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The Place of Nicaea in Buddhist-Christian Theology

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Abstract

Several themes are as fundamental in Buddhist thinking as they are in the ancient and modern debates about the teaching of the Council of Nicaea (325). This article argues that if the interreligious dialogue urged by Vatican II had been more energetically sustained, a Buddhist-Christian conversation about the legacy of Nicaea could have been a significant ecumenical event, overcoming the monopoly of Eurocentric perspectives.

Keywords

Athanasius, Buddhism, conventional truth, emptiness, interreligious dialogue, Nicaea, skillful means, substance, Vatican II

If Buddhist thinkers were invited to celebrate, along with Christians, the seventeenth centenary of the Council of Nicaea, their contribution might turn out to be quite crucial. First, they would draw on their long tradition of critiquing "attachment to views" as a damaging spiritual malady. Then they would draw on "emptiness," the keynote of Buddhist ontology, to assess the charge of "substantialism" often brought against Nicene theology. Finally, they would review the status and function of dogmatic language in light of the notions of "skillful means" and "conventional truth." Each of these topics is as fundamental in Buddhist thinking as the dogma of Nicaea is

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in Christian faith. If the interreligious dialogue urged by Vatican II (*Nostra Aetate*, §2)[1] had been more energetically sustained, and a broad-based interreligious theology more amply developed, a Buddhist-Christian conversation about the legacy of Nicaea could have been a significant ecumenical event, overcoming the monopoly of Eurocentric perspectives.

Attachment to Views

The Buddhist analysis of "views" goes beyond a psychological study of the pathologies to which religious belief is prone. It bears on the notion of truth and on the way truths are to be held if they are to remain true. The first step on the Noble Eightfold Path is "right view" (Pali *sammā-diṭṭhi*), something quite different from "orthodox dogma." It is a practice rather than subscription to a theory, and it demands alertness as one treads the middle path, avoiding the extremes of "substantialism" (Skt. *śāśvata-dṛṣṭi*) and "annihilationism" (*uccheda-dṛṣṭi*). The sixty-two false views examined in the first sutta, or scripture, of the Pali Canon reveal various ways one may slip into either of these extremes.[2] It offers a fine net that can filter out any kind of distorted thinking about the nature of reality. But this is not merely a survey of theoretical errors, comparable to ancient patristic lists of heresies. Meditating on each item in turn, the mind is healed as it is nudged back to the path of freedom. In contrast to Christian mapping of a middle path between "extremes" in thinking about the Trinity (between modalism and tritheism) or Christ (between monophysitism and Nestorianism) the Buddhist discussions bear less on the nature of the Buddha or of buddhas and bodhisattvas in general than on reality itself. A thorough Buddhist critique of the Nicene Creed might have to bring into view later, more sophisticated ontological thinking down to Aquinas.

In commemorating Nicaea, we risk investing in a "substantialist" view of the being of God that from a Buddhist angle involves us in spiritual bondage. The "emptiness" that is the middle avoiding both extremes invites us to a kind of thinking marked by balance and restraint, and more than that, by freedom from views that shackle the mind. Thus, affirmation of "right view" is not a matter of binding oneself to non-negotiable dogma, but rather of opening a space of freedom for the mind. The Nicene affirmation, too, frees the mind from the Sabellian and Arian "extremes," combining the Son's true divinity with his utter dependence on the Father as source of his divine being. Pursuing affinities between orthodox Christian dogma on one side and Buddhist right view on the other could reveal an unexpected profile of dogma as liberation.

1. See Peter Feldmeier, "*Nostra Aetate* and Encountering Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 40 (2020): 273–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2020.0015.
2. See "*Brahmajāla Sutta*: The Supreme Net of What the Teaching Is Not," in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Wisdom Publications, 1996), 67–90. See also Paul Fuller, *The Notion of Ditthi in Theravada Buddhism: The Point of View* (Routledge, 2004).

While the commemoration of the sixteenth centenary of the Council of Constantinople in 381 recalled the relatively broad horizons of the Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan Creed, with its expansive teaching on the Spirit and the church, and its long history of use in Christian worship, the step back to Nicaea 325 narrows the focus, homing in on the exact clauses that sparked more than fifty years of bitter debate in the "Arian controversy." Prescinding from topics that later became prominent—trinitarian questions, about one *ousia* and three hypostases,[3] christological questions about how the Savior's humanity (strongly affirmed) is combined with his divinity, and the question of the Spirit's divine status—the focus shifts back to what the Creed of 325 actually said, especially in its innovative anti-Arian clauses (along with the associated anathemas). Here is the text:

> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten (*gennēthenta ek tou Patros monogenē*), that is, from the essence of the Father (*toutestin ek tēs ousias tou Patros*) God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made (*gennēthenta ou poiēthenta*), of one essence with the Father (*homoousion tō Patri*).

Is it legitimate to focus exclusively on one dimension of Christ's identity, namely the true divinity of the eternal Son? The Johannine prologue and even the Nicene Creed present the eternal generation of the Word as the first phase in a saving movement that culminates in the Incarnation. The Creed is not concerned with a speculative theology of divine substance; it sets its claims about the reality of the Son's generation from the Father within the context of a description of the incarnational economy, drawing on the Johannine prologue for the section of the second article quoted above. St. Athanasius's *Three Orations Against the Arians* (*CA*, c. 339–345) are intensely focused on the Nicene teaching that the Son is begotten from the essence of the Father and is true God, yet they continually refer to the incarnational economy as a source of proof-texts for the Nicene dogma and a refutation of Arian objections drawn from Christ's incarnate condition.

