."[10] At the close of the third century CE, along with the clarification of the elements of the fundamental "architecture" of orthodox trinitarian doctrine introduced by Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) and Origen (c. 185–c. 254),[11] there was a growing awareness of a noticeably increasing dissonance between biblical revelation and the Hellenistic philosophical framing of the God issue that had governed much of the discussion in late antiquity. Contemporary forms of Platonism had supplied much of that framework, portraying God as a changeless divine monad or sole principle (*archē*) that absolutely transcended time and history. This clashed with the person- and event-centered understanding of God and God's economy of salvation that Scripture emphasized.

The controversy sparked by Arius and his allies put the problem at center stage. The Arians argued that God the Father is uncreated, eternal, utterly transcendent; he is the unique Monad from whom all duality is excluded. Due to the Godhead's transcendence, there can be no direct relationship between divinity and the finite material world, and its essence cannot be shared. The Father relates to the world only by means of intermediaries, that is, the sphere occupied by the Son of God. "Only the first entity (*hypostasis*) is truly and fully God." Any unity of the Son with the Father "is a unity of will rather than of substance. This doctrine does not deny the Son's divinity but presumes the framework of a graded hierarchy of transcendence in which it is possible to

9. See Paul Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion" and "The Language of Faith," trans. R. Bradley DeFord, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. C. E. Reagan and D. Stewart (Beacon Press, 1978), 213–38. See also Anthony J. Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* (Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 77–94.
10. Friedo Ricken, "Das Homoousios von Nikaia als Krisis des altchristlichen Platonismus," in *Zur Frühgeschichte der Christologie: Ihre biblischen Anfänge und die Lehrformal von Nikaia*, ed. Bernhard Welte, Quaestiones Disputatae 51 (Herder, 1970), 74–99.
11. For details about this fundamental trinitarian "architecture" and Tertullian's and Origen's important contributions, see Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, 211–22.

speak of variation in degree within the divine realm."[12] The Son is not coeternal with the Father, but had a beginning ("there was [a time] when he was not"),[13] and was the mediating instrument (or "demiurge") by which the transcendent Father created. Since the Son is of a different order of existence than the Father, he has no direct knowledge of the Father and has no communication with him. The divine titles he has (e.g., "Word," "Son of God") are only by courtesy.

The bishops at Nicaea most probably took up a previously familiar baptismal creed and inserted various elements and anathemas that specifically ruled out any Arian-style subordinationism as a legitimate Christian interpretation of God and God's salvation. The most crucial of these elements was the concept of *homoousios* ("of the same being/substance," "consubstantial"). Initially objectionable to many in the fourth-century church because of its non-biblical character and various gnostic shades of meaning,[14] the council employed it in order to refute the Arian doctrine and to craft a statement to which no Arian could subscribe. *Homoousios* expresses the church's belief that the Son is eternally begotten (*gennēthenta*), not created (*poiēthenta*), thereby uncoupling the concept of "begetting" from any naturalistic concept of "being created in time." Thus, the Son is fully God ("true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father"): He belongs on the side of God rather than that of creatures, and possesses the unique and indivisible divine nature that is proper to the Father, without being the Father. Within the context of the creed as a whole, which is trinitarian from the start and follows the pattern of the economy of salvation rather than a philosophical program, and despite the historical ambiguities of this non-biblical term, *homoousios* can be interpreted to mean "unity of being," rather than "same being" or "identity of being." The creed thus does not profess belief in a formal and abstract notion of "divinity" or "Godhead." "The creed starts rather with the Father and understands him as the 'summit of unity' in which the Son and the Spirit are comprehended. We thus have a genetic conception of the divinity, in which the divinity originates in the Father and streams forth in the Son and the Holy Spirit"[15] and a clear affirmation that it includes relationality and relationship.[16] In order to insist on the presence of God and God's salvific power in the world, the fathers at the Council of Nicaea pushed into the foreground the reality of the incarnation of God in Christ, the real presence of God in human time and history, and at the same time sought an

12. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011), 17.
13. Quoted at Nicaea in the anathema accompanying the creed; see Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Sheed and Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1: 5; and Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, oratio I, 5 (*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graea* [= PG], ed. J.-P. Migne [Paris, 1857–66], 26:21 A–B).
14. For a gnostic prehistory of *homoousios*, see Ricken, "Das Homoousios von Nikaia," 92–95. For a more expansive analysis of the ambiguities of the term, see Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 15–24.
15. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, new ed., trans. [Matthew O'Connell and] Dinah Livingstone (Continuum, 2012), 258.
16. Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott: Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Herder, 1997), 91–92.

expression of this reality within the default metaphysical language of that epoch, assuming that the conceptual reality thereby expressed conveyed an absolute truth.

If the conflict with Arius had provoked the crisis of the ancient church's Platonism through the exposure of its inadequacies, there was a parallel crisis of scriptural interpretation that had to be faced as well, since exegetical attempts up to that point had failed to quell the controversies over Christ's identity and significance. In responding to this conundrum, Nicaea provides an ironic twist. The council's reformulated understanding and use of the unbiblical notion of *ousia* (along with the other unbiblical notion, *hypostasis*) helped to guard the biblical Christian experience of the triune God from being swamped by philosophical rigorism, especially the type that led to the Arians' radically subordinationist interpretation of the Son's relation to the Father that put the very reality of salvation in question. The confession that the loving Father is the source of all things and the recognition of Jesus's intimate sonship with his "Abba" (an intimacy he offers to share with us) are biblical affirmations rooted in experiences with God that had provided the basis for early Christianity's fundamental trinitarian structure and its eventual dogmatic expression. Nicaea's creativity in rethinking platonic ontological concepts in order to communicate the experienced impact of biblical revelation leads Rowan Williams to point out how crucial this level of theological creativity is.

