



## **From confession to creed: Nicaea and the ecclesial dialectic between movement and institution**

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### **Abstract**

This contribution to “Receiving Nicaea” in 2025, within the South African context, examines the dialectic between confession and creed, specifically the act of confession and its corresponding creedal formulations. Its “theoretical framework” is provided by a similar dialectic between movement and institution in the works of Henri Bergson, H. Richard Niebuhr, and David Bosch. This raises the question of how a creative tension between movement and institution can be kept alive. This depends on how both the movement (here, the anti-imperial movement of the Spirit) and the institution (here, the church as God’s covenant partner) are understood. The danger of not maintaining such a creative tension is illustrated with the example of the reception of the Confession of Belhar. On this basis, the basic structure of the Nicene Creed (as revised at Constantinople, 381) is explored, given its Trinitarian logic and its narrative framework. It is argued that despite its imperial setting and purpose, the Nicene Creed may be read as a critique of Empire. It is this impulse that can ensure that the dialectic between movement and institution, between the body of Christ and the mission of the Spirit, is kept alive.

### **Keywords**

*Belhar Confession; Henri Bergson; David Bosch; confession, imperialism, institution; movement, Nicaea; Nicene creed, H. Richard Niebuhr*

## Introduction

To speak of “Receiving Nicaea”<sup>1</sup> instead of celebrating or resisting (or reclaiming or revisiting) Nicaea may well be appropriate. What is being received is indeed a gift, but then something like a φάρμακον (pharmakon), both a remedy and a poison (Afrikaans “gif”). What is being transmitted is a treasure, but can also be something treacherous and even treasonous. Something has gone wrong if such a confession can be read both as an anti-imperialist impulse (confession of faith in one Lord, Jesus Christ) and a theological legitimation of Empire (given the role of Constantine in calling the Council of Nicaea). Indeed, Nicaea lies at the threshold between a martyr church and the rise of Christendom. Under Diocletian, a church in Nicomedia was barred and burnt with 600 people in it (Dudley 1880:44). The Council in nearby Nicaea was, to some extent at least, “an assembly of martyrs” (Dudley 1880:45).

It is not as if everything went awry on the romantic assumption of a pure and pristine early church. What, then, did go wrong, where and when? One may portray this in various ways: the shift from a Hebrew to a Greek imagination, from a focus on a God of history to a focus on God’s eternal being, from the anti-imperial inception of Christianity (the cross) to a legitimation of Empire, from a pacifist church to a legitimation of just wars, from a confessional church to the formulation of creeds and canons. One may consider the adoption and adaptation of Greco-Roman culture, language, civilisation, philosophy, values and worldviews, and finally the conditions of Empire.

In this contribution, I will consider one such line of inquiry, namely the dialectic between the church as movement and the church as institution. This dialectic was astutely recognised by David Bosch in his *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (1980). Where only the movement character of the church is emphasised, that movement soon dissipates. Where the need for institutionalisation dominates, the movement may stagnate and tend to become rigid. Something similar

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1 This article is based on a paper read at a conference on “Receiving Nicaea” hosted at Stellenbosch University, 19–21 May 2025. It must be understood within this context.

applies to other kinds of movements, including liberation movements that become institutionalised as political parties.

This is a telling tension, but not a necessary one. One may also argue that movements can be destructive and lead to dead and deadening ends, quite literally so. It therefore matters what kind of movement Christianity is and is supposed to be. Inversely, one may also say that institutions can enliven movements. Institutionalisation may inherently be a moderating force, but this does not necessarily constrain movement. Instead of merely stabilising or rigidifying the church, institutions can enable continuity, ensure cohesion and provide catalysts for sustaining, expanding and guiding such a movement. Again, it matters what kind of institution the church is supposed to be and what forms of institutionalisation are at stake.

This dynamic also applies to acts of confession, and subsequently to the formulation of creeds and to theological reflection on and debates around such creedal formulas. Institutions can sustain instead of stifle confession, but debates on confession can also become an end in themselves. As I will suggest, the Council of Nicaea and the subsequent Nicene Creed are a case in point, as is, in more recent times, the Belhar Confession.

## Revisiting David Bosch, Richard Niebuhr and Henri Bergson

In his rather brief description of the tension between movement and institution, Bosch draws on H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), who in turn draws on Henri Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1977/1932). I will touch on each of these scholars briefly, seeking to address the questions raised above, namely what kind of movement is envisaged and what kind of institution is assumed.