The *Orations* were preceded by a luminous and comprehensive account of the incarnate economy, *De Incarnatione* (probably c. 336). The latter has been called "a prime example of a christocentric forgetting of the Spirit,"[4] but one might say the same of the Nicene Creed. If the *Orations* contain "a fully developed 'Spirit Christology,'"[5]

3. Specifically trinitarian discourse surfaces only sporadically in Athanasius's writing fifteen to twenty years later, for example: "The Triad is not originated, but there is an eternal and one Godhead in a Triad, and there is one Glory of the Holy Triad" (*Contra Arianos* 1.18; henceforth *CA*); the discussion continues without mentioning the Spirit. See also *CA* 3.15.
4. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011), 134. It is only from 359, in his *Letters to Serapion*, that Athanasius explicitly addresses the question of the Spirit's divinity.
5. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 134. But Anatolios cites only *CA* 1.46–51, which deals with Psalm 45:7–8 on God anointing Christ and refers this to his humanity. See also *CA* 2.18; 3.23–25.

this may show Athanasius registering the lacuna in the Creed of 325, which was partially filled in the Creed of 381 with its declaration that the Spirit is adored and glorified along with Father and Son. The celebration of the sixteenth centenary of Constantinople in 1981 generated much reflection on the Holy Spirit, but the celebration of Nicaea can evoke the Spirit only as the missing presence whose lack the Creed of 325 makes us feel, with its curt third article: "And in the Holy Spirit"—somewhat as the orchestral exposition in the Brahms Violin Concerto teases us by preparing but deferring a climactic lyrical theme, kept in reserve for a gorgeous presentation by the soloist. To the extent that commemoration of Nicaea 325 has morphed into a discussion of Constantinople 381, it risks going over the same ground already so thoroughly covered in 1981. To give point to the current celebrations, topics specific to the first Council must be isolated and discussed on their own terms.

A Buddhist critique of Nicaea could build on the critiques of Western scholars who contend that Emperor Constantine dictated the Council's outcome in advance,[6] who refer to "the Sabellian overtones of the Nicene interpretation,"[7] or who even claim that Alexander of Alexandria compromised with Sabellianism in accepting the *homoousion*. These critics are likely to agree with Edward Gibbon that Athanasius's "mind was tainted by the contagion of fanaticism,"[8] with the result that he furthered a crass, simplistic theology, shattering the elegant and subtle Origenian theology associated with the aristocratic Didaskaleion (the Catechetical School) to court the support of unlettered monks and an excitable populace. They may see him as encouraging a cult of personality when he identified himself with the Nicene cause and branded all his opponents as Arian. According to the critics, it was power, not truth, that inspired his theological "manifestos"[9] such as *Contra Arianos*, and he only became interested in defending Nicaea when he found it politically opportune. The hostility he aroused had

6. Eduard Schwartz, *Zur Geschichte des Athanasius* (de Gruyter, 1959), 252. Schwartz (1858–1940), who detested Athanasius, is the chief architect of the secularization of church history; see Vincent Twomey, *Apostolikos Thronos* (Aschendorff, 1982), who forcefully argues that "the ultimate cause of the Eusebian-Melitian conspiracy was the Arian heresy" (353), as is confirmed by the condemnation of Athanasius not only on disciplinary but also on doctrinal grounds at Tyre (335) and Jerusalem (336), simultaneously with the rehabilitation of Arius. His rejection, early in his episcopate, of Constantine's demand that he receive Arius back into his diocese marked him from the start as walking in his predecessor Alexander's Nicene footsteps. For another strong critique of Schwartz, see Jan M. Szymusiak, in his introduction to Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Deux Apologies* (Sources Chrétiennes 56 bis) (Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 9–67.
7. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 39, espousing Basil of Ancyra's misgivings. This irenical book unfortunately leaves the impression of equal legitimacy when describing two sides in fourth-century theology, "trinitarian theologians of unity of will" and "trinitarian theologians of unity of being" (41–98).
8. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 21 (Great Books of the Modern World, 1952), 316.
9. See Mark DelCogliano, "The Emergence of the Pro-Nicene Alliance," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 256–81.

nothing to do with theology but with his "extremely authoritarian personality"[10] and his alleged gangsterism.[11] Moreover, the intervention of Pope Julius on his behalf in 340 was opportunistic, again motivated by a thirst for power. These allegations illustrate how the integrity, consistency, and clear-sightedness of Athanasius as a theologian are inevitably missed in an over-secularized approach to church history.

All this must be corrected before Nicaea can be presented as a worthy dialogue partner of Buddhism. Here help comes from an unexpected quarter. Adolf von Harnack wrote:

> Athanasius was a reformer. . . . Behind and beside him there was speculation which sailed on a shoreless sea and was in danger of becoming totally rudderless. He grasped the rudder. One might compare the situation with that of Luther facing the medieval church and scholasticism. His concern was not with a word, a formula, but with a decisive thought of faith: the redemption of humanity to divine life through the God-man.[12]

For Harnack, only Luther matches Athanasius in making dogma so vital for faith. As he wrote, "The German reformer gave the formulae of Greek Christianity new life."[13] Just as fourth-century Christian architecture chose one essential form, the basilica, Athanasius brought out the essential lines of Christian doctrine in a powerful "reduction,"[14] making his thought "the most effective means to ward off the complete Hellenization and secularization of Christianity."[15] Indeed, Nicaea marks a "crisis of early Christian Platonism"[16] and resolves it by rigorously proscribing any notion of a graded divinity or any subordinationism in thinking of the relation of the eternal Son to the Father. (Of course, there is a perfectly orthodox kind of subordination in that the Son derives his being totally from the Father; this is liable to be obscured in some flamboyant versions of the "social Trinity.")

Harnack would not approve of last century's smearing of Athanasius's character and neglect of his theology: "This is not the place to deal with Athanasius as a politician. 'Brutus says he was ambitious; and Brutus is an honourable man.'"[17] "If one measures him by the standards of the time, nothing low or ignoble can be found in him. The popular accusation of hierarchical domineering is naïve. . . . An energetic bishop, representing a great matter, could only be a commanding ruler."[18]

The steadfast stance of Athanasius in a world of constantly shifting opinion does not negate the fact that he remained a thinker. The polemical gambits of his writing

10. Manlio Simonetti, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (Augustinianum, 1975), 153.
11. A pervasive theme in Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (T&T Clark, 1988).
12. Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), 2.22–23.
13. Harnack, 3.814.
14. Harnack, 2.26.
15. Harnack, 2.27.
16. See Friedo Ricken, "Nikaia als Krisis des altkirchlichen Platonismus," *Theologie und Philosophie* 44 (1969): 321–51.
17. Harnack, 2.25, n. 3.
18. Harnack, 2.238–39.

are monotonous, but the theological arguments are responsive to changing situations. The alleged fanatic kept his eye on the Nicene teaching, and on the matter at stake in it, and when he denounces the various anti-Nicene synods as "Arian," he is logically correct even if historically misleading, for in practice, being anti-Nicene amounted to denying the true divinity of the Son and falling back into the Origenian subordinationism with which Nicaea had broken. If "right view" is the Buddha's weapon in all his battles about the nature of the real, Nicene orthodoxy is the intellectual sword that Athanasius dexterously wields. In neither case is the "view" allowed to become a dead thesis; rather it aims at a living contact with the real to be renewed again and again.