> There is a sense in which Nicaea and its aftermath represent a recognition by the Church at large that *theology* is not only legitimate but necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate as a means of securing continuity at anything more than a formal level. Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another. They need to be made more *difficult* before we can accurately grasp their simplicities. Otherwise, we read with eyes not our own and think them through with minds not our own; the "the deposit of faith" does not really come into contact with *ourselves.* And this "making difficult," this confession that what the gospel says in scripture and tradition does not instantly and effortlessly make sense, is perhaps one of the most fundamental tasks for theology.[17]

The use of reason to clarify faith claims had been part of Christian tradition from its earliest days, despite suspicions of reason's usefulness and power.[18] But the official approbation that Nicaea gave to the task of theological reflection, to the point of including its results in the confession of faith that previously had been purely liturgical and doxological, was a momentous step. The church insisted that Scripture, in light of its ambiguities and difficulties, demands interpretation; the mere recitation of scriptural proof-texts is no guarantee that one has successfully grasped the truth of revelation.

17. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed (Eerdmans, 2001), 236 (emphasis in original).
18. For example, Tertullian's complaint "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!" (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 7).

But yet another irony arises centuries later when Nicaea's creative reworking of its native Hellenistic mindset is seen not as a way to remain faithful to the biblical experience of God but rather as a betrayal of it. For us, this is the remaining problem that Nicaea could not possibly have foreseen. "The emergence in recent centuries of an explicit quest for the essence of Christianity stemmed from a sense that this creedal definition of Christian identity was no longer sufficient and that it was necessary to step back behind it to some more fundamental and immediate apprehension of Christian truth."[19] In other words, there have been many attempts to retrieve what lay "behind" the creed and other dogmas, namely the original biblical experience that led to the early church's confession of the presence of God in Christ. Adolf von Harnack's late nineteenth-century *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* is often cited as a prime impetus for this attitude, especially his claim that "dogma in its conception and in its construction is a work of the Greek mind on the soil of the Gospel."[20] The diverse "quests for the historical Jesus" are also rooted in this perceived need to "step back" behind the dogmatic expressions. However, it is Martin Heidegger's project of "overcoming metaphysics" and launching a critique of what he called ontotheology that has had the greater influence today. The widespread reception of this critique in the last half of the twentieth century destabilized the traditional identification of God with Being and forced a reevaluation of the role of metaphysics within theology, especially the Catholic theology of God and Christology. This has led to a profound questioning as to whether the creed's reliance on a metaphysical framework actually distances us from the presence and power of God revealed in scripture and tradition. As Joseph O'Leary puts it, "If one begins to think of God using concepts such as existence, nature, being, one has trouble rejoining the biblical experience of the passage of God as creative power, call to justice, numinous presence."[21]

Heidegger argued that philosophy, in its quest for the unifying ground of beings, thereby reveals its true identity as metaphysics. "Metaphysical thinking departs from what is present in its presence, and thus represents it in terms of its ground as something grounded."[22] The objectifying representation of Being as a being, along with the tendency to ignore the fundamental phenomenality of beings (that is, their sheer givenness as modes of presencing) and the persistent misunderstanding of reality in terms of dualistic oppositions (e.g., Being as "ground" over against beings as "grounded"), all add up to the fatal flaw of metaphysical thinking: Despite its claim to grasp all reality, metaphysics misses what Heidegger calls the "ontological difference," the very

19. Joseph Stephen O'Leary, *Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition* (Winston Press, 1985; repr. Wipf & Stock, 2016), 203.
20. Adolf Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 4th ed., vol. 1, *Die Entstehung des kirchlichen Dogmas* (J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1909), 20 (my translation). In response to his critics, Harnack denied that he was identifying dogma with Greek philosophy.
21. Joseph Stephen O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 343.
22. Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Harper & Row, 1972), 56.

condition that makes the differentiation between Being and beings possible. Rather than the two elements that metaphysics wrongly identifies as fundamental, there are rather *three* that become apparent to thought: Being (the process of presencing), beings (which are present and take their stand within our field of attention), and the differentiating process which simultaneously connects and holds them apart—dif-fers/de-fers them, hence the "difference."[23]

Metaphysics compounds its errors by representing the ultimate unifying principle as the "highest being," the divine ground. Here, Heidegger argues, is where metaphysics becomes ontotheology.[24] God enters philosophy when identified with Being, with the unifying Ground of the perduring of beings. However, God is thereby inscribed within a metaphysical schema that is "bigger" than God, so to speak. This all-encompassing schema employs God as part of the dualistic formatting of experience (divine being over against non-divine beings). God thus rests in the grip of the differentiating process that is always already present ahead of the Divine Highest Being. In other words, both the character of God as Being and the relationship of God to beings is determined by an always already-present third "factor," the ontological difference. This God, in Heidegger's famous description, is "the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god . . . can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god."[25]

