

## **Reflections on Peter Nagel's article: *Problematising the Divinity of Jesus:* *Why Jesus is not θεός* – including a short history of the doctrine of the Trinity**

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### **Abstract**

This is a response to an article written by South African New Testament scholar, Peter Nagel. The article draws on the thoughts of another South African New Testament scholar Andries van Aarde and of German theologian Bernhard Lohse, on the history of the doctrine of the Trinity. Concluding observations include inquiring as to how the church will effectively address this type of study in its deliberations and decisions.

### **Keywords**

*Athanasius; Augustine; divinity; doctrine; Iesous; Irenaeus; Lohse; Nagel; Nicaea; Origen; Theos; Trinity; Van Aarde*

## **Introduction**

On 1 September 2022, a colleague in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, Dr Peter Nagel,<sup>1</sup> received a letter informing him that he was temporarily suspended as a proponent of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). This followed an investigation of which Nagel was aware and in which he was questioned. I am also a DRC member and an ordained minister (although an emeritus). On 9 December 2022, I sent an email in support of Nagel and the content of his relevant article: *Problematising the Divinity of*

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*Jesus: Why Jesus is not θεός*,<sup>2</sup> to the Chairperson of the investigative body which suspended him on behalf of the DRC Curatorium. The Chairperson<sup>3</sup> responded promptly and indicated that Nagel's "competence (status) as a proponent was not temporarily suspended based on his article in the first place, but because of his personal confession about the deity of Christ". He explained: "His article only came up when he presented it as explanation/motivation for his personal position/confession. His personal confession and how he handled it is contrary to his legitimation oath. He did not communicate his changed position in the prescribed ecclesiastical way (as he undertook in his legitimation oath)."

After reading the response of the Chairperson, I decided not to engage in further discussion with the church's investigative body. My article is, therefore, not a response to their finding in any way. However, upon reading the article, and conversations with Nagel and other colleagues about it, I was interested anew (as an ethicist and systematic theologian) in how Jesus should be understood according to the New Testament. This inspired this response. Nagel merely refers to some of the church's creeds in his article, but I decided to add a summary of the latter in this response to indicate how long it took the early church (to find the language and) to recognize Jesus' divinity (and the doctrine of the Trinity).

The abovementioned Chairperson also stated in his email that a "legitimized academic not only moves in the domain of the academy, but also in the church domain" and that church leaders "are well aware of the complicated relationship between church confession and academic theology". Because I was a church minister for 20 years, and busy with theological-ethical reflection and research for the last 16 years, this comment by the Chairperson further motivated me to investigate if dedicated members and leaders of the church could possibly relate, in a responsible manner, to the

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2 Published in *Neotestamentica*, Volume 53(3): 2019. 557–584.

3 I may refer to the content of this correspondence because Nagel's suspension was also explained in this manner in the public domain. The Chairperson indicated that he could not make the content of the letter of suspension available to me, but Nagel could do so – which I did not ask him to do. Nagel's suspension was lifted after a year.

content of Nagel’s article. This brings me to a brief discussion of the content of Nagel’s article.<sup>4</sup>

## Response to the article

The doctrine of the Trinity was only clarified and finalised dogmatically “well into the fourth century” (Lohse 1985:37). Having said that, we must admit we have not achieved clarity about the beginnings of this specific doctrine, although churches often communicate it as such. The New Testament is not focussed on the doctrine of the Trinity. It is set to proclaim the kingdom of God,<sup>5</sup> especially as it emerged in the historical Jesus, and was experienced, told, and written down by early believers – with the latter referring to the “Jesus of faith”.

Regarding the significance of the distinction between the “historical Jesus” and the “Jesus of faith” for trinitarian theology, New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, in conversation with each other in their book entitled *The meaning of Jesus: Two visions* (1999), express their mutual consent. Borg says (1999:145–146):

Do I think Jesus thought of himself as divine. No. Do I think he had the mind of God – that is, did he know more than his contemporaries (and anybody who has ever lived) because, in addition to having a human mind, he had a divine mind? No. Do I think he had the power of God? That he could, for example, have called down twelve legions of angels to protect himself, as Matthew 26:53 reports he said? No. But if we make the distinction between

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4 To better understand his reasoning and arguments in this regard, read, among others, his two articles on the complexity of a Hebrew deity. [Online]. Available: <https://peter-nagel.co.za/download/who-and-what-is-a-hebrew-deity-reflecting-on-certain-hebrew-and-greek-self-declarations-and-expressions/> and <https://peter-nagel.co.za/download/the-new-testament-%ce%ba%cf%8d%cf%81%ce%b9%ce%bf%cf%82-problem-and-how-the-old-testament-can-help-solve-it/>. His book (2023) *Paul’s concept of a Hebrew Deity in relation to Jesus – Insights from the Kyrios and Theos citations*, further demonstrates the complexity of this matter.