Harnack's enthusiasm for Athanasius and the dogmatician Luther might seem incompatible with the basic claim that "dogma in its conception and development is a work of the Greek mind on the soil of the Gospel."[19] A limit of Luther in Harnack's eyes is that he was impervious to the critique of the dogmatic tradition that was already afoot in his day.[20] His acclaim of Athanasius and Luther does not preclude ongoing critical reflection on the adequacy of the Nicene mindset. Yes, Nicaea represents a salutary crisis of early Christian Platonism, and its reading of the Johannine prologue is a step back to the soil of the Gospel. The Creed can be seen as an exegesis of the Johannine text, with a consequent straitjacketing of Johannine exegesis long afterward, John's contemplative utterances being milked for their dogmatic and metaphysical interest. But if we pursue further the Johannine reference, giving the "step back" something like the subversive force this expression has in Heidegger, as signifying an overcoming of metaphysics to recover the "matter itself," then we can let John speak anew when we recite the Creed. The Creed's "right view" can be read as opening the door to Johannine contemplation rather than cramping it with dogmatic scruple.

Even the creedal language of *ousia* and *homoousios* is at the service of this project; it is not intended as an advance into new territories of metaphysical speculation, though it was later dragooned for that purpose. One cannot call the Nicene Creed an exercise in metaphysical theology, but its defense by Athanasius inevitably draws on metaphysical argument and the resources of metaphysical theology, which had been most richly developed in the work of Origen. Theology is "the most ungrateful of sciences"; the Athanasian reduction of doctrine to essentials spelled the downfall of Origen. In the fifth century, Socrates (*Church History* 6.13) defends Origen against a "quaternion of revilers" (Methodius, Eustathius, Apollinaris, and Theophilus),[21] but by the next century, Origen's star had sunk under the horizon into the limbo reserved for those perceived as heterodox. Today, as we attempt to look back from Nicaea to its Johannine foundation, we can retrieve the merits of Origen's great *Commentary on John* to which anxiety about Nicene orthodoxy has tended to blind us. Beneath the level of formal theses there lies a space of thought and contemplation within which successive witnesses—John, Origen, Nicaea, Athanasius—are moving in their quests to attain a right view of an event of revelation, neither reifying it nor robbing it of its reality.

19. Harnack, 1.20.
20. Harnack, 3.816–17.
21. Harnack, 2.28, 236.

Simonetti says, "The controversy, which had begun within the Origenian tradition, by its nature of high level and cultural tradition, changed its appearance with Athanasius and began to become the struggle of the simple and unvarnished (and ignorant) people against the abstractions of philosophers (and the requirements of culture)." Simonetti idealizes "the aristocratic tradition of the Didaskaleion," which was not particularly brilliant in the pre-conciliar "theological twilight."[22] He claims that Athanasius's "simplistic radicalization of the complex doctrinal, political, and cultural themes" made it impossible for him to recognize "the subtle distinctions the opponents made between their position and that of the pure Arians; for him they were all equally enemies, and as his enemies they were also enemies of the faith. But this simplification also meant a distortion and alteration of the deeper reasons for the clash and thus favored wide-reaching ambiguities, heavy with consequences for the whole of Christianity."[23] This seems a gross underestimation of Athanasius's theological greatness, not only of his skill in maintaining theoretical rectitude, but in his capacity to maintain his views without falling into sclerosis or empty ranting. Right view is not a matter only of "getting it right" but of holding it rightly, always conscious of what is at stake and of the pastoral impact of the teaching.

Mahāyāna's More Radical View on Views

Earlier Buddhism, in its scholastic developments (the Abhidharma), became a fussy religion, anxious to list and refute wrong views. The Mahāyāna reaction against this targets right views as well as wrong, since they can be a subtler and more insidious obstacle to liberation. It makes a virtue of "freedom from views."[24] That Athanasius had this virtue is shown by his capacity to withdraw from the theological fray in order to live contemplatively with the desert monks, setting a headline the Cappadocians would follow. Above all, it is shown by a crucial move that heralded the end of the Arian controversy, namely his recognition that Basil of Ancyra, whose homoiousian thinking was opposed to the Nicene *homoousios*, was in fact aligned with the basic intention of Nicaea, so that acceptance of his language was possible. Church historians tend to speak as if this bridge-building of Athanasius were a matter of political negotiation and compromise, missing his properly theological

22. Aloysius Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden (Mowbray, 1975), 167–218. Simonetti himself deplores "how little we know of the Alexandrian theology of the second half of the third century" (*Studi sull'arianesimo* [Studium, 1965], 110). Athanasius is a livelier and deeper theologian than Eusebius, even as retrieved in Holger Strutwolf, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Jörg Ulrich, *Euseb von Caesarea und die Juden* (de Gruyter, 1999); Sébastien Morlet, *La Démonstration Évangélique d'Eusèbe de Césarée* (Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2009); and Adam Renberg, *The Son Is Truly Son: The Trinitarian and Christological Theology of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Brepols, 2021).
23. Simonetti, *La crisi ariana*, 142–43.
24. Perhaps it was T. S. Eliot's Buddhist studies (and not merely a random stroke of wit) that enabled him to recognize in Henry James "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it" (in the *Little Review*, 1918).

insight and tact. I suggest that if we bring out on one side the basic Buddhist utterances on views and their overcoming and on the other the basic dogmatic arguments of Athanasius, the interaction of the two will not culminate in a Buddhist denunciation of Athanasius but in a rich reflection on the nature and function of dogmatic views.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its penchant for dizzying paradox, overturns correct views in an unsettling way by standing them on their head. The Zen utterance, "If you see the Buddha, slay the Buddha" is a slogan urging freedom from views. "Dependent origination" is a fundamental view of the way things are, empty of substantial being, yet not falling into a mere void. Surely it merits to be proclaimed as the central dogma of Buddhism. Yet for Madhyamaka, the most fundamental Mahāyāna philosophy, dependent origination, and the emptiness it implies, are provisional designations, "no more than a useful way of conceptualizing experience,"[25] leading us to the ultimate "quiescence of fabrications (*prapanca*)" or "auspicious cessation of hypostatization."[26]