Is all talk of God and God's presence thus automatically illegitimate? Is every image of God to be identified with the God of ontotheology? Some recent commentators would read Heidegger's critique in such an extreme way, as rendering all images of God identical with "the God of philosophy" and thus illegitimate and all faith in God suspect because of its alleged totalizing tendencies. But it is clear, even in the passage cited above, that such extreme readings are mistaken and miss Heidegger's intention. The critique of ontotheology is his way of clearing the decks, saying in effect that human reason's attempts to use the idea of God to gain the highest metaphysical vantage point and thus make the whole of being intelligible are instead betrayals of the divine God who is beyond "the God of philosophy." Heidegger recognizes the legitimacy of belief and of theistic discourse. Indeed he wants to speak of an experience of God that reaches back beyond the image of God constructed by ontotheology and philosophical theology to the God before whom one can indeed "play music and dance." This project, reminiscent of Pascal's attempt to protect the experiential content of faith (the "what") from any sort of theoretical distortion (the "how"),[26]

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23. See Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," the second essay of Heidegger's *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Harper & Row, 1969), 42–74.
24. Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," 70–71: "When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theologic."
25. Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," 72.
26. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (Penguin, 1995; French orig., 1670).

has its sources in Heidegger's early lectures on philosophy of religion and a phenomenology of faith derived from his reading of Paul and Augustine, a reading very much influenced by Luther and Kierkegaard. His later critique of the metaphysical objectification and dissolution of "the divine God" was a development of an explicitly Lutheran view of faith's relation to theology, which he had already laid out in the 1920s.[27]

Heidegger's critique of ontotheology definitely effects any contemporary discussion of the thinkability of God in light of Nicaea—it puts down a destabilizing marker. On the one hand, no Christian theology of God that follows this critique can afford to be unreflectively metaphysical without a rigorous argument that demonstrates how its understanding of being escapes the Heideggerian definition of metaphysics as objectifying and controlling representationalism. But, on the other hand, Heidegger's own thought offers little help in constructing a "post-ontotheological" theology. No theology of God that is committed to incarnation and sacramentality can simply follow Heidegger's subsequent path and take up the rather diluted apophatic notion of *das Heilige* ("the Holy") in his later works.[28]

What effect, then, does "the end of metaphysics" have on our discussion of the presence of God and its "thinkability"? It leaves contemporary believers with a perplexing sense that Joseph O'Leary clearly describes: "It can be unnerving to sense the pastness of one's religious culture, to feel that one is enacting a historical drama, that one's religious speech is placed within quotation marks and threatens to become unreal, nothing more than a pious homage to a vanishing tradition."[29] The discomfort can be especially acute during the liturgy, where participants must practice a discernment regarding religious language that helps them overcome "the unease caused by the elements of archaism, conventionality, and inadequacy in Christian language and gestures, letting us perform these gestures in the double awareness of their provisional nature and their spiritual aim."[30] O'Leary's suggestion of a way *forward* is to take the *step back* and "trace the language and the claims of faith back to a fundamental validating experience" and thus "search for the underlying phenomenality of revelation" that has provided the impetus for scripture, tradition, and ongoing prayer life.[31]

The *phenomenality* of revelation is key—simply put, this means the concretely particular *appearing* (and not simply *appearance*) and effectiveness of the reality of God's

27. See Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, Gesamtausgabe, II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1919–1944, Band 60 (Klostermann, 1995); *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, Studies in Continental Thought (Indiana University Press, 2004). See especially the lectures on the phenomenology of religion (1920–21, which include the Pauline interpretations) and on Augustine and neo-Platonism (1921).
28. See, for example, "What Are Poets For?," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Harper & Row, 1971), 91–142 (orig. "Wozu Dichter," 1946); "Letter on Humanism," trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, in *Basic Writings*, rev. ed., ed. David Farrell Krell (HarperCollins, 1993), 217–65 (orig. *Brief über den Humanismus*, 1947).
29. O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth*, 38–39.
30. O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth*, 39.
31. O'Leary, *Questioning Back*, 210.

salvation in Christ in our everyday lives. In the light of this phenomenality, dogmatic language, while important, is necessarily derivative, dependent as it is on the original, personal, intense experience of God's presence that any language, including metaphysical language, struggles to express and yet always falls short in attaining. "Metaphysics is no longer the cement that gives dogma its most comprehensive form . . . . If we see dogma, instead, as a pragmatic adjustment to an ancient culture that required such formal articulations of belief, then we may calmly assess the successes and failures of this enterprise of inculturation, and its residual merit for today, while also asking what other adjustments of kerygma to culture are now required."[32] Such a pragmatic adjustment was necessary in the ancient church because of the various misleading answers swirling around the questions "who is Jesus?" and "why is he significant?" The creed, as it developed over the councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451), was both a defensive strategy (against the rational yet heretical responses to the questions) and a positive expression of the fundamental incarnational-sacramental imagination of Christian belief. That imagination insists that finite creation can and does mediate the infinite and that God indeed had entered into human time and history in order to bring us eternal life. "Christ reveals God not because he combines divine and human substances but because in his self-emptying he reveals the true nature of humanity before God. Approached from below, on the paths of history and evolution, the figure of Jesus can emerge as a divine word spoken into the heart of history."[33]

The Creed, Tradition, and Four Cardinal Points

In light of this critique of the Nicene Creed's metaphysical entanglements, we can now take up anew the question of the creed and the "thinkability" of the truth of God's nature and presence. If those particular metaphysical expressions are seen as inadequate at best or distortions at worst, where should we turn in order to render God's presence not only *thinkable* but also *able to be experienced* in our everyday lives? How might we demonstrate that Nicaea's confession of faith remains a central witness to the tradition of Christian belief and to the Christian incarnational and sacramental imagination, grounded in the Triune God? How might we show that the creed offers a way to pierce the "buffer" that surrounds many in this post-postmodern epoch?