5 “The phrase ‘kingdom of God’ (and such similar reverential phrases as ‘kingdom of heaven’) denoted, not a *place* where God ruled, but rather the *fact* that God ruled – or, rather, that he soon would rule, because he certainly was not doing so at present in the way he intended to do. Other lords had usurped his unique role as the sovereign of Israel” (Borg & Wright 1999:33).

the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus,<sup>6</sup> then my answer would be, “Yes, the post-Easter Jesus is a divine reality – is indeed one with God”. And about the pre-Easter Jesus, I would say, “He is the embodiment or incarnation of God.”

Wright notes (1999:160–161) that, to think about Jesus in the same vein as the “one God” and in terms of “Trinity”, “is certainly not true of the New Testament”. Years before the philosophy of the early church fathers was invoked to describe the “inner being of the one God (and the relation of this God to Jesus and to the Spirit)”, Jewish tradition (for example, in the Old Testament) used imagery (that is metaphors<sup>7</sup>) such as Spirit, Word (*Logos*), Law (*Torah*), Glory (Presence), Wisdom (*Sofia*) and Love to express the relationship between the Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit.

Wright (1999:166), self-acknowledged “church theologian”, further says: “I do not think Jesus ‘knew he was God’ in the same sense that one [ontologically] knows one is tired or happy, male or female.” However, according to Wright (1999:166), he (Jesus of Nazareth, that is the historical Jesus) “had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be<sup>8</sup>”. The use of trinitarian language to think about God refers to the “commitment of faith, love, trust and obedience” by Jesus-followers – from the time of earliest creedal Christianity up to the present (Wright 1999:168). This is “language of self-involving”.

In his book *Surprised by hope: Rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church*, N.T. Wright (2008:288) says: “Love is not our duty; it is our destiny. It is the language [the historical] Jesus [and the Jesus-followers who produced the New Testament] spoke, and we [who are living in the present] are called to speak it so that we can converse with him ...

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6 It is crucially important to make this distinction. “When we don’t, we risk losing both ... When we do make the distinction, we get both ... History ... prevents faith becoming fantasy. Faith prevents history becoming mere antiquarianism” (Borg & Wright 1999:7–8, 26).

7 The essential meaning of a metaphor is “to see as” ... “Very early on, we metaphorized our history, and since then we have often historicized our metaphors. When we literalize metaphors, we get nonsense. We also lose the metaphors, with their rich resonances of meaning” (Borg & Wright 1999:150, 153).

8 Also see: Wright (1996:653).

Conversely, people who are living by this rule of love will be people who are learning more deeply how to hope.”

Language of self-involving is the language of participation. New Testament scholar Ferdinand Hahn in his collected work *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, in the passage sub-titled “Jesus als ‘Gott’”, refers to John 1:1c where the undetermined/unarticulated (without the preposition “the”) God (θεός) is equalled with the imagery/metaphor *Logos* (Λόγος) and says that this equality represents “language of participation” with the “godliness of God” (*der Gottheit Gottes*) (Hahn 2005:636). However, Hahn emphasises that participation does not mean that Jesus/Logos is “identical with God” (*mit Gott selbst identisch*). The concept of participation represents confessional language. The confession that “Jesus is God” (*Jesus als Gott*) ought to be understood in relationship with the “unity of the Son with the Father” (*Einheit des Sohnes mit der Vater*). This relationship does not refer to the “earthly Jesus” (historical Jesus; *irdischen Jesus*), but “Partizipation an der himlische Wirklichkeit Gottes”, that is the Jesus of faith and its unity with the Godhead (Hahn 2005:636).