Perhaps the obsession with views that prevailed in Christian theology and gave us the Inquisition could be healed by seeing views as merely practical steps to avoid extremes, including the extreme of being entangled in views. Shaking off the elements of projection, craving, and self-assertion that inevitably attach to views may require affirming the emptiness of views as the highest wisdom, to the point that emptiness itself is seen as a false view: "Emptiness is found in the sixty-two kinds of wrong view" (*The Teaching of Vimalakīrti* IV, 8).[27] Or perhaps the meaning is that the wrong views, as they plunge toward extremes, end up refuting themselves and discovering emptiness as the truth they were unconsciously asserting. To rigidly insist on a view, however true, is the greatest heresy in Buddhism, for such rigidity loses the essential thread of emptiness. Let loose on the history of theology, Buddhist analysis would diagnose a host of unwholesome investments affecting the true tenets as much as, or more than, the false ones. It might encourage an anarchic attitude, appealing to all the wrong views that orthodoxy so painstakingly and so painfully keeps at a distance, to suggest that the more phobic the reaction to the condemned heresies, the more likely that some uncomfortable truth lies within them.[28]

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25. Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Wisdom, 2013), 278. This deflationary phrasing does little justice to the intellectual labor behind the development from the early sense of dependent origination to name the links of samsaric existence to its later status as a universal ontological principle, to its identification with emptiness, and then to its deconstruction, with the effect that it is better named as non-dependent non-origination: "the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which there is neither cessation nor origination (*anirodham, anutpādam*)," the opening words of Nāgārjuna's treatise (Dedicatory Verse, Siderits and Katsura, 13).
26. Ibid.
27. On this, see J. S. O'Leary, *Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on* The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa) (Peeters, 2018), 159–69.
28. To sort, grade, and refute views, Nāgārjuna makes much use of the tetralemma, a logical device known also to the Greek Skeptics. Bernhard Nitsche had me discuss "The Tetralemma, the Two Truths, Skilful Means, and Divine Personality," in *God or the Divine? Religious Transcendence beyond Monism and Theism, between Personality and Impersonality*, ed. Bernhard Nitsche and Marcus Schmücker (de Gruyter, 2023), 217–36.

Our celebration of Nicaea raises two temptations: (1) rigidly asserting a substantialist reification of dogma, and (2) nihilistically revolting against dogma, denying that the Spirit could produce such clumsy, heavy language, much less be bound by it. The path between those two extremes is informed faith, which affirms the Creed by recognizing its "emptiness" (its precariousness, provisionality, and inadequacy) and understanding how it arose from conditions that, at the time, made it the best way to defend a sacred truth.

Nicene Ontology and the Buddhist Critique

This brings us to a second zone of friction between Buddhism and Christianity, namely the question of ontology, which has already begun to emerge in our discussion of "views." Many theologians would argue that Christian teaching fell into substantialism when it embraced categories of Greek philosophy like *ousia* and *hypostasis* (synonymous for Nicaea but differentiated for trinitarian theology by the time of Athanasius's synod at Alexandria in 362). John Hick, for example, praises efforts to rethink the Incarnation as perfectly realizing "the union of divine and human action, which occurs whenever God's grace works effectively"[29] or as the high point in the "creative and saving activity of God the Spirit towards, and within, the spirit of man."[30] This might be a suitable account of the Blessed Virgin, but from the Nicene vantage, it is defective as Christology since it gives no basis for adoring Christ as truly divine. In Hick's view, what prevents traditional theologians like Karl Rahner from fully embracing the proper dynamic view of Christ are the shackles of the substance-language of Nicaea and Chalcedon. He writes, "Few people today (outside the ranks of rather traditional professional theologians) use the concept of 'substance,' or find the idea of a person with two natures other than grotesque."[31] If the focus of the 2025 celebration of Nicaea is limited to the Council and its first reception, it will force us to look squarely at the first and most fundamental dogmatic claim of this sort.

While it might seem that the Council's *ousia* language hasn't a leg to stand on in the face of Buddhist-inspired critique, closer study may discern a subtler meaning of that language, allowing it to stand its ground in dialogue with Buddhist anti-substantialism. That is to say that the Nicene theologians were constantly alert to the great matter of Christ's sonship and divinity, and its salvific import, and thus highly unlikely to become trapped in frozen slogans or crude reifications. The terms they used had a relational and contextual sense, and were not allowed to get too remote from the dynamic, kenotic character of the Christ they were intended to witness to. Here, as so often, what might begin as a polemic opposition of a stereotyped East and West will yield, as the dialogue progresses, into a discovery of affinities. Indeed many central Buddhist themes such as emptiness, non-self, nonduality, will be found to lodge in Christian tradition, and not only in outlying mystical figures but in mainstream discourse such as that of the Fathers.

29. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (Macmillan, 1985), 60, referring to Donald Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (Scribner's, 1948).
30. Hick, 62, quoting Geoffrey Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Clarendon, 1977), 100.
31. Hick, 60–61.

One need not exaggerate the metaphysical quality of the last layer of the Creed's account of Christ's eternal nature, the phrases *ek tēs ousias* and *homoousion tō Patri*, losing from view the religious purpose of these terms. They are not vamping up substance but sounding the depth and reality of a relationship. *Ek tēs ousias* underlines that the Son is born from the Father—not "from another *ousia* or hypostasis" (as one of the anathemas specifies), and not as a product of God's creative will. *Homoousios* may mean no more than "of the same kind of stuff as" and may have no particularly metaphysical content in itself. In context, followed by the dative (*tō Patri*), it deepens the relational sense of the Johannine language of divine sonship: The Son is not only born from the very being of the Father, but their relationship is so close that they can be said to be of the same being!

Athanasius defends the word *homoousios* in the 350s in response to attacks on it, but it is wrong to say he turned to Nicaea only then (and only as a convenient strategy against his foes). His masterwork *Contra Arianos*, a decade or more previously, is already steeped in the Nicene language of *ousia*, though it cites *homoousios* only once. "He had plenty of other expressions to denote the ontological unity of Father and Son, *to idion tēs ousias* (peculiar belonging of the substance), or *aparallaktos eikōn tēs ousias* (exact image of the substance), or *idion gennēma tēs ousias* (peculiar offspring of the substance) . . ., 'the identity of Godhead and the unity of substance' (*CA* 3.3)."[32] Of course, a touch of metaphysical Hellenization is in the air, especially in the urge to define ultimate realities. Yet as retained in the church's worship today, the word *homoousios* is in line with the Johannine basis of the Creed, not a philosophical swerve away from it.