The short answer is to take the "step back" to the original scriptural experience of God that O'Leary and others have urged us to take and then to make that experience accessible today. But what constitutes that "original experience"? And how might it be made accessible?

Biblical Experience: The Dialectical View of God

The Nicene Creed is both a crucial reception of a previous tradition and a catalyst for further developments of that tradition. Speaking generally, a tradition is a living

32. O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth*, 342–43.
33. O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth*, 353.

combination of *knowledge* and *practices*, of content and process. *Practices* test the truth of that knowledge by *putting it into play over time*. Time, of course, can obscure and even eclipse meaning by distancing us from its origins. But time can be revelatory as well, bringing out a tradition's authentic truths and thereby encouraging its development. This applies to the tradition of Christian belief and practice. If we do a phenomenology of the Christian tradition from the New Testament to Pope Francis's recent call for synodality—that is, if we carefully describe and analyze the underlying logic of Christian experiences—that phenomenology will reveal the tradition's essentially *performative* character. The Christian tradition is a reality unfolding over time—the practice of discipleship, of living a Jesus-like life. It is *an ensemble of practices, beliefs, and reflections* that is more adequately approached through dynamic analogies with the arts than by using static metaphors that are text-based, literature-based, or architectural (e.g., "foundation").

The main element of this tradition is the classic, scripturally based Jewish and Christian "dialectical view" of God as paradoxical presence-and-absence.[34] The dialectical view, seen above all in the Hebrew scriptures' theophanies and in the Gospel narratives, portrays God as fundamentally personal and loving, experienced within the dialectical patterns of knowable-yet-mysterious, available-yet-uncontrollable, and immanent-yet-transcendent. Thus, God is both present and absent, with "absence" signaling "the *otherness* of God, God's *excess* that outruns our human ability to adequately 'name' and conceptualize the characteristics of the personality of God."[35] The dialectical view remains the classic and dominant view up through the late medieval period, despite its necessary entanglements with the Greek ontotheological tradition, whose insistence on rational clarity and certainty ultimately exposes an obvious lack of fit with the dialectical view's divine mystery, the sheer givenness of the loving presence of God that is witnessed and narrated, not rationally demonstrated.

The dialectical view began to unravel in the late medieval period. The development of nominalist philosophy and theology in the fourteenth century (the so-called *via moderna*) emphasized God's omnipotence and transcendent freedom in order to emancipate God from human control but wound up rendering God more abstract and foreign to human experience. But nominalism was not the sole cause of the rise of the extrinsic view. Rather, it mirrored a mood of religious discomfort that had appeared earlier, a growing sense of distance between the ordinary believer and God that was present in late medieval spirituality, liturgy, and religious art. While various spiritual movements attempted to fill the gap with their more affective devotions to the humanity of Christ (especially his passion), Mary, and the saints, this did not stop the accelerated development of an extrinsic view of God that portrayed "an absolutist deity who acts in an arbitrary manner."[36]

34. The following discussion of the dialectical and extrinsic views of God summarizes the more detailed discussion of these views in Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, chapter 2.
35. Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, 38.
36. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 17.

This extrinsic view, overemphasizing God's transcendence, carries over into modernity and eventually colonizes it; it has been a dominant factor in Western culture up to our own day. It does not expunge the dialectical view (which persists *sotto voce*, so to speak) but seriously eclipses it, having become the default "normal" Christian view. Clearly, the buffered self can be shown to be another result of the extrinsic view or even a protest against the "absolutist deity." To shorten a very long and complex story, one can say simply that it is easy to draw a straight line from Descartes's proof for God's existence in his *Meditations*, through Kant's postulated God in the second *Critique*, to Nietzsche's madman who claims that "God is dead . . . and we have killed him."[37] Each of these is a facet of the modern theological eco-system that has been called "the heresy of Christian theism,"[38] the extrinsic view that focuses on a unipersonal God reduced to a set of divine attributes. One key to overcoming it is found in Paul Ricoeur's famous evaluation of the nineteenth-century "hermeneutes of suspicion." Their "external critique" of this default modern Christian view is necessary for believers as well: "To smash the idols," Ricoeur says, "is also to let symbols speak."[39] But their critique proceeds only "archeologically"; it looks backward for the *archê* or origin of religion in historical events or psychological states. But another critique is possible, a "hermeneutics of affirmation" that proceeds *eschatologically*, looking forward to arrival of hope disclosed in religious language, symbol, and performance.[40]

The original experience that we need to retrieve and make accessible and thinkable, then, is the dialectical view of God's paradoxical presence-and-absence, the loving God who exceeds our finite categories but who nevertheless invites us to participate in divine life. What can help in this retrieval is to bring back an ontological framework, despite our earlier critiques, in a chastened, reformulated way.

A Transfigured Ontology

To do this, we can appeal to Walter Kasper and his argument for a Catholic natural theology that is at once ontological, anthropological, and theological. Kasper retrieves a crucial modern insight: that freedom and free activity are more primordial than being. "Being is act, accomplishment, happening, event. Not self-contained being but existence, or freedom that goes out of itself and fulfills itself in action, is now the starting point and horizon of thought."[41] This is transfigured metaphysical thinking that understands fundamental ontology as dynamic rather than static. This sets the stage for Kasper's further argument that the finite person is fundamentally open and relational,

37. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, no. 125, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (1954; reprint, Penguin, 1983), 95.
38. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 285; see also 314–15.
39. Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," 213–22, at 219.
40. Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," 223–38.
41. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 153.