Werner Kümmel, late professor in New Testament at Marburg University, in his book (English title) *The theology of the New Testament according to its major witnesses: Jesus – Paul – John*, notes that the non-identity between Jesus and the Godhead is also witnessed in John 17:17 (1973:298). In this verse the evangelist metaphorically refers to Jesus as the Truth, meaning that Jesus “belongs to God” and that God acts in and through Jesus, however without ontologically identifying Jesus with God. Kümmel’s colleague Reinhold Bernhardt, professor in Systematic Theology at the University of Basel in Switzerland, in an article “Jesus Christ as ‘vere Deus’ as a challenge for interreligious dialogue”, likewise does not see the Chalcedonian *vere Deus* as “an ontological attribute but as the denotation of a profound relationship with God”. According to Bernhardt (2011:41), the concept relationship “means unity and difference in one”. That unity-in-difference between Christ and God is mirrored by the unity-in-difference between the divine context of the Christ-revelation and the historical Christ-event (the historical Jesus as the proclaimer who became the proclaimed). The substance of this revelation and this event portrays “God’s universal unconditional love which Jesus preached and presented” (Bernhardt 2011:41).

However, New Testament scholar Dennis Duling (student of the late Norman Perrin, influential professor at Chicago Divinity School), is convinced that, “As far as we can tell, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God ... but made no explicit claims for himself ... The precise historical details of the movement from the Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom of God to the New Testament and its various proclamations of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, are probably forever lost to us. What we have is the New Testament itself, its proclamation and its paraenesis, its myth and its history” (Duling 1994:547).

Andries van Aarde (2020), former New Testament professor at the University of Pretoria (and one of Peter Nagel’s lecturers), explores this “movement from Jesus to the writings of the New Testament” and beyond the New Testament, expanding the movement from Jesus up to creedal Christianity by applying the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and Eberhard Jüngel. Ricoeur and Jüngel (1974) are co-editors of the work in which the nature of the historical development of religious language is investigated, namely *Metaphor: Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache*. In his contribution, “Philosophische und theologische Hermeneutik”, Ricoeur (1974:24–44) describes the “development of dogma” as a “movement” or “trajectory” consisting of four stages: From an (individual or communal) (1) fundamental religious experience; to (2) use of language; to (3) confessional formulae; to (4) dogma (see Van Aarde 2020b:273).

Metaphorical language expresses a religious experience as an historical event when the relevance and significance of a particular experience is shared by others in a timespan beyond the historical event. When the metaphor develops into liturgical language such as song, prayer, or communal confession, the historical event becomes a “confessional formula”. When the formulae are sustained beyond time and space and culture, the historical experience becomes a dogma. Dogmatic language may represent either a deepening or an alienating interpretation of the historical experience. When dogma becomes an instrument to excommunicate so-called heretics, it clearly does not represent in a positive and constructive way the deepening of an historical religious experience.

According to Van Aarde, “trinitarian dogma” of creedal Christianity, although not the language of the New Testament, represents a trajectory of

“signals” and metaphors witnessed by Jesus-followers in the New Testament which have their roots in the religious experience of the historical Jesus. Jesus called the Godhead “father” and his followers called Jesus “son of God”. Inspired by God’s Spirit, the historical Jesus acted as healer of marginalised outcasts and proclaimed God’s fatherhood to those who also participated in God’s mercy and as such became “sons” (children) of “God the Father of Jesus”. This historical trajectory was described by the early patristic theologians as *theosis* (θέωσις) (see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen 2004).<sup>9</sup> During the development of the trajectory, an identity between the Godhead, Jesus, and the church (Jesus-followers) can be seen in the participation of mercy, love, and righteousness. An ontological identity between son and father was never the intent of either Jesus or his followers – as interpreted by the aforementioned scholars.

Therefore, we should not lose sight of the wider (historical) context within which this conversation about the doctrine of the Trinity took place, namely the massive transition from a monotheistic concept of God to a multifaceted or complex concept of God. Parallel to this was the broadening of the faith community, which no longer only included Jews, but also Gentiles. This process began with Paul (Abraham the father of *all* believers, etc.). Here too was the line between Christianity, and Judaism and Islam, which remained strictly monotheistic.

According to Bernard Lategan,<sup>10</sup> former South African professor of New Testament and Biblical Studies, the conversation in the first centuries CE was consequently dominated by efforts to bring about this broadening of the community of faith and the multifacetedness of not only a two-in-one (Father and Son), but even a triune concept of God. Arius, Athanasius, and others (see later) struggled with this problem and finally reached the “and-and” formulations of among others Nicaea and Athanasius, which not only

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9 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2004:37–60) argues that Luther’s emphasis on “faith based on justification” does not exclude the θέωσις theology of the early patristic theologians (also see Van Aarde 2020b:263–283).