Luise Abramowski notes that for Athanasius, the anathema "from another *ousia* or *hypostasis*" must be completed by "than that of the Father," and that "neither of the two terms are said *of the Son* in the Nicene Creed."[33] Thus, the enigma of how two hypostases can share one essence does not arise at all. How much "the Greek mind" is at work here may be gleaned by comparing the anathema with Plotinus's talk of "a lineage worthy of the purest Intellect (*Nous*), that it should spring from nowhere else but the first principle, and when it has come into existence should generate all realities along with itself" (*Enneads* V 1, 7, ll. 28–30).[34] The Creed has no intention of sounding the depths of the divine *ousia*, whether in mystical contemplation or in metaphysical speculation. Its sole aim is to affirm the relation of the Son to the Father as a relation founded in reality and not in some act of creative will. *Homoousios tō Patri* is a relational statement. It is "a guide to a certain way of reading Scripture"; "efforts to understand this term primarily by recourse to secular usages of *ousia* and cognate terms are misguided. Neither the council fathers of Nicaea nor Athanasius himself were working with any determinate technical sense of *ousia* or *homoousios*."[35]

32. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 437. See the important but neglected study of Charles Hauret, *Comment le "Défenseur de Nicée" a-t-il compris le dogme de Nicée?* (Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1936).
33. Luise Abramowski, "Die dritte Arianerrede des Athanasius: Eusebianer und Arianer und das westliche Serdicense," *ZKG* 102 (1991): 389–413, at 403.
34. A. H. Armstrong, trans., *Plotinus*, 7 vols. (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1966–88), vol. 5.
35. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 128.

The Creed's "concept of God," we are told, "reflected a paternalistic and condescending view of Christian salvation history—one in which an all-powerful Logos, perfect, glorious, and sharing the essence of the Father, descended from the heights of heaven to intervene in human history . . . a top-heavy theology for an increasingly top-heavy church."[36] But how does that criticism not apply immediately to the Johannine prologue or the kenosis hymn of Philippians 2:5–12? Such critique seems to proceed along predetermined rails rather than respond comprehensively to the scope and subtlety of conciliar and patristic thought.

Homoousios was "inserted into the creed to describe how the Son related to the Father."[37] Yes, but as a refinement of the primary "description" derived from John. The Johannine vision underpinning the *homoousios* is borne out by the relational terms into which Athanasius translates the term in *Contra Arianos.* He prefers to call God "Father" rather than "ingenerate" (*agennetos*), an "unscriptural and suspicious" word (*CA* 3.34). He grounds his defense of the Nicene doctrine in an exegesis of what John says about the relations of Father and Son. A favorite proof-text for this purpose is John 10:30, "I and the Father are one," which he first quoted in his earliest writing, *Henos sōmatos*.[38] It is easily argued that this interpretation of John in light of Nicaea overlooks the contemplative character of John 10:30, underlined by Henri Le Saux, who meditated on this text alongside the great Upanishadic utterance: "That are thou, *tat swam asi*."[39] But Athanasius's primary concern is not with scoring dogmatic points or shoring up a metaphysics of substance; rather, he sees the Johannine texts as an invitation to contemplate the mystery of the divine sonship: "Whoso thus contemplates the Son, contemplates (*theōrei*) what is proper to the Father's Essence" (*CA* 3.3, referring to Jn 14:10).

The most powerful rejection of substantialism, or *svabhāva* (own-being, self-existence), in Buddhist literature is that of Nāgārjuna, the second-century founder of Madhyamaka thought, which has been called "the central philosophy of Buddhism." T. R. V. Murti's book bearing that title,[40] which Thomas Merton read during the Asian journey that ended with his death in Bangkok,[41] is faulted by scholars of Madhyamaka for its recourse to Kant[42] and especially for its tendency to read Nāgārjuna in light of Vedantic sources. But Murti's sensitivity to the religious overtones of Nāgārjuna's vocabulary, and his ease of movement between Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara, evident in the flow of

36. Carlos A. Galvão-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (University of California Press, 2013), 89.
37. Galvão-Sobrinho, 87.
38. For the Athanasian authorship of this encyclical letter of Bishop Alexander, shortly before Nicaea, see J. H. Newman, *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius* (1890; repr., AMS Press, 1978), 2.3–6. The cluster of proof-texts amid which John 10:30 is quoted in *Henos sōmatos* 2 is reproduced in Athanasius, *De Decretis* 21, a clear stylistic fingerprint.
39. Henri Le Saux, Swami Abhishiktananda, *Intériorité et révélation: essais théologiques* (Présence, 1982).
40. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Allen & Unwin, 1960).
41. Naomi Burton et al., eds., *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 1973).
42. "The total and interminable conflict in reason and the consequent attempt to resolve the conflict by rising to a higher standpoint." Merton, *Asian Journal*, 102, paraphrasing Murti, *Central Philosophy*, 126. "Criticism is Śūnyatā—the utter negation of thought as revelatory of the real." Murti, *Central Philosophy*, 140; quoted by Merton, 115.

untranslated Sanskrit footnotes throughout his book, prompt us to desire an interreligious entente between the two great foundational thinkers. Śaṅkara denounces Nāgārjuna as a nihilist, yet his guru's guru Gauḍapāda quotes Nāgārjuna, revealing commonalities between the Madhyamaka and the Vedānta spiritual quests, especially at the level of methodology and in their recourse to the dyad of conventional and ultimate truth.[43] The current dominance of a drily skeptical outlook in Madhyamaka studies, influenced by Hume and Wittgenstein, has not helped replace Nāgārjuna in his Indic context. Indeed, even the great Buddhist scriptures that are a proximate and essential background to his thought, especially the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, are rarely mentioned by these scholars. Analogously, students of the Nicene Creed often neglect its scriptural basis in the Fourth Gospel. I propose that an encounter between Nicaea and Nāgārjuna can be interreligious only if the religious dignity of both sources is retrieved and kept in view.