"characterized by a tension between an always concrete and irreplaceable individuality and an unlimited openness to the whole of reality." This self-transcending openness "can reach definitive fulfillment only if it encounters a person who is infinite not only in its intentional claims on reality but in its real being; that is, only if it encounters an absolute person."[42] The concept of person as a unique realization of being-as-relational can also apply to God, as the deep and rich Christian tradition has insisted, portraying God "rather in the horizon of freedom and defin[ing] him as perfect freedom." If human fulfillment can only occur "by emptying ourselves out in love, so as to realize our own intentional infinity," this means that "seen in the horizon of the person, the meaning of being is love. . . . To call God a person is to say that God is the subsistent being which is freedom in love. Thus the definition of God's essence brings us back to the biblical statement: 'God is love' (I John 4.8, 16)."[43]

Our thinking about God thus discovers the natural access-point of faith (the aim of a truly Catholic natural theology) and has a double focus. It is *anthropological*, providing an analysis of that natural access-point all the way down to its fundamental desire for fulfillment—a *personal* desire that can only be fulfilled *in a personal and relational way*. And it is *theological*, pointing to the only possible way definitive fulfillment can come about: through a reception of love given without constraint and thus participation in divine life.

However, desire does not create its own fulfillment. Wouldn't it be nice if the intentional yearning for ultimate fulfillment from our side (call it "faith") were answered by a personal givenness that provided precisely that fulfillment in a personal way (call it "revelation")? The bridge between a transfigured natural theology and what Kasper calls a trinitarian "theological theology" runs right through the category of *relationality*. Indeed, that is the conceptual choice made by the great architects of the trinitarian doctrine, the Cappadocians, in articulating as precisely as they could what became the orthodox trinitarian formula of "one *ousia*, three *hypostaseis*," a choice to see the terms "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" as signifying *how* God is rather than *what* God is. This general architecture of the doctrine was confirmed by Constantinople I (381). It is a development that is post-Nicene, of course, but Nicaea provided the impetus by dethroning the rigorist platonic conception of God and insisting, against the Arians, on the unity of the Father and the Son.

The focus on relationality also helps with the problem of the trinitarian doctrine's "practical relevance to Christian life,"[44] not cutting it to fit the zeitgeist but rather underscoring how and why the Trinity has been revealed, as the creed says, *qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem* (for us humans and for our salvation). That phrase is the signal—and has been all along—of the *performative* nature of the creed. Beyond the question of "thinkability," belief in the presence of God needs to be experienced—that is, activated and performed—in order for it to be effective in the lives of believers. This helps to bridge the hermeneutical gap "between the confession of the Trinity as developed in ancient Christianity and our attempts to understand it and live

42. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 154.
43. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 154–55.
44. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 233.

it in the aestheticized postmodern (or even post-postmodern) consumer world of the West."[45]

Four Cardinal Points (Paradox, Phenomenality, Performance, Presence/Absence)[46]

Paradox. Whatever thinking we do about the triune God, we are haunted by a *paradox*. The prologue to the Gospel of John expresses it with delicious irony: "No one has ever seen God," the evangelist says, and yet at the same time believers have indeed seen God because "the only Son . . . has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Impossibility and contradiction abound: God as ineffable, yet available; not seen, yet seen; absent, yet present. How do we deal with this?

In fact, paradox is the very structure of revelation. The reason is God's "discretion" from the beginning of creation, God's holding-back in order to give all reality space to be. "God does not give himself in experience; he announces himself in witnesses. . . . Nothing defines his identity or his essence except the action he takes within a framework which he has fixed, the covenant, and a promise which opens up the present to the future in a positive way."[47] But what signals do we have *in this life* that God is love and that this love is directed to us? After all, speaking as a phenomenologist, I am hungry for the *phenomena* toward which the intentionality of my embodied consciousness is directed. But God is not an "object of knowledge" like other objects; our epistemological expectations are confounded. How is the ineffable triune God available to us within our embodied, time-bound lives?

Phenomenality. The language of "looking for God" or "searching for God" both creates and hides a problem. Our language for experiences or non-experiences of God is pervaded with the visual metaphor: We long for "the beatific vision"; God dwells "in light inaccessible" (Anselm); Philip begs Jesus to "show us the Father" (Jn 14:9); *The Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of a divine darkness that blinds the soul "in an abundance of spiritual light."[48] Beyond the platonic roots of the metaphor that knowing is like seeing, the modern way of framing experience with the visual metaphor posits a seeing/knowing "I" at a fixed central point with all that is "real" positioned outside at a distance from this point. To "see clearly" is to engage reality but always at a distance with a gap to be bridged.

45. Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, 247.
46. For more detail about these four aspects, see Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, chapter 5.
47. Christian Duquoc, "'Who Is God?' Becomes 'Where Is God?': The Shift in a Question," trans. John Bowden, in *Where Is God? A Cry of Human Distress*, ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán, Concilium 1992/4 (SCM Press, 1992), 1–10, at 2–3.
48. Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Penguin, 1973), 244; *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1981), 252.