10 He studied ancient languages, linguistics, literature and theology at the Universities of the Free State and Stellenbosch from 1956 to 1963 and completed his doctoral studies in the Netherlands in 1967. He was professor of New Testament at the University of the Western Cape before moving to Stellenbosch University as head of Biblical Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He has read the article and is satisfied with how he is quoted.

tried to put into words the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, but also wanted to maintain the equal status of the three persons of the Trinity. This process demonstrates the historicity and contextuality of the concept of God. This was already visible in the formulation “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” which indicates both time and space. Put otherwise: the concept of God is time-bound but at the same time dynamic in nature. Traditionally, this has been explained, among others, by the promise and fulfilment scheme or by the “ongoing revelation” (B. Lategan pers. comm., 08 January 2023).

However, the person of Jesus remains an enigmatic figure who can hardly be captured in words or descriptions. According to the texts and sources available to us, he is, on the one hand, real and fully human, but, on the other hand, mysterious and heroic. No wonder that he has been compared to all kinds of historical figure-types through the centuries of research and numerous methodological investigation methods. But he still eludes a precise description. In his famous inquiry into the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, Albert Schweitzer (1913) describes how the investigators of his time, armed with the newly developed tools of historical criticism, diligently chiselled away the fossilised Jesus figure trapped by centuries of tradition. As they progressed, they noticed with excitement that the figure began to move and loosen. When he was finally freed, he walked towards them, but then moved past them – back to the century he came from and without them getting to know who he really was. His *Selbstbewusstsein*<sup>11</sup> remains a mystery (B. Lategan pers. comm., 08 January 2023).

In these circumstances, it is understandable that the young faith community continued to look for ways to formulate the identity of Jesus (according to Athanasius, closely linked to his work). They considered him to be the Messiah in the light of his “son of man” or “son of God” statements in the gospels, as well as his special relationship with his “Father”. However, this confirmation happened *post-factum* or retrospectively and reached back to prophetic and other Old Testament statements (B. Lategan pers. comm., 08 January 2023).

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11 In no bible text does Jesus refer to his *Selbstbewusstsein*.



## Drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde<sup>12</sup>

The name Jesus and the concept God are complicated, as we know. In the Reformed tradition it has long been recognised that it is not possible to define and capture the mystery of the essence of God (*The Confession of Faith* or *Belgic Confession*, 9).

According to Van Aarde,<sup>13</sup> the post-New Testament church up to and including the composition of the ecumenical creeds<sup>14</sup> decided: Jesus' divinity and his humanity are unmixed (*non confusum*) and undivided (*conjunctum*). Unmixed means they are independent entities. Undivided means they cannot be separated. But how exactly should we understand this?

Research in New Testament studies and systematic theology since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding the relationship between the name Jesus and the concept God states: God (*Theos*) in the New Testament refers to YHWH and EL (a primordial entity). God is always transcendental (beyond creation) but also immanent (interacting with creation). The transcendental refers to the creator of everything and the immanent to the interaction with creation using metaphors such as Spirit (*Pneuma*), Wisdom, Word (*Logos*), Presence/Glory (*Doxa*) and Love. Where the transcendent *Theos* manifests immanently, these metaphors have been used to illustrate the words and deeds of *Theos*. If God makes Godself known in the Old Testament, it is mostly through prophets and angels.

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12 He served as professor in New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Pretoria. Subsequently, he was honorary professor from 2009 to 2015 and senior research fellow in the Unit for the Advancement of Scholarship at the same university. He holds an MA in Semitic Languages, a DD, PhD, and DLitt degrees. He was editor-in-chief of the journal *HTS Theological Studies* from 1985 to 2023 and is a rated scholar of the South African National Research Foundation. He has received three awards for academic achievements from the South African Academy of Science and Arts and authored the ground-breaking book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus Child of God* (2001). He also received the prestigious Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu-prize for his two volumes: *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume One: Discontinuity in content, continuity in substance*, and *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume Two: To and from Jerusalem*.

13 The following paragraphs mainly come from personal email communications with him: A. van Aarde pers. comm., 06 December 2022. He has approved these quotes.

14 The Nicene Creed (like the New Testament) was originally written in Greek, and although Athanasius wrote in Greek, the Creed of Athanasius was originally written in Latin. I, therefore, refer alternatively to Greek and Latin terms.