The proximity of Madhyamaka to Vedānta is not just a question of methodology but concerns above all the experience of nonduality (*advaya*), the practice of gaining access to the real by dissolving painful dualisms. These Indian experiences of nonduality strongly resonate with the nondual utterances in the Johannine writings and even with the more intellectual striving for nonduality in some Western philosophers.[44] One might say that the supreme nondual utterance is in the Creed of Nicaea itself: He became flesh, he became human (*sarkōthenta, enanthrōpēsanta*). While warring bishops in the fourth century and somewhat obsessed scholars in more recent times have focused almost exclusively on the *homoousion*, the mighty Beethoven, who is said to have had the Upanishadic "That are thou" over his desk, made the words *et homo factus est* the climax of the Creed in his *Missa Solemnis.*

Biblical and Christian traditions are themselves rich in resources for a critique of substantialist conceptions of God. The Hebrew Bible constantly shatters fixated, idolatrous images of God. Again and again, some hallowed image of God is revealed to be idolatrous and is shockingly overturned. This deconstruction continues in the New Testament. The Fourth Gospel and the First Letter of John speak of God as "spirit," "light," and "love," thus overcoming any idea of God as a detached substance and instead plunging God into a dynamic realm of communal contemplation from which it is impossible to distill some well-defined object suited to metaphysical analysis. When early church Christology has recourse to the language of substance and hypostasis, it places that terminology at the service of a mystery beyond articulation, introducing a

43. See Richard King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism: The Mahāyāna Context of the Gauḍapādīya-Kārikā* (State University of New York Press, 1995); and Christian Bouy, ed., *L'Āgamaśāstra de Gauḍapāda: Un traité vedāntique en quatre chapitres* (Institut de Civilisation Indienne, 2000).

44. See J. S. O'Leary, "Nonduality in Plotinus and Madhyamaka," in *Buddhism and Neoplatonism*, ed. Emile Alexandrov and Alexander O'Neill (Chisokudō Publications, 2025), 203–26; Fabien Muller, *Kenologische Versuche: Der Johannesprolog zwischen Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu und Meister Eckhart* (Aschendorff, 2022), with my review in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* (forthcoming); and Matthew Z. Vale, "Knowing the Real: Nonduality in Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Lonergan," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 42 (2022): 217–36, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2022.0012.

ferment of paradox in which the play of concepts becomes a dance of traces. When we pray the Creed, we may find an uneasy question stirring in our minds, a doubt as to if and how the words we utter bear effectively on ultimate reality. This doubt can move our minds from substantialism to emptiness, from fixated objectification of the *fides quae* to the openness of the *fides qua* that trusts in a reality our words point to or witness to but cannot master. To say "true God" is to evoke the ultimate empty reality of the divine; to speak of "true God from true God" does not replace that emptiness with a heavy substantialism but places the Son in the same unobjectifiable, empty dimension as the Father. He is with or toward the Father, in the bosom of the Father, from eternity (Jn 1:1, 18), vanishing, as it were, into a nondual relationship to "the one true God" (Jn 17:3). It is easy to understand how this mysterious unity could lead Athanasius's partner Marcellus of Ancyra into modalism, greatly embarrassing the Nicene cause. As we return to square one, to the first dogma, we raise up this hallowed historical construction to the gracious wisdom of Buddhism and seek a new set of fundamental orientations. Of course, we put on hold the later ingenuities of trinitarian speculation and mysticism down to Eckhart and Cusanus (not to mention Schelling and Hegel), as we try to focus the very basics on both the Christian and the Buddhist sides. Even a pooling of questions would imply a high level of encounter.

Emptiness is the keynote of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the very air it breathes. It is differently deployed in different scriptures and schools, but even notions that sound heavily substantialist at first, such as the notion of a Buddha-nature present in all things or the notion of a True Self to be aimed at in Zen meditation, can be parsed in terms of emptiness.[45] In its intricacy and variety, Mahāyāna provides an intellectual and spiritual milieu that could provide a nourishing and challenging environment for Christian theological thought, much as Western philosophies and ideologies have historically done. To begin to talk about the Council of 325 in such a milieu, not fretting about substance but opening wide to the freedom of emptiness, would be more than an interesting academic exercise. It could be a release, an awakening, and a homecoming, a recovery of central and essential matters to which the Council witnessed.

Dogmatic Language as Skillful Means and Conventional Truth

Buddhist meditation on the status and function of religious language deploys two rich and subtle notions: conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*)[46] and skillful means

45. For example, Sallie B. King defended Buddha-nature against Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō's iconoclastic critique by underlining that Buddha-nature is empty, "The Doctrine of Buddha-Nature is Impeccably Buddhist," in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism*, ed. Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

46. Introduced by Nāgārjuna in a few verses of the fundamental treatise of the Madhyamaka school and given a crucial place in his commentators Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti, and in Tsong Khapa (1357–1419). See Malcolm David Eckel, *Jñānagārbha on the Two Truths: An Eighth Century Handbook on Madhyamaka Philosophy* (State University of New York Press, 1987); and Guy Newland, *The Two Truths in the Madhyāmika Philosophy*

(*upāya-kauśalya*).[47] These notions provide an ample basis for a sophisticated critical appropriation of the Creed. Buddhist teaching is valid and efficacious only when it grasps itself as conventional truth, only when it is enacted as a skillful means for guiding the unenlightened to liberation. In the well-worn metaphors, it is a finger pointing to the moon, a raft to be cast aside once it has ferried the seeker to the further shore. This soteriological contextualization and functionalization of religious doctrines reflects a desire never to separate the two pillars of Buddhism, namely wisdom and compassion. It intersects with the Christian concern to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). Both love and truth were betrayed when Athanasius greeted Arius's timely demise in a water closet with glee, and when Michael Servetus (1509/11–1553) and Thomas Aikenhead (1676–1697) were executed to protect the Trinity. The Buddhist therapy of such "unskillfulness" reaches down to how doctrinal truth is grasped and propagated and to the very nature of that truth. While the mainstream language of dogmatic Christianity, in councils, creeds, and catechisms, aims to convey propositional truths straightforwardly and transparently, Buddhism has granted central authority to intensely critical and deconstructive styles of discourse such as Nāgārjuna's, which signal their own provisional and merely auxiliary status and are ready to yield to silence as a better way to convey what they would express.