To shift the metaphor does not eliminate the paradox. But it makes it more approachable. Kevin Hart's phenomenological way of putting it steers us in a more productive direction for thinking about God's presence:

> When we pray to the Trinity, we do not constitute the triune God as phenomenon; we dispose ourselves so that we receive him as mystery. We do not bring God into presence; we enter into his presence, which may be quite different from human modes of presence. The triune God is not an object or a being, nor strictly being itself but rather *ipsum esse subsistens omnibus modis indeterminatum*, to use Aquinas's fine expression, that is, wholly undetermined subsistent "to be" itself. God is an absolutely singular *event*, and doubtless His triune nature is an index of that singularity.[49]

The earlier discussion of the natural access-point of faith and the desire for fulfillment gives us some sense of the "clearing" in our everyday lives where we might have access to this "singular event" of mystery. Kasper's analysis of freedom as the overarching reality, rather than "being" or "substance," gives us a way of discerning our encounter with transcendence as personal. But "Trinity" is even more personal than the rather abstract concepts of "transcendence" and "absoluteness." Where do we find the clues for that?

Performance. We find them in the Gospels—in the life, preaching, practices, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus's active presence and embodiment of the values of the Kingdom of God is itself a theophany. We also find them in the continual enactment of these values over time as disciples and as a community of faith guided by the Spirit. Jesus's invitation to us to put aside the power arrangements of world that obscure the already-graced structures of our lives and to live as disciples—live a Jesus-like life that is the applicative performance of those Kingdom values—is an invitation to participate actively in what Klaus Hemmerle has called "trinitarian ontology," that is, participating in the love that is the very being of God who enters into all aspects of reality and transforms them by "the rhythm of giving that gives itself."[50] Responding to Jesus's invitation by incarnating in our lives his practice of the values of the Kingdom allows us to enter into God's presence, which is "an absolutely singular event."

These days, discipleship as applicative-performance-over-time is difficult to preach and difficult for many to grasp, especially in a late-capitalist consumer culture marked by social acceleration and de-temporalization, the literal erasure of time. The

49. Kevin Hart, "Notes toward a Supreme Phenomenology," in Hart, *Kingdoms of God* (Indiana University Press, 2014), 159–78, at 168. He cites Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 11, a. 4, resp.: "[God] exists supremely, because he has not acquired an existence which his nature has then determined, but is subsistent existence itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*), in no way determined" (*Summa theologiae*, vol. 2 [Ia. 2–11]: *Existence and Nature of God*, trans. Timothy McDermott [1964; repr., Cambridge University Press, 2006], 166–69).
50. Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie: Englisch-Deutsche Ausgabe*, ed. Wilfried Hagemann and Thomas J. Norris, trans. Thomas J. Norris (Echter, 2020), 107.

"now-ism" or "presentism" that afflicts contemporary life in the West, the conception of time as constricted spaces, the slicing of everyday life into unrelated temporal fragments, the constant onslaught of obligations and information that keeps us hopping from one disconnected moment to the next, leading strangely enough to inertia—this is the context of Christian life today.[51] Discipleship runs counter to this default lifestyle because it implies duration and a developing narrative over time. My earlier comment that the Christian tradition is more adequately approached through appeals to art, architecture, and (especially) music directly addresses this change in culture and thinking. The arts are adept at disclosing glossed-over aspects of our experience and navigating the porous boundaries of the visible and the invisible, time and transcendence—placing us inside the paradox. The arts demand time to unfold: visually (as we explore a painting), tactilely (epic architecture that has felt centuries of footsteps or a room whose character changes as the light shifts during the day), aurally (that Taylor Swift track or that Bach fugue each take time to unfold their effects and meanings). That we respond the way we do—we do indeed take time to experience these—reveals that our embodied subjectivities are temporally saturated, despite the default culture that hammers us into inertia masquerading as frantic change. And so we can still experience time and duration, which means that the narrativity of discipleship, our participation in the discreet gift of divine love *in* and *as* reality, and the application of its possibilities over time in an ensemble of practices, beliefs, and reflections, are still within our experience.

Presence and absence. Have we solved our conundrum? Of course not—there is no unraveling the "double apriori" that is operative in reality: God's self-revelation occurs in the conditions of human experience, and the very possibility of human experience is grounded in God whose discretion gives it freedom to be. It is a mutual dependency, occasioned by divine initiative. Revelation, from biblical times until now, ties presence and absence closely together. God is *present* by fulfilling our innermost desires for love and meaning and yet disturbingly *absent* by shattering our expectations and exceeding our attempts at a complete synthesis or definitive understanding. Our awareness of the infinite triune reality of God (the "immanent Trinity") cannot occur without an encounter with the love of God in partial and fallible performances of grace in real time (the "economic Trinity"). This is precisely the reason why a discussion of the contemporary "thinkability" of the presence of God must be expanded to also include the necessary precondition for that thinkability: the wider and deeper *experienceability* of the presence of God. Our experience and confession that "God is love" must have a real-time catalyst, some footing in reality, and some continuity in history. Since these encounters continue to occur, no definitive synthesis of knowledge is ever possible, only the fragile certainty of faith.

51. For more on the "erasure of time" and social acceleration, see Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (Columbia University Press, 2013), 71–80; Rosa, "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society," *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 3–33, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00309. For the effects on Christian discipleship, see Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, 285–90.

One reason for this fragility is that, for the most part, these encounters with God do not verge on the spectacular. They occur as part of the ordinariness of everyday life that participates in divine presence by the sheer fact of its existence: the person who finds love against the odds, unexpected help from a kind stranger on the street, the destruction of a community's life overcome by that community's trust in one another and in grace, an overwhelming liturgical experience after a string of blandly rote attendances, one's spirit deeply moved by a piece of music one has heard a thousand times, a nation's trust in justice and peace over violent confrontation. In a wonderful phrase attributed to the eighteenth-century spiritual writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade, this is called "the sacrament of the moment."[52] The shattering of expectations that occurs in these events is not because they are other-than-normal but rather that the normal includes experiences on the porous boundary between the visible and invisible, that from within immanent time we can access the mystery of God's love, the answer to the mystery of the world and human beings.