For Jesus followers (in the New Testament), Son and Christ replaced the prophets and the angels. Jesus followers saw Son and Messiah as visible embodiments of *Theos*. In the Greco-Roman context, the word ‘god’ was also used where miracles/benefits were involved. Julius Caesar and the emperors were, therefore, considered to be divine. Philosophers could also be seen as divine.

*Kyrios* (Lord) refers to YHWH in some places. However, the term was also used for the “divine” rulers, emperors, and philosophers. In the New Testament, *Theos* is the father of Jesus Christ, and the Son is the image of *Theos*. This *Theos* was monotheistic for Judaic-Hellenistic Christians. In his life, Jesus did not identify himself as *Theos*; whether Jesus is God was not an issue for him. The language about the Trinity was, therefore, not the language of Jesus or the New Testament. The latter is confirmed by Lohse when he reasons: “As far as the New Testament is concerned, one does not find in it an actual doctrine of the Trinity” (1985:38).

Lohse (1985:40) further reasons that the

New Testament is not satisfied, however, with these sometimes rather far-reaching assertions about God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Some passages present triadic formulas. They are called “triadic”, and not “trinitarian”, because they name Father, Son, and Spirit alongside one another without reflecting upon the oneness of God and, hence, do not yet contain a doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>15</sup>

According to Van Aarde, although the New Testament does not contain an elaborate theology of the Trinity, there are indeed “footprints” or signals thereof that do not go back to the historical Jesus, but to the post-Easter Jesus (Van Aarde 2020b:272–278). These footprints, in a particular sense, extend to a religious experience of the pre-Easter Jesus who called God “father”. However, this life of the post-Easter Jesus is a Spirit-filled life. It is about a religious experience concerning not only words or teaching, but also actions. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg refers in this regard to a “spirit-filled mystic” (Borg 2015:110; cf. Van Aarde 2020a:9). These experiences

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15 For such a formula see 2 Corinthians 13:13: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

of Jesus form the above-mentioned traces, and it is these traces or signals that are included in the early church confessions. In this respect there is a continuity between the New Testament and the orthodox confessions. Van Aarde (2020b:273–274) substantiates his thinking on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (1974:24–44) and Ricoeur’s understanding of the “historical development of religious language” (as referred to earlier).

According to Van Aarde, the concepts “true God” and “true man” only emerged in the second century CE (A. van Aarde pers. comm., 06 December 2022). The concepts developed and culminated in the Creed of Athanasius (29–32): that Jesus is equal to the Father only with regards to his divinity (*aequalis Patri*), but regarding his humanity, he is not equal to the Father (*minor Patre*). For Athanasius, equal to the Father means that God, who names people through metaphors, interacts with creation. Van Aarde summarises this with three concepts: wisdom, justice, and love. Jesus shares these qualities with *Theos*. In this respect the Son is *aequalis Patri*. In other ways, the Son is *minor Patre*. For example, he is not creator like the Father. The early church opposed the overemphasis of Jesus’ deity (among others Sabellius,<sup>16</sup> 198–217 CE). The deity of Jesus was not confessed independently of his humanity. The two natures of Christ Jesus were seen as unmixed (*non confusum*) and undivided (*conjunctum*) and indeed in one Person (*in una persona*). Just as Jesus does not share all the attributes of the Father and the Holy Spirit, the post-Easter Jesus, according to the earliest Christians, does not share all the attributes of humankind either.

In explaining the unity between Jesus and *Theos*, Van Aarde in *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume One*, writes about “transcendence in everydayness – in other words, a divinely inspired spirituality” (2020a:233). He then refers to Schleiermacher ([1821–1822; 1830–1831] 1999:397) who reasons that such a spirituality is a “‘God-consciousness amidst humanness’ and indicates this aspect through the descriptive strategy of the ‘supernatural-becoming-natural’” (*Naturwerden des Übernatürlichen*) (Vander Schel 2013:11). In

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16 “The modalistic Monarchians argued that God is only a single person. The Son and the Spirit merely represent modes of appearance of the one God.” Sabellius, “who was active in Rome at the beginning of the third century, even used the expression ‘Son-Father’” (Lohse 1985:42).

this regard, Schleiermacher sees Jesus as both *Urbild* and a *Vorbild* (cf. Resch 2012:27). Van Aarde (2020b:297–298) points out that:

For Schleiermacher (1999:397) the two natures of Jesus manifest in a God-consciousness in his humanness. Similarly, “God is present in all other human beings”, though “to a far greater degree” in Jesus (Schleiermacher 1999:364). This is why Schleiermacher speaks of Jesus as both an *Urbild* and a *Vorbild*. According to Resch (2012:26), this means that Jesus had the ability to impart God-consciousness to others. Christ-followers can participate in this God-consciousness. (Clements 1987:57)

Van Aarde writes in volume two of this book (2020b:307), that (as referred to above) in “creedal Christianity these three attributes, wisdom, justice and mercy, are the substance shared by Jesus and the Godhead, as well as by Jesus-followers”. Therefore, he finds

the dispute unfortunate among exegetes (e.g. Lindsay John Kennedy (2018:137–139) *for*, or (e.g. Paula Frederiksen 2017:165) *against* the “belief” that “Jesus is God”, mostly based on Pauline texts such as Philippians 2:5–11 and Romans 1:3–4. The concept θεῶσις is about the *continuity in substance* between Jesus and creedal Christianity, that is the shared substance between divinity and humanness. A life that embodies wisdom, justice and mercy signifies the absorption of the divine into human existence. It is this identity, individual and communal, that creedal Christianity wants to express. (2020:307)

Theosis is a central aspect in Van Aarde’s historical Jesus studies. While his argument is connected to the traditional trinitarian theology and aligned with the orthodox understanding of the Triune God, Van Aarde does not view theosis solely as a preserved dogma confined to the Eastern Orthodox Church. To substantiate Van Aarde’s argument, reference to just two recent research articles is enough, namely Gannon Murphy (2008) and Goran Medved (2019).

According to Murphy (2008), the concept of theosis, which indeed is primarily advocated in Greek patristic and Byzantine theology, has found resonance not only in historical and modern Eastern Orthodox thinking but is also ingrained in the traditional Reformed doctrine of “Christ in us”

(*Christus in nobis*). The compatibility of theosis with classical Reformed theology underscores its adherence to the biblical soteriology reflected in Reformed theology but also establishes that it is appropriate in Reformed theological and ecclesiastical settings.

According to Medved (2019), the concept of theosis extends beyond Eastern theologians and is represented by certain mainstream theologians and in movements in the Western sector of the church. Theosis should be acknowledged as a fundamental historical doctrine of the church due to its grounding in both biblical principles and historical significance.

According to Van Aarde, this concept, as articulated in the Athanasian trinitarian expression “*assumptio humanitatis in Deum*”, pertains to Jesus being simultaneously distinct from and equal to God. In its original Latin form, it is “*non conversione divinitatis in carnem, sed assumptione humanitatis in Deum*” (not by the transformation of the divine nature into flesh but by the assumption of humanity into God). The notion of theosis emphasises that Jesus is both divine and human, existing as the “perfect God” and “perfect man”, with a rational soul and human flesh (based on Plato’s insights). Jesus is equal to the Father in divinity but subordinate in humanity. Theosis extends beyond Jesus’ humanity and encompasses human beings actively participating in the salvific act initiated by Jesus.

The concept of believers assuming God within themselves is associated with Luther’s interpretation, where he employs the concept of *renovatio* to illustrate the connection between a believer’s attributes and actions and Jesus as the source of life and gifts. Luther suggests a progression from Jesus’ imputation, initiating ethical behaviour, to the follower’s participation and continuity, mirroring Paul’s union with Christ (Luther [1531] 1911; Luther [1538] 1955).

Friedrich Schleiermacher aligns with Athanasius, endorsing the idea that through Jesus’ God-consciousness (*assumptio humanitas in Deum*), he becomes the archetype for believers assuming God within themselves. This God-consciousness, according to Schleiermacher, constitutes the core of Christ’s salvific act. Jesus’s salvific act is rooted in the belief that humanity can attain the same perfect religious self-consciousness (Schleiermacher [1821–1822] [1830–1831] 1999; Pearson 2003; Oseka 2015).

Nagel (2019:557–584), as briefly noted, conducted a linguistic investigation of the identification of *Iesous* and *Theos* in the New Testament. Statements from the post-New Testament confessions were not part of this investigation. However, he does refer to the developments that took place from the second century. Alongside numerous other recognised exegetes,<sup>17</sup> he concludes that identity between *Theos* and Jesus does not appear in the New Testament. The name *Iesous* was a proper name like many other names. Only in Matthew 1:21 does it gain a specific meaning (see Van Aarde 2020a:335) when the angel said to Joseph: “... and you shall give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”. However, the angel clearly did not mean that Joseph should call Jesus “God”. As Nagel rightly points out, there is no identity link between *Iesous* and *Theos* in the New Testament (see above the views of New Testament scholars Tom Wright and Marcus Borg).