But again, before opening a dialogue with Buddhism about the Nicene dogma, we must overcome skepticism at home. "How on earth," it will be asked, "can one claim that the maneuverings of small groups of bishops, under imperial command, using the language of their time, could say something objectively true about the inner life of the divinity? Had Christianity developed in a Chinese milieu, using completely different categories, would it have come up with anything remotely similar?" The doubt is compounded for the *ousia* clauses, "added, to all seeming, almost as an afterthought,"[48] in a hasty last-minute strategic calculation. This skepticism would not spare either the biblical texts, the "soil of the Gospel," or indeed the very notion of a specific divine revelation (as opposed to some general revelation in nature or life).

Athanasius was well aware of the inherent flimsiness of dogmatic language: "Since the more I desired to write, and forced myself to think (*noein*) about the Divinity of the Logos (*peri tēs theotētos tou logou*), so much the more did the knowledge [of it] recede from me (*hē gnōsis exanekhōrei makran ap' emou*). . . . And that which I seemed to understand (*noein*), I was unable to write; but also what I wrote was a weak shadow of the Truth which was in my mind."[49] He may not have extended this awareness to scriptural texts or the Creed. But from a Buddhist point of view, even the

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of the Ge-luk-ba Order of Tibetan Buddhism (Snow Lion, 1992). See also J. S. O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 48–78; and J. S. O'Leary, *Reality Itself: Philosophical Challenges of Indian Mahāyāna* (Chisokudō Publications, 2019), 189–218.

47. For which the locus classicus is the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra. See Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism* (Routledge, 2017 [1978]); and O'Leary, *Reality Itself*, 140–60.

48. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (Longman, 1972), 229.

49. *Ad monachos* 1.2, in Hans-Georg Opitz, ed., *Athanasius Werke II/5* (de Gruyter, 1940), p. 181, ll. 10–14 (trans. V. Twomey).

weightiest utterances of Scripture or Creed are conventional, not ultimate truth, and in recognizing this, we become more skilled in using sacral or dogmatic language effectively, in accord with its function. Note, however, that Athanasius's apophatic confession comes late in his career, whereas if Buddhists had held the Council of Nicaea it might have figured at the top of the agenda.

Does the Creed succeed in objectively referring to the items it names? To do so, it must be sustained and guided by an intention of faith. Its content, the *fides quae*, requires the *fides qua* to make sense. As an act of faith, the Creed exceeds the truths articulated and expresses trusting submission to the divine mystery. Enacted thus, the Creed renounces fixation on the dogmatic points and opens up to the wider concert of faith-utterances in other religions. It tunes in to the total event it attempts to limn in contour, an event of the redemptive coming of the divine into the world. The other traditions talk of something similar, even if their ideas and propositions are alien to us. Within the space created by the mutual acceptance and mutual challenge of two traditions entering the drama of encounter, there emerge specific themes that carry an immediate attraction—Buddhist wisdom and compassion, Christian knowledge of a God entering a kenotic covenant with his creatures. Other themes are taken up as challenging topics of debate—Buddhist claims about non-self, Christian dogmas like that of Nicaea—and the conduct of the debate is an exercise in skillfully navigating between samsaric entanglement in words and concepts and nirvanic openness to presences that these words and concepts point to but that lie beyond their grasp.

In *Ad Afros*, Athanasius talks of the Creed as a divine event, "the word of God that remains forever" (Is 40:8).[50] Here, surely, it will be objected, we see a hubristic divinization of dogmatic views and a clutching at substance that flees from the wisdom of emptiness promoted by Buddhism. While not directly an event of Revelation, the Creed is a privileged transmission (*paradosis*) of the apostolic teaching: "the sound faith, which the Lord granted (*ekharisato*), the apostles proclaimed (*ekēruxan*), and the fathers transmitted (*paradedōkasin*) who came together at Nicaea from the whole of our world";[51] "the tradition from the beginning and the teaching and faith (*paradosin kai didaskaleian kai pistin*) of the Catholic Church, which the Lord granted (*edōkan*), and the apostles proclaimed, and the fathers preserved (*ephulaxan*)."[52] Just as Vatican II historians seek to apprehend it as an event rather than a set of documents, so did Athanasius, decades later, discern in Nicaea an event of witness to revealed truth.

Some will see this as hollow triumphalism that makes the Creed of Nicaea a massive rock and crushes any possibility of interreligious dialogue, affirming a single divine substance in metaphysical propositions given infallible authority by an imperial church. But note that Athanasius sets the Creed in a historical macro-context that reaches back to the apostles and forward to further efforts to clarify the nature of

50. *Afr.* 2.3; text in Athanasius von Alexandrien, *Epistula ad Afros*, introduction, commentary, and translation Annette von Stockhausen (de Gruyter, 2002), 116, 120–22. For this high point of Athanasius's reception of Nicaea, see Hermann Josef Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der alten Kirche* (Schöningh, 1979), 57–62.

51. *Afr* 1.1; von Stockhausen, 75.

52. *Athanasius Letters to Serapion*, I 28 (Migne, Patrologia Graeca 26, 593C–596A).

Christ. Today's efforts to rearticulate Christ's divine status along Nicene lines but under radically changed conditions will gratefully draw on the insights and new spaces of thinking presented by other religions.

Church historians who have restored Nicaea to its original context have often done so in a deflationary style, and with so much success that one wonders what there is to celebrate as we mark the seventeenth centenary of the Council. But when seen as a hugely significant step in an ongoing process, the Creed poses an inexhaustible challenge to more dynamic theological thinking. Its dogmatic gesture became the foundation of all subsequent doctrinal thought, not only by suppressing subordinationism but also by opening a vast new horizon of doctrinal vision. The divine saving Logos and the drama of saved humanity stand forth as weighty, concrete realities in this new space, whereas in Origenian theology they are always prone to become abstractions because of the enveloping Platonistic worldview. The skillful choice made at Nicaea had a liberating impact beyond the expectations of the participants, sweeping away mindsets that had served their purpose and now verged on decay. But Nicaea was not only liberation-from, but also liberation-for, in its full-throated affirmation of the Son's divinity. This became the new cornerstone of theology, a hugely resonant answer to Christ's question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:27). The words of the Creed, compiled from available resources, clicked with the deep faith of the church, though it took time for this to become apparent.

Meditation on skillful means and conventional truth generates a freed-up, flexible set of attitudes to the Creed (even among those who embrace it in faith) and makes thinking about the heritage of trinitarian dogma an open-ended intellectual adventure, one that may attract those struggling with comparable hermeneutical tasks in other religious traditions, making us colleagues in the wider task of interpreting religious classics in the horizons of the contemporary world.