A Performance Hermeneutic

With Christian faith claims, there is no authentic "thinkability" without "experience-ability," no grasp of truths of faith without putting those truths into practice and experiencing their effects in our everyday lives. In light of our analysis, it is clear that any attempt to *think about* God's presence relies on having *experienced* the dynamism of God's loving presence in real time and having interpreted that presence as *personal* through the lens of the deep and rich Christian tradition. The Nicene Creed's confession of the unity of the Father and the Son is a central element of an ongoing tradition that has not only received the original scriptural experience of God in Christ but has necessarily reflected on its "strangeness," brought it to liturgy and to thought, and then has acted as a catalyst for further experience and reflection.

It is better, perhaps, to speak of deep and rich Christian *traditions*—various interpretations of the meaning of discipleship, of what it means to follow Jesus in one's particular historical and cultural situation by inheriting, so to speak, all the previous insights into discipleship. These traditions are not immune to time; indeed, temporality is crucial to their make-up. This is why explanatory metaphors like "deposit," "foundation," "framework," and the like eventually prove to be inadequate: They are based in either a textual understanding or a visual or mechanical metaphor and are thus too static. The diversity of historical responses to the presence of God in Christ demands an explanation that recognizes more flexibility, flow, and temporally saturated elements. Any analysis of the tradition must see time and diversity not as problems to be solved but rather as necessary preconditions for any understanding of God's presence in any age.

52. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, trans. John Beevers (Image/Doubleday, 1975), 24.

This is why I strongly emphasize an understanding of the Christian tradition based on performance, a *performance hermeneutic*, as the more adequate way to discern the truth and underlying logic of this ensemble of practices and reflections. In fact, it is clear that Christianity is like music: A close analogy with musical works and with musical performance contribute a deeper understanding of Christian traditions in history and our appropriation of them for Christian life today.

Why like music?[53] First, following its own incarnational logic, Christianity needs to be performed and interpreted in space and time in order for its intended salvific truth to be fulfilled; second, each performance carries with it the history that has preceded it. This comparison with music holds because any musical work is already a multilayered interpretation of a previously formed tradition and an improvisation within a historically-constituted genre.[54] The intended truth of the musical work occurs in its fulfillment only when it is realized in particular performances in space and time. The written score is a historically-situated schematic that needs to be filled in and concretized by performance. Experiencing the truth of the Christian tradition is a similar process: It is a three-dimensional temporal truth that unites a past that is always already interpretive with future possibilities, all occurring at the moment of their incipient realization in the present.

In terms of the general *process* that occurs, there is not much difference between a musical score as a schematic artifact from the past (e.g, Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in G minor), and the Nicene Creed as a schematic artifact composed in the first quarter of the fourth century CE. Each is a slice of an historical tradition and each has a content that can be studied in isolation from its actualization in real time. Musicologists examine Mozart's thematic and harmonic procedures in his Symphony no. 40, just as theologians analyze the christological disputes that led up to Nicaea, the council's solution, and how we interpret the creed today. But in both cases, the *content* only reaches fulfillment in a *process*; only performance in time can reveal the fuller truth of each of these schematic artifacts—playing the music (preferably with the appropriate ensemble) and living out the faith-claims pronounced by the creed.

53. Some of the following material is taken from my essays "*Ut Musica Christianitas*: Christian Tradition as a History of Performances," in *The Shaping of Tradition: Context and Normativity*, ed. C. Dickinson, L. Boeve, and T. Merrigan (Peeters, 2013), 91–99; "'. . . And Followed Him on the Way' (Mark 10:52): Unity, Diversity, Discipleship," in *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence: Hermeneutics, Critique, and Catholic Theology*, ed. Anthony J. Godzieba and Bradford E. Hinze (Liturgical Press, 2017), 228–54.
54. "Improvisation" in this context is borrowed from Bruce Ellis Benson and his argument for an "improvisational hermeneutics." See his book *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and his essay "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics: Jazz Lessons for Interpreters," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James A. K. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Indiana University Press, 2006), 193–210. For the difference between the "intentional" and "real" existence of musical works, see Roman Ingarden, *Ontology of the Work of Art*, trans. Raymond Meyer and John T. Goldthwait (Ohio University Press, 1989), 27–46, 90–94.

The key here is *performance over time.* The Christian tradition brings its past—that is, its origins, the lived experiences that effectively and affectively respond to those origins, and the effects of those effects—into a relationship with the present by means of temporally-projected actions of participation. This is, after all, the *only* access we have to the past: We encounter and perform it *in the present context*, which has already been shaped by diverse streams of tradition (what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a *Wirkungsgeschichte*, a "history of effects"). By means of one's interpretation of the elements of that tradition—performance in the present—one discloses the past's future possibilities to be discerned, actualized, made effective, and savored.

This analysis is based on four crucial points. The first is Gadamer's insight that the moment of *understanding* is the moment of *interpretation* is the moment of *application*.[55] Understanding and interpretation are ontological issues: They have to do with the actualization of the interpreter's possibilities-for-being that are situated in history and culture. The truth of any text, work of art, or musical work can only be grasped when there is a fusion between the horizon of the historically-situated work and the historically-situated horizon of the interpreter(s) and an application of that truth to the interpreter's possibilities. This process encounters a temporal distance between horizons, whether lesser or greater. A fusion of horizons does not erase that distance, the "pastness" of the past. The temporal distance persists and is productive, revealing not only difference but also continuity, allowing the interpreter to see where the past's presence in the present has shaped to some degree the prejudgments, interests, and questions of the interpreter.[56]

The second is another of Gadamer's insights: that any tradition is really a "history of effects" and that all understanding is what he calls a consciousness effected by history.[57] To be part of a tradition means that one is, so to speak, standing in a stream with its origins far upstream. What constitutes the stream and flows past one's ankles—that is, what influences the interpreter's pursuit of understanding—is all the material that had originally entered upstream, mostly what we might call "classic" works, events, even persons (in David Tracy's apt phrase, classics are timeless because they are always timely),[58] but also the shorter-lasting period pieces. One can accept, reject, or vary that material, but one is *always already* influenced and formed by it. A so-called double hermeneutic is involved: Not only is it necessary to interpret works against the background of their own historical horizon of expectations, but the interpreter has

55. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Crossroad, 1989), 307–41, esp. 308.
56. "The horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306; emphasis in original).
57. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 341–79.
58. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Crossroad, 1981), 102: A classic has an "excess of meaning" that "both demands constant interpretation and bears a certain kind of timelessness—namely the timeliness of a classic expression radically rooted in its own historical time and calling to my own historicity."

one's own horizon of expectations against which she/he needs to be interpreted as well.[59]

The third insight is that in the Jewish and Christian traditions, revelation is always expressed in a narrative that by its nature implies a time-conditioned unfolding. Like a musical work, a narrative involves "a number of phases or parts which succeed each other in a univocally determined order. . . . [Each phase] is qualitatively modified by some or all of the preceding and following phases."[60] O'Leary makes a similar theological point: "The event of naming is a narrative event. To name 'God' without such narrative context is a helplessly vague gesture at some unthinkable ultimate. Only stories, explicit or implied, taking the form 'the God who . . .' give the proper name its bearings."[61]

The fourth and final insight comes from the Gospels' own emphasis that the salvific truth of the reign of God announced by Jesus can only be fully experienced in the performance of its values, in discipleship. The Gospel of Mark's depiction of authentic discipleship in the Bartimaeus story (Mk 10:46–52) ends with Bartimaeus, his physical sight healed and his faith insight confirmed, following Jesus "on the way" (*en tē hodō*) that leads to suffering, death, and resurrection (10:52). The conclusion to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37) ends with Jesus's exhortation to the lawyer to "go and do likewise" (10:37).

How, then, does one perform the "score" of the *Symbolum Nicaenum* when it is encountered in the liturgy as part of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed?

> We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, the only-begotten (*monogenē*) begotten from the Father (*gennēthenta ek tou patros*), that is from the substance (*ousia*) of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father, through whom all things came to be, both in heaven and those in earth; for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became human, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the holy Spirit.[62]

The hints or performance indications have been there all along. They become more apparent when one shifts from a metaphysical/ontological framework to a more performative one. Again, the key is *relationality*. The Father, as "maker of all things," is intimately related to creation (a relation made more emphatic at Constantinople in

59. On the "double hermeneutic" and its inevitability in theology, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (Crossroad, 1984), 291–92. This can be extended *mutatis mutandis* to all forms of understanding.
60. Karol Berger, review of Roman Ingarden, *The Work of Music and the Problem of Its Identity*, in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 558–65 at 561–62. Berger calls this a "quasi-temporal" structure, since it does not deal with "physical time" but rather with "phenomenal, experienced time" (561).
61. Joseph Stephen O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 161–62.
62. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1: 5.

381); this recalls the strong creation theology of Genesis where all creation is good and humans are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27), a participative relation established on God's initiative. The Son's relation to the Father is expressed in the strongest (if abstract) terms ("God from God . . . consubstantial with the Father"). The Son's relation to humanity is also put in the strongest terms ("for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate [*sarkōthenta*], became human [*enanthrōpēsanta*], suffered [*pathonta*]"). Divine salvation has an intentionality: It is performed *for us, in relation to us*. The details of this performance of salvation can be found in the Gospels, Jesus's own enactment in his time of the values of the Kingdom of God. He proclaims its arrival through his particular interactions with those who need healing of body and spirit, with the crowds who eagerly follow him to hear the word of God, with those who challenge his authority to speak for God, and ultimately in his passion, death, and resurrection. To believe in Jesus as the human face of God is to follow him, and following Jesus—being a disciple, living a Jesus-like life—means being "on the way" with him and performing the values of the Kingdom over the course of time. Those actions settle into a lived tradition that is best treated not as a treasure box filled with divine truth and carefully passed along without blemish, but as a performing tradition more akin to a musical performance that unfolds the identity of the work over time. Time provides the setting for our ongoing lives as disciples, allowing us to see the timelessness of the grace of God in Christ and the Spirit because it is always timely, always applies to our situation.

The thinkability of the presence of God today presupposes the experienceability of that presence, our active participation in it, and the particular activation of its salvific possibilities in our time. The traces of the tradition of Christian discipleship in its historical artifacts such as the Nicene Creed can only be authentically valuable and alive when they are true and can only be true when they are performed—that is, incarnated—over time. The presence of God is inseparable from its performance, revealed in Jesus's mandate of relationality: "Go and *do* likewise" (Lk 10:37).

Author biography

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