As discussed, according to the New Testament, the divinity of Jesus relates to his words and deeds which are in accordance with the wisdom, justice, and love of God. Nagel’s article, in a way also his statement that “Jesus is not θεός”, is directly opposed to what the church decided at Nicaea 325 CE. However, it does not deviate from the important orthodox view (or principle) of *minor Patre* and *aequalis Patri* (as explained above). In this he shares the beliefs of most recognised biblical scholars in South Africa and abroad, as his extensive list of sources demonstrates.

This brings me to a brief history of the doctrine of the Trinity, as described by preeminent German historian Bernhard Lohse,<sup>18</sup> to indicate that the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity were not self-evident in the New Testament era.

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17 See among others: Rudolf Bultmann (1955); Vincent Taylor (1962); Raymond Brown (1965); and Bart Ehrman (2014).

18 Lohse was professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Hamburg University in Germany and is the author of *A short history of Christian doctrine* (1978) and *Martin Luther* (1986).

## Doctrine of the Trinity<sup>19</sup> – a short history

According to Lohse (1985:252), Irenaeus of Lyon<sup>20</sup> and Tertullian of Carthage<sup>21</sup> (end of second and beginning of third centuries) were “the first to outline an actual doctrine of the Trinity which does not simply set the three persons side by side” but express “clearly the unity of the persons as well as the differences between them”. However, “the Son was subordinated to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to the Son”.

In the year 200 “two streams of Monarchianism” sought “to retain the affirmation that God is only one person. For the dynamistic Monarchians,<sup>22</sup> Christ was a man who was filled with the impersonal power of God, and who was adopted as Son of God.” For the modalistic Monarchians,<sup>23</sup> mainly represented by Sabellius (beginning of the third century), “God was active in various modes, namely, as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit” (Lohse 1985:252). These two streams were excluded from the church at the beginning of the third century, whilst Tertullian’s doctrine of the Trinity exercised “a decisive influence in the West”. In the East, Origen<sup>24</sup> (d. 254) developed “his highly speculative doctrine of the Trinity”, which already employed “the concept of *homoousia* (unity of being)”, though it emphatically retained “the numerical distinctness of the persons” and conceived “the Godhead to be centred entirely in God the Father” (Lohse 1985:252). Origen designated “the Son as a creature created by the Father. Origen’s doctrine of the Trinity was such that it could be developed in various ways, in the direction of Arianism or in the direction of later Orthodoxy” (Lohse 1985:252).

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19 For further reading see: Rubenstein (2000); Burn (1925); Fortman (1972); Gwatkin (1978); Hefele (1871–1896); Kelly (1981); Lössl (2010); McGiffert (1925); Moltmann (1981); Rahner (1970); and Rusch (1980).

20 See *Proof of the Apostolic preaching*, chapter 47.

21 See *Against Praxeas*, chapters 2 & 12.

22 Mainly represented by Theodotus the Tanner and Theodotus the Money Changer and Paul of Samosata (Lohse 1985:252).

23 As mentioned, Sabellius, who lived at the beginning of the third century, a bit later than Theodotus the Tanner and Theodotus the Money Changer, who both lived towards the end of the second century, represented this stream.

24 See *Origen on prayer*, chapters XV, and 1–XVI, pp. 2–48.

In 319, Arius (presbyter of Alexandria) was excommunicated by the Synod of Alexandria on the grounds that he designated “the Son of God as a creature which was not from eternity and whose being therefore does not possess divinity” (Lohse 1985:252). In 325 the Council of Nicaea<sup>25</sup> condemned “the doctrine of Arius and in its confession” affirmed “that the Son is one with the Father in his being – he is ‘very God of very God’” (Lohse 1985:252). During 325–361, the “major phase of the Arian controversy,”<sup>26</sup> the “eastern theologians influenced by Origen”, as opposition, were “temporarily successful in substituting creeds of a more or less Arian formulation for the confession of Nicaea” (Lohse 1985:253). The emperors’ policy aided the eastern majority in this endeavour. Yet, Athanasius and his friends, together with the majority of the Latin West, held fast to the Nicene confession.<sup>27</sup> The distinction between *ousia* (the common substance of the persons of the Trinity) and *hypostasis* (person), which derived from the theology of the Cappadocians, marked the final phase of the Arian controversy from 361 to 381. This avoided a modalistic misunderstanding of the *homoousia* of the Son with the Father. This phase of the debate was also distinguished by the focus on the position of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, to which Athanasius<sup>28</sup> and the Cappadocians responded in a manner similar to the Nicene statements regarding the relationship of the Father and the Son. In 381, the Council of Constantinople confessed the *homoousia* of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with God the Father, putting an end to the Arian controversy.