The Step Back from Dogma to a Founding Event

I presented as an "ideological simplification" the following thesis twenty-four years ago:

> Had dogma been kept in strict subordination to the founding events all might have been well. But it took on a life of its own, claiming to be itself the foundation of Christianity and the most essential condition of salvation. Today we are able to contrast this history with the story of how Buddhism survived and spread in East Asia without any reliance on doctrinal intransigence. The teachings were kept subordinate to their practical purpose and given no autonomy as pure theories.[53]

That such strictures find a field of valid application at many places in the vast reaches of theological tradition can scarcely be denied. But Nicaea itself, as understood by Athanasius, did remain strictly subordinate to the founding events, specifically to the Johannine vision, and Athanasius never promoted the *homoousios* as a standalone

53. J. S. O'Leary, "Emptiness and Dogma," *Japan Mission Journal* 55 (2001): 227–45, at 229; also in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 22 (2002): 163–79, https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2002.0022.

thesis that could take on a life of its own. Coming after "true God from true God" and *ek tēs ousias tou Patros*, the phrase *homoousios tō Patri* is a further affirmation of the full reality of the Son's intimate relationship to God the Father. It is not an imposition but a recognition, chiming with Peter at Caesarea Philippi and with the Fourth Evangelist. Only in dependence on that trajectory is the Creed an act of faith.

Nicaea maintains a vital connection with the phenomenon of Christ's filial dependence and obedience in the Fourth Gospel, which conveys "the overwhelming impression of a man whose life was lived in *absolutely intimate dependence* . . . upon God as his Father. . . . The way this is described is governed not by psychological realism but by theological reality—though this is *not* the same as saying that it is to be interpreted (as we tend instinctively to do with this vocabulary of 'the Father' and 'the Son') in terms of Nicene ontology."[54] Nicaea, by the solutions it excludes, holds the door open for a profound interpretation of the Gospel accounts. Even if it is not as directly applicable to the Johannine presentation of Christ as was first thought, it stands guard against any interpretation that would render him a mere prophet. To be sure, the Johannine schemas of pre-existence and the ontology of Nicaea need to be reinterpreted in-depth, transferred from the direct to the oblique, if they are to fully accommodate the contingency of history.

John Keenan's account of Christ as "empty of any essence and engaged in the dependently co-arisen world in all its radical contingency"[55] tries to do justice to the teaching of Chalcedon while contesting the use of rigid metaphysical categories:

> Jesus as empty of any essence whatsoever is an ineffable outflow from the ultimate realm. But as emptiness is identical with dependent co-arising, so Jesus is enmeshed in the web of the constantly flowing and changing events of his time. He is ultimate and absolute inasmuch as he is totally empty, and human and relative inasmuch as he is totally interrelated with the world.[56]

Though we can imagine the Word as eternal and unchanging, this becomes a barren projection if we do not simultaneously seek to hear that Word in the mobile variations of its historical unfolding. The attempt to think the Word apart from its incarnation results in an image of God modeled on the human mind, as in the Augustinian and Thomist presentations of the Trinity. Such projections exist only to be shattered by the concrete manifestation of the Word in history, which has to be sought again and again.

The Salvific Accord Between Buddhism and the Nicene Faith

The Jesuit historian of Zen Buddhism Heinrich Dumoulin often rued that, when consulted about the passage on Buddhism in *Nostra Aetate*, he had failed to affirm that wisdom and compassion are the two pillars of Buddhism (a theme to which he subsequently often returned). This might have allayed the rather intellectualist

54. John A. T. Robinson, "The Use of the Fourth Gospel for Christology Today," in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 61–78, at 68.
55. John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology* (Orbis, 1989), 225.
56. Keenan, 237.

character of the Council's presentation of Eastern religions. Let me return to this theme in closing.

In addition to "true God from true God" and "*homoousios* to the Father," the Creed has another distinctive emphasis that scholars neglect, namely the affirmation that the Son "became flesh." At the "Nicaea 2025" conference held at the Augustinianum and the Angelicum in Rome from April 2 to April 5, 2025, Rowan Williams titled his opening lecture "Respecting the Image." The title was like a pistol shot in a concert hall, and many spontaneously asked themselves what on earth the image of God in human beings had to do with the true divinity of the Son. A moment's reflection, however, raised a disturbing question: At a time when the divine image is blasphemed in its most vulnerable bearers, in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, is it even morally justifiable for the clergy and theologians to hop from city to city in search of conferences on events of seventeen centuries ago? With Ammianus Marcellinus, we laugh at the "crowds of priests, who went to and fro to different synods, as they call the meetings at which they endeavour to settle everything according to their own fancy,"[57] but future generations may not be amused at our antiquarian preoccupations.

The Creed is about the salvation of humanity, but how is that to be heard today? One might even say, as Rowan Williams does, that the *homoousios* itself is "for us," in that it shows the deep ground of our salvation in the Son's relationship to the Father. Buddhist wisdom is also salvific in intent, while the enactment of Buddhist compassion is sustained by consciousness of what wisdom teaches. Wisdom without compassion is empty (and not in the good sense); compassion without wisdom is blind. The structural homology between this and the two dimensions of Nicene Christology, the divine and the fleshly, shows how close the two religions come in their most fundamental reflections. The endless discussions about the interplay between wisdom and compassion[58] in Buddhism could enrich and illumine our christological discourse. Nicaea invites us to worship not a dead "substance" but a vibrantly relational divine life, and it shows that divine life "coming down" to share human life and death in a gracious visitation (*epidemia*) and condescension (*sunkatabasis*), to use Origen's terms, inherited by Athanasius: "the condescension of the Logos towards creatures, whereby he became the brother of many" (*CA* 2.62). The inseparability of wisdom and compassion—of emptiness and the too, too solid flesh—generates paradoxes as stunning as anything in Tertullian or the *horos* of Chalcedon. Sixty years after Vatican II, we need to hear Buddhists and Christians talking to each other about these great theological themes.

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57. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, trans. C. D. Yonge, 16.18.
58. For the Indian Madhyamaka tradition alone, see the thought-provoking texts discussed by Ludovic Viévard, *Vacuité (śūnyatā) et compassion (karuṇā) dans le bouddhisme madhyamaka* (Collège de France, 2002).

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