### Henri Bergson

Henri Bergson (1859–1941), a French Nobel prize winner for literature,<sup>2</sup> is well-known for his philosophy of life as expressed in the term *élan vital* (not to be confused with vitalism) through which he engaged critically

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2 Bergson was of Polish-Jewish and Irish-Jewish descent. Towards the end of his life, he intended to convert to Catholicism but refrained from doing so due to the rise of anti-Semitism. When Jews were required to register at police stations in occupied France in

with evolutionary biology, social Darwinism, Einsteinian physics and Nietzsche's will to power. Put differently, the drivers of evolutionary change are not (only) random variation, natural selection or selfish genes struggling for survival and power, but the inherent zest for life.

In a long first chapter (90 pages with no subheadings and few paragraph breaks) he explores two sources of morality in an open and closed society (also private and public morality) by juxtaposing (not perfectly correlated though) concepts such as obligation and habits, the everyday life and the mystic life, necessity and nature, reason and instinct, science and art, Socrates and Jesus, the philosopher and the mystic, animal intelligence and human instinctiveness, repose and movement, the genius of the mind and the genius of the will, the created and the creative, unrest and mythmaking to sooth the unrest. He argues that there are two sources of morality, "the one having its roots in intelligence, which leads also to science and its static, mechanistic ideal; the other based on intuition, and finding its expression not only in the free creativity of art and philosophy but also in the mystical experience of the saints."<sup>3</sup> For Bergson, the root of mystic experience is not rationality but a deeper intensification of intuition turned inward (1935:238). It is therefore also a continuation of the discovery of an *élan vital* (1935:239).

In two subsequent chapters, he then employs such juxtapositions to contrast static and dynamic forms of religion. Bergson's view of the functions of (primitive) religion may be contested and need not be explored here. He argues that the evolutionary role of static religion is to guard against the dissolvent power of intelligence (1935:112) and to defend humans (only) against an awareness of the inevitability of death (1935:121) through mythmaking. By contrast, he relates the role of dynamic religion to mystic experiences of revelation that illuminate and warm privileged souls (1935:203), and that prompt a more instinctive, intuitive vital impetus. What is being revealed is the source of creativity that life itself manifests (1935:209). For Bergson, religion, then, is "the crystallisation brought about

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1940, he completed the form with the following entry: "Academic. Philosopher. Nobel Prize winner. Jew."

3 See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henri-Bergson> (last accessed 18 February 2025).

by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism has poured, while hot, into the soul of man” (1935:227). Therefore, religion is to mysticism what popularisation is to science (1935:227). Bergson portrays the way in which Christianity transformed Judaism from a nationalist to a universalist religion as a prime example of such a dynamic religion (1935:228), which “cooled off” with regular intervals in various forms of static religion.

In a final chapter on mechanics and mysticism that ranges far and wide, including discussions of biological evolution, the rise of science, mechanisation and prosperity, he observes that the mystical must summon up the mechanical. One must use matter to get away from matter. To rise above earthly things is only possible with the requisite fulcrum (1935:298). He makes this relevant for the use of fossil fuels that vastly expand the energy of organisms but require moral energy to address the social and political problems (writing in 1932!) that come in the wake of such sources of energy. A larger “body” calls for a bigger soul. Mechanism should mean mysticism (1935:299). He also touches on imperialism. Static religion is aligned with nationalism. True mysticism (the sources of dynamic religion) is born from a sense of being instruments of a God who loves all people equally and who bids them to love each other. True mysticism is therefore incompatible with imperialism (1935:300).

One may conclude that, for Bergson, the movement is best understood in terms of an *élan vital*, transformed through mystical experience in the will to love and be loved (1935:245). He understands institutions as forms of crystallisation, a necessary process of cooling off, but then always less authentic than the mystic experiences from which they are derived. Morality cannot be reduced to rational (Kantian) obligation or (Platonic) ideas of the good. Something more is needed to breathe life into the equations. That something more is religion, but then dynamic, not static religion. Mysticism is needed to help humanity crushed beneath the weight of its own scientific and technological progress (1935:306).

## H. Richard Niebuhr

H. Richard Niebuhr’s book *The Kingdom of God in America* (first published in 1937) is famous for the statement on the second last page that “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministration of a Christ without a cross” (1959:193). The book

argues that the spirit of American Christianity may be understood as a *movement* that revolves around faith in the kingdom of God (1959:ix).

Niebuhr, drawing on Bergson, stresses the dialectical movement character of (American) Christianity, although he does not see this simply as progressive. The genius of Christianity is not related to its (liberal) programmes or (conservative) creeds but in the organic movements of those who felt themselves “called” and “sent” (1959:xiv). This allows for a dialectic between movement and institution, the theological (the reign of God as coming) and the sociological (denominationalism and its allegiances with American interests), the prophet and the priest. He insists that,

There is a vast difference, as Bergson has pointed out, between a religious institution or static religion and a religious movement or dynamic faith. The one is conservative, the other progressive; the one is more or less passive, yielding to the influence of dynamic elements in other areas of life, the other is aggressive, influencing rather than being influenced; the one looks to the past, the other to the future. ... Because the sociological interpretation deals with static or passive rather than dynamic Christianity in America, it is unsatisfactory as a complete explanation (1959:11–12).

For Niebuhr there is a pattern in this movement, albeit not a singular one. The kingdom of God meant, at times, three different, if connected things, namely the sovereignty of God (e.g. Puritanism, Quakers), the reign of Christ (e.g. evangelicalism and the great awakenings), and the kingdom on earth (e.g. the social gospel). He traces this movement in three successive chapters, which he likens to a symphony with three movements (1959:164). The pattern that he discerns is the dialectic between a movement with white-hot convictions and the cooling off of such convictions through crystallised codes, solidified institutions and petrified creed (1959:166–167).

Niebuhr comments that institutionalisation always has an ambiguous character. There are genuine attempts to consolidate for post-revolutionary generations the gains made by a revolutionary movement by putting them into forms that can be transmitted to our children’s children. He sees this pattern in prophetic ethics that was turned into code Judaism. The creeds, rites, offices and disciplines of the early church made it possible for them to

lead a second generation of Christians into communion with the Father, Son and Spirit, which their parents received as a surprising gift of forgiveness. Without such stabilisation and conservation, the great movement would have passed like storms at sea, leaving behind them nothing but the wreckage of the earlier establishments they had destroyed (1959:167). Institutions can never conserve without betraying the movements from which they proceed. An institution tends to become static, whereas a movement is dynamic. It looks to the past, whereas a movement points forward. In content, the institution resembles the dynamic movement, but its spirit reflects the dispensation before the revolution. Niebuhr then states: “So the Christian church, after the early period, often seemed more closely related in attitude to the Jewish synagogue and the Roman state than to the age of Christ and his apostles; its creed was more often like a system of philosophy than like the living gospel” (1959:168). Let me quote one more paragraph at some length:

For the failure of the institution is not simply due to its inability to keep pace with a changing cultural environment; frequently, it is more adaptable to its setting than the revolutionary movement had been. It seems rather to lack inner vitality; it is without spontaneity and the power to originate new ideas; it is content with past achievement and more afraid of loss than it is hopeful of new insight or strength; it is on the defensive. Institutions, however, differ not only in spirit from their parent movements; they tend also to change the content which they are trying to conserve. When the great insights of a creative time are put into the symbolic form of words, formulas and creeds, much must always be omitted. The symbol is never the reality, and it is subject to progressive loss of meaning; in time, it often comes to take the place of the experience to which it had originally pointed. So, by limitation and loss of symbolic reference, and by the substitution of the static for the dynamic, institutions deny what they wish to affirm and become the antithesis to their own thesis. The antithesis is never complete; something is always conserved, but much is lost and repudiated (1959:168–169).

For Niebuhr, then, the movement is born from the Protestant conviction that the kingdom belongs to God only, that we are not our own. The institutions that result from that are denominations where churches and their leaders

become self-conscious representatives of God on earth. This movement, he argues, is rooted in the prophetic imagination, in apocalyptic forms of resistance and the lived experiences of the apostles. This unique view of a God of history cannot be found amongst the Greeks or the Romans, where history was understood as recurrent cycles of rebirth and decay imaged in the seasons. It is this view of history that became secularised through Western notions of progress and Marxian views on dialectical materialism and reinforced by Darwinian evolution, scientific and technological progress and the colonial expansion of European civilisation (1959:190). It is this rather toxic liberal view of the coming kingdom as sustained progress that he denounced in the well-known closing quote.

### David Bosch

In a chapter on a theology of mission in *Witness to the World*, Bosch notes the “event character” of Christianity and a theologising tendency.<sup>4</sup> In the first three centuries of the Christian tradition, the event character dominated. This was a period of mission and rapid expansion, driven especially by a surprising spirit of inclusivity – slaves, women, the urban poor, Africans, and, especially, Gentiles, all in the very same local churches forming “alternative communities” (1980:93–101). In the next few centuries, the time of the seven ecumenical councils, the inverse applied. There was a theologising tendency while missionary expansion subsided. The church became a bearer of culture and a civilising presence (1980:106). The Greek preference for abstractions and the Roman preference for systemisation led to periods of stagnation in Western and Eastern forms of Christianity. To be reconciled with God meant to be reconciled to the established customs of a more or less Christianised society (see Niebuhr 1959:181).

Bosch is careful not to blame all the woes of subsequent Christianity on the Constantinian era. The early church was not free from conflicts over ecclesial bureaucracy, matters of doctrine and allegiances to political power. He also warns against exaggerating the contrast between the Hebrew emphasis on a God of history and the Greek spirit of contemplation. Some forms of

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4 Bosch refers to an article by Herbert C Jackson, entitled “The Missionary Obligation of Theology” in *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* 14:1 (1964). This is not readily available.

institutionalisation are necessary, as is clarity on the biblical canon, the content of the Christian faith and its relation with other intellectual and spiritual movements. Nevertheless, the tensions between movement and institution were shaped decisively by the Constantinian era.

The same pattern seems to apply to the subsequent tradition despite claims by Martin Kähler and others that mission is the mother of theology. It is on this basis that Bosch introduces the distinction between movement and institution, where theology (arguably, reflection on the confession of the church) is one example of institutionalisation. He maintains that this should yield a “creative tension” (a favourite term of his). In his words, an institute without movement becomes a museum or a home for frail care. Then “the prophet becomes priest, charisma becomes office, and love routine” (1980:27). A movement without institution dissipates or else takes on other institutional forms. He shows how this interplay is characteristic of the history of Christianity, where stagnation repeatedly leads to reform movements that need to be institutionalised to be sustained, but also at times become deformed movements. Bosch explains in a paragraph worth quoting at length:

There remains, however, a never-ending process of interaction between the static and the dynamic. Whenever the Church, like Israel of old, forgets her pilgrim and event character and wants to settle in a way-side inn, whenever she forgets that she is not of this world and begins to exercise power in society, there develops an element of unrest within her, which often takes the form of cells, groups, societies, or sects, which challenge the establishedness of the Church. Whenever the Church allows herself to become conformed to the world to such an extent that she abandons or neglects dynamic elements which belong to her essence, all kinds of corrective counter-currents begin to develop. ... If the institution has no eye or ear for these voices of protest, it denies itself the possibility of renewal and gradually dies of suffocation. If, on the other hand, the renewal movements deny themselves the solidity and breadth of the institution, they become like beautiful flowers without roots, floating on water and driven to and from by various winds until they lose their splendour and are washed ashore. Others

strive to retain their élan and significance by deliberately organising themselves into a “separatist Church.” (1980:26–27).

For Bosch, the movement is, in a word, best described as God’s mission and the institution as church. Mission is not the mission of the church; the church is a constant, always fragmentary concretisation of God’s mission. His whole oeuvre may be understood as an exposition of what that means. Neither mission nor church is rooted in itself or an aim in itself. God’s mission and God’s covenant are rooted in God’s compassion for creatures who are weak, rejected, poor and oppressed. God’s election of Israel, continued through the church, is not an aim in itself but is necessary to be a light for all the nations, for the whole Earth. Mission and church are directed towards the coming of God’s reign “on earth as it is in heaven.” Both are there, and necessary, for the sake of the world that God so loves (John 3:16). For Bosch, the church is therefore a sign of the eschaton, an “alternative community,” an experimental garden, a surprise to outsiders, a new creation. It is in and for the world but not of the world (1980:221).

It may suffice here to comment on the translation of the Afrikaans title of his book *Heil vir die Wêreld* (1979)<sup>5</sup> into English as *Witness to the World* (1980). The problem is that the term “heil” is not translatable despite the connotations of healing, wholeness and holiness that are etymologically related to *heil* (also *heelmaak*, *heilig*). There are, of course, some negative connotations attached to *heil* given the association with “Heil Hitler!” but this is obviously a distortion of its meaning. *Heil* is usually translated as salvation, but this is not quite adequate since salvation is not an aim in itself, whereas *heil* describes the very purpose of salvation. The secular variant of *heil* would be well-being if understood as comprehensive well-being. This may have sufficed but for the lack of the religious connotations of living in the presence of God and being inspired by such a presence. In any case, well-being cannot be translated into Afrikaans as “welsyn” has the connotation of welfare and is often used pejoratively to refer to “hopeless” cases. What is at least clear is that for Bosch, *heil* is understood as comprehensive and multidimensional, including medical, psychological, social, economic, political and ecological dimensions, you name it!

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5 For sentimental reasons I am rather fond of the Afrikaans original. I received a signed copy from Bosch as a Christmas gift in 1981 during a visit to our family.

Likewise, mission (*marturia*, or witness) is multidimensional and involves various dimensions of being church: *leitourgia*, *kerygma*, *diakonia*, and, especially, *koinonia* (1980:227, see also Ayre & Conradie 2016).

## What movement, which institution?

Given the validity of such a distinction between movement and institution and the need for sustaining a dialectical interplay, it is clearly important to reflect on the nature of such movements and, only on that basis, on appropriate institutions that would sustain such movements. Note again that movements are subject to judgement. There are creative and destructive movements, reform and deform movements (see Conradie & Pillay 2014). In particular, what kind of movement is the Jewish-Christian tradition, if compared with other movements? This question is obviously to be contested. No single answer will suffice. Consider, for example, abolition movements, holiness movements, suffrage movements, the Pentecostal movement, the Catholic *resourcement* movement, the charismatic movement, liberation movements, Kairos movements, environmental movements, LGBTQIA+ movements and many more. Moreover, can the Jewish-Christian movement(s) be described as an example of a more generic category (e.g. “new religious movements”) or is it *sui generis*? This, too, is contested terrain.

An added complexity is that movements are often clearer on what they resist than on where they are moving towards. This applies to the critique of political oppression, imperialism, slavery, fascism, patriarchy, capitalism, communism and the like. Functional definitions of religion will tend to see a particular religious tradition as in the service of another, higher goal, which hardly ever satisfies adherents to such a religious tradition. What, then, may count as an ultimate goal? Popular terms such as liberation, justice, inclusion would not do since the focus is typically negative, namely on oppression, injustices and exclusion – and of course rightly so. Other candidates would be freedom, human flourishing, peace, and well-being – all widely used but also contested terms in secular discourse. In the Jewish tradition, Shabbat and shalom come to mind, in the Christian tradition, the reign of God and the longing for a new heaven and a new earth.

It would be facetious to provide clear answers to the twin questions raised above. Debates in this regard may fill volumes. Allow me, nevertheless, to put my cards on the table. I regard the Jewish-Christian tradition, at best, as a movement inspired by God's Spirit to allow the whole of God's good creation to flourish again despite the destructive impact of human sin. More specifically, it provides a critical response to conditions of Empire, whether of Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman or any other stripe. This critique is found in the biblical witnesses, literally from Genesis 1 (against Babylonian rule) to Revelation 21 (against Roman persecution). It is a movement seeking a more egalitarian, less hierarchical society in which the Ḥabiru,<sup>6</sup> the later 'Am ha'aretz (עַם הָאָרֶץ), ordinary people, will form the core. Note, though, that they were at first led by a rich nomad in Abraham, the Pharaoh's deputy in Joseph and a stuttering prince in Moses.

Israel and later the church, as God's covenant partner, were called to be a light for all nations, an example of God's dream for the whole world (see also Conradie 2025). This is a deeply counterintuitive strategy. The biblical witnesses, in both testaments, provide ample evidence of the continuous failure of this movement, which comes as no surprise given the long-term debilitating psychological impact of oppression. Israel failed to be a light for all nations and instead yielded all too often to the temptation to replicate them, to establish an Israelite empire. Yet, the Biblical texts witness to a God of inclusive compassion, steadfast loyalty and vulnerable love (see Berkhof 1986:126–154), especially for those who are weak, marginalised and oppressed, a God who does not drop a beloved creation but always seems to find ways to start anew.

The institutions set up to provide impetus to such a movement, again not surprisingly, seldom live up to such expectations. That applies to judges and kings, prophets and priests, rabbis and apostles. Also, to arks and covenants, temples and walls, synagogues and churches, charisms and offices, deacons and elders, pastors and bishops, bishops and teachers,

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6 Even the Wikipedia definition is rather telling: Ḥabiru, meaning dust or dirt “is a term used in 2nd-millennium BCE texts throughout the Fertile Crescent for a social status of people who were variously described as rebels, outlaws, raiders, mercenaries, bowmen, servants, slaves, and labourers,” in other words people who do not form part of the “cultural” society. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%CA%BFApiru>.

creeds and confessions, texts and traditions of interpretation, ministries and missions, projects and programmes. All of these are arguably important and necessary; none of them is necessarily adequate.

Clearly, there is not only one appropriate form of ecclesial institution. At the heart of the debate lies confusion as to what kind of institution the church is. The closest secular equivalents may be either a voluntary association of people (e.g. like a country club, a friendship club, a *stokvel*, a shield to survive in a hostile urban environment), or an organisation (e.g. like other faith-based or non-profit organisations, a therapeutic centre or a rescue agency). Both options lead to serious problems in understanding the nature and vocation of the church. Theologically, one cannot resign from this “voluntary association” (one can only be excommunicated). Equally, it would be hard to define the vision and mission statement of the church as an organisation because it is not merely task-driven, even if vision and mission are key to understanding what the church is. Other alternatives, to see the church as one expression of culture, as a lucrative business, as a school of thought, or as a vanguard for socio-political transformation, are even less attractive. In ecumenical reflections, the church is therefore often understood as an icon, a prototype, a sacrament, a sign, a symbol, or something like that, of God’s coming reign (see Bosch 1991:374–378).

Either way, one can identify a number of forms in which the church as a movement can be institutionalised. Here one may mention councils, creeds, dogmas, liturgies, offices, ministries, missions, sacraments, synods and their commissions, and many more. Each of these can provide impetus to the church as a movement. Each can lead to stagnation if such institutions become rigid and ossified.

Any form of institutionalisation involves an exercise of power. This comes with many dangers, given an alignment with constellations of power. Such dangers are not only prevalent within the Christian tradition, but it cannot escape from that either. Again, an alignment with power structures comes in many forms – military, political and economic power may be blatant and obvious, together with physical and technological power. But there are also forms of power embedded in culture, notions of civilisation, philosophy and the academy. Such power is reflected in symbols, concepts, and vocabularies. To shy away from the use of such power is to shy away from

exercising responsibility. Short of a Manichaean disdain for any exercise of power and therefore of anything that smacks of what is material, bodily and earthly, such power needs to be accepted and used responsibly.

The temptation for Christian communities that form a small minority in society is to offer a sharp critique of political power (e.g. conscription for an Empire's armies) but to underplay patriarchal power structures within the community. Put differently, the Anabaptist critique against allegiance to power in Christendom may be constantly necessary and will typically emphasise the movement character of Christian witness. By contrast, a theocratic vision (as in Augustine's *The City of God*) would recognise the need for appropriate institutions, accept the responsibilities that come with positions of power, but need to resist the temptation of allowing them ultimate status.<sup>7</sup> Such a theocratic vision will need to recognise that the church is not an aim in itself; it is an instrument used by God to lead the world that God so loves to be loved (John 3:16). The locus of God's salvific work cannot be restricted to the church.<sup>8</sup>

## The role of a confession of faith

There is clearly a thin line between the use and the abuse of power, notably also the power of words. This is also true of confessions and the vocabularies they employ. The Nicene use of the Greek term *homoousios* is a classic example. Confessional language may be found primarily in liturgical and catechetical contexts where it expresses a sense of identity and authenticity, for example, if used in the context of baptism in a minority church. Confessional language can also be used in the context of public, prophetic witness, in speaking truth to power amidst contestations. The

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7 An interesting example of this debate is Peter Leithardt's critique of John Howard Yoder's anti-Constantinianism in *Defending Constantine* (2006) and the set of responses to that, edited by John Roth (2013). I am persuaded by William Cavanaugh that it is better not to speak of a Constantinian "shift" from adherence to the gospel to apostasy, but of a Constantinian "moment" in the long pedagogy of God's people. I would interpret that moment as Kairos moment, one that requires vision and discernment given the dangers of the collusion between piety and power. See Cavanaugh (2013:92).

8 See the collection of essays (Roth 2013), mostly from an Anabaptist perspective, on Leithardt's *Defending Constantine*. This debate poses the question: Is the church a people set apart by God as a witness in the present world of the world to come? Or does God act within the present world through the witness of the church? See Nugent (2013:13).

question that needs to be raised here is what happens to such confessions when they become formulated and, to some extent, fixated in confessional documents like the Nicene Creed. A confession is an act or an event before it can become a document (Webster 2001:123). Such creeds can be liturgical and confessional but also declaratory and dogmatic (see Edwards 2021:136). Such documents invite theological debate over formulations that can become far removed from their liturgical and existential rootedness. Again, institutions need not stifle movements, creeds do not need to subdue confessions, but there are dangers there that need to be heeded.

A Christian confession of faith is not primarily a statement of belief or beliefs. As Πιστεύομεν, the very first word in the Nicene Creed, indicates, it expresses something deeply personal: we know God as Father, Son and Spirit (all in the present tense) and trust this God as our Maker, our Saviour and our Sanctifier. It is not about a belief, but an expression of believing in. When that becomes formulated in a creed that begins to have a life of its own, the danger is that *fides quae* can become separated from *fides qua*, that the focus shifts from knowing God personally to propositional statements about that person. Inversely, without the *fides quae* a confession can easily be reduced to nothing more than an anthropological or ecclesial statement of identity (see Webster 2001:122).<sup>9</sup> As Khaled Anatolios (2011:36) observes, in the debates at Nicaea there was consensus both on the primacy of faith and on the need for reason to account for that faith, despite the rationalistic impression that such debates may yield.

A confession of faith can be a product of institutionalisation, but it can also be a generative force for movement. This may be illustrated by the Nicene Creed, but in the South African context, the Confession of Belhar provides a more recent example.

Volumes have been written about the context within which the Confession of Belhar emerged, namely the tacit and at times explicit theological legitimisation of apartheid (see Cloete & Smit 1984). The Confession of Belhar elicited and channelled enormous energies through its critique of such heresy, namely that apartheid, given its system of race classification,

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9 Webster (2001:122), drawing on Otto Weber, roots the act of confession in God's self-revelation: "Confession is not primarily an act of definition; it is, rather, a thankful, praising, self-committing acceptance of God's self-revelation in Christ."

assumes the fundamental irreconcilability of people in terms of race. In response, the heart of the Confession focused on the gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

Given the tension between movement and institution, three brief comments may suffice here.

The first is that Belhar illustrates particularly well why there comes a time when institutionalisation, in this case the declaration of a *status confessionis*, accompanied by the confession itself, becomes necessary. It did not operate to the detriment of the church's struggle against apartheid, in the church itself and in society, but provided further impetus to that struggle by channelling the energies of many. Put differently, without discerning a *casus confessionis*, that a moment of truth emerged where the gospel itself is at stake, the dangers associated with unnecessary formalisation loom large (see Smit 2007:415). Whereas a confession is aimed at addressing heresy and avoiding schisms through a call for unity, premature creedal formation will tend to lead to conflict and schism (Smit 2007:418).

The second is that any form of institutionalisation both includes and excludes. The message may be precisely one of inclusivity (see Conradie 2017), but the vehement rejection of various heresies suggests that an amorphous variety cannot suffice in times of crisis. There is a need to discern the Spirit, to draw a line, to speak the truth, to resist evil. In this case, it was the theological legitimisation of apartheid that was at stake.

The third comment is that the ongoing reception of the Confession of Belhar, especially within the Dutch Reformed "family" of churches within which it emerged, illustrates the danger of institutionalisation again particularly well (see Platjies-Van Huffel & Modise 2017). Soon enough, Belhar became something of a fetish, a stumbling block, even a weapon that may be used to accuse others, a source of division instead of a call to unity. This is not to be blamed on the content of the confession but on its reception, especially within the Dutch Reformed Church itself. What happened is that the focus shifted from the content of the confession (unity, reconciliation and justice) to the standing of the confession itself, from the act of confessing in a state of confession to the status of the confession.

One may say that the testimonies of witnesses are typically story-based and story-shaped and therefore more readily sustain the movements within which they are situated. One must tell the story of what one has seen, heard or experienced. However, there is often a need to reflect on such witnesses to test their veracity, for example, through cross-examination. Likewise, there may come a time to publicly state what one stands for, to declare one's beliefs, to confess one's faith. There may be catechetical, liturgical or other reasons to do so, and these tend to follow existing formulas. However, the primary need for confession emerges when and where one's identity, attachments, allegiances, convictions become contested in the presence of other such convictions, both from within (within oneself or within a community of believers) or from the outside. This rarely happens in worshipping communities, but it can happen in ecclesial gatherings over such identity. It can also happen in any public sphere – schools, businesses, politics, civil society, and so forth. Given such contestation, there is a need to state one's beliefs, one's deepest convictions as concisely as possible. This is not the time to tell long stories. It is a time to stand up and be counted, to speak truth to power where necessary. This accounts for the typically brief nature of a creed.

## **The Confession of Nicaea**

The Confession of Nicaea (325) is an obvious example of the perceived need for institutionalisation, for clarity on Christian identity. As is well-known, this perceived need came from at least two sides, namely ecclesial debates on Arius and Arianism and Constantine's attempt to establish harmony (from the Greek ἀρμόζω – to fit together) in the Roman Empire that could be reinforced through ecclesial consensus. The Council of Nicaea, with its anathemas and especially its twenty canons, also illustrate how a movement can become trapped in bickering about ecclesial power, where the dynamics of the movement become undermined. I will leave such debates aside here, important as they surely are. As the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea illustrates, Constantine's agenda and the theological agenda of bishops were sometimes at odds with each other. Whereas the outcome of the Council was apparently immaterial to Constantine as long as harmony (hegemony?) could be established (a far cry!), the bishops were

concerned to safeguard the divinity of Christ and therefore their salvation (however that was understood). This agenda failed in the short term between the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople but succeeded in the long term, given the ecumenical endorsement of the creed of 381. Although this does raise suspicions around “the winners who write history” (see Kim 2021:6), I will not dwell on that here. It may suffice to note that the imperial quest for harmony cannot be equated with the ecumenical quest to confess “the one faith” together (Faith and Order 1991). I will also not seek to offer any description of the emergence of Trinitarian theology or the theological debates around that, except to affirm the need for such a deeply Trinitarian theology (see Conradie 2013). There are ample such overviews available (see e.g. Anatolios 2011), requiring expertise on patristic sources. Instead, I will focus on what happens to the movement within the act of confession itself.

The Nicene Creed, as revised at the Council of Constantinople (381), follows a Trinitarian logic. Although the term Trinity is not used in the confession, the logic is clearly Trinitarian. In terms of the distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, one may say that the confession follows a logical structure for confessing faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, for the economic Trinity, it also follows a narrative order from creation to consummation (the life of the world to come).<sup>10</sup> The second article of the creed, after the initial confessions of Jesus as truly and fully divine (Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν), also retains a narrative dynamic. Through him all things were made, he became incarnate, suffered, was crucified, buried, was raised, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father and will come again in glory. Nevertheless, very little justice is done to the ministry of Jesus, his messianic calling or his inauguration of

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10 For this emphasis on the economic trinity, see my earlier contributions in this regard (Conradie 2013, also Conradie & Sakupapa 2018). In my view, the need for discourse on the immanent Trinity must be affirmed, but Trinitarian short-cuts avoiding the complex problems around the economic Trinity readily lead to rationalistic speculation and mysticism. In this sense, the argument of Khaled Anatolios (2011:41) is important, namely, to distinguish between theologies that locate the primacy of Christ either in the unity of being with the Father (Athanasius) or in the unity of will with the Unbegotten (Arius and others). For the latter group, given the Platonic opposition of being and becoming, God’s willing (e.g. to create) is regarded as external and secondary to God’s being (Anatolios 2011:78). In response, one may insist that, in the Hebrew imagination, God’s being can scarcely be separated from God’s willing and doing. God’s being is in coming and caring.

God’s kingdom. It is merely stated that he was born, suffered, died and was buried. Likewise, his