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25 See J. Kelly, *Early Christian creeds*, and his *Early Christian doctrine*.

26 See Socrates: *The Ecclesiastical history of Socrates Scholasticus*, Book 1, chapter 23, in which he refers to the Arian controversy as a battle in the dark.

27 “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit.” (Lohse 1985:52–53).

28 See Athanasius: *Four discourses against the Arians*, Discourse III, chapter 6, and his: *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, chapter 1.



Lohse notes that at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine<sup>29</sup> was particularly focussed on emphasising the unity of God. Although he favoured “relation” to “person”, he insisted on the distinction of the persons. As a result, Augustine’s ideas became the norm for the western doctrine of the Trinity, which consequently emphasised the unity of the persons while eastern theology generally developed “its doctrine of the Trinity by beginning with the divinity of the Father”, although it, too, maintained “the *homoousia* of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with the Father” (Lohse 1985:253). Lohse continues: “The difference between the Greek and Latin doctrine of the Trinity” was “neatly expressed in their divergent formulation of the procession of the Holy Spirit”. The Latins asserted “that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, while, according to the Greeks, the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, though he does so through the Son” (Lohse 1985:253).

## Concluding remarks

In my opinion Peter Nagel wrote a good and balanced article based on outstanding exegesis. As New Testament scholar, he conducted a linguistic investigation of the identification of *Iesous* and *Theos* in the New Testament, and not on the later church creeds. The latter is the field of another theological discipline. However, his findings correspond with what is stated in the creeds (A. van Aarde pers. comm., 06 December 2022) and how the doctrine of the Trinity developed until the beginning of the fifth century. With his research he shares the beliefs of most recognised biblical scholars in South Africa and abroad.

Furthermore, his article appears in the right forum, namely a scientific journal which, in the first place, asks for a scholarly discussion and assessment by specialists in this field to critically test, refute, or accept its arguments and findings. His article is not intended as a letter of objection against any church dogma or confession. The focus is exclusively on the text (or rather, some text passages) of the New Testament and not on a discussion and interpretation in later periods of church and dogma history.

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29 See Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book II, chapter 5, Book V, chapter 2, chapter 9, chapter 14, and Book XV, chapter 28, and his *Enchiridion*, chapter 38.

However, confusion can (easily) arise between a critical analysis of the language and terminology of certain biblical passages and a dogmatic statement (or confession). Viewed critically, it must be added that the title of Nagel's article can contribute to such possible confusion. With the second part of the title "Why Jesus is not θεός" he obviously means linguistically speaking, but this can be misunderstood as an ontological or dogmatological statement. In fact, Nagel realises this, and notes that a claim like this has "potential ontological implications, although it is primarily a linguistic and conceptual claim" (Nagel 2019:557–558). He explains that such a claim

can imply that Jesus is not *the* "God" in as far as the term θεός calls to mind a deity of the OT, who is in turn interpreted by Judaism and Christianity as the one and only "God." Another implication is that Jesus is not a "god" in the transcendent sense. A third inference is that Jesus is not divine. (Nagel 2019:558)

Although he is aware of this possible misunderstanding, he chose to keep the second part of the title and, indeed, in the negative. He explains as follows: "This statement is a *negativa* in the sense that it is not asking who Jesus might be, nor stating who Jesus is, but rather who Jesus is *not*. It is a close-ended statement, as opposed to an open-ended question" (Nagel 2019:557).

The teasing question, however, remains: How will the church (and more specifically the DRC) account for this kind of research in a credible way in discussions and decisions within the church as an institution. So that certain traditional views regarding the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity, do not automatically lead to less convincing arguments and decisions in the light of the latest research. And which consequently could later become a complaint against the church?

The problem is often that exegetes are not (always) given the freedom to critically examine the New Testament and other texts and to publish their findings – which are subject to equally strict peer review evaluation. If scholars in the academy and church are not allowed to do this kind of research, they are typically controlled by an institution (and what it believes to be true/is convinced of), which would not reflect a healthy situation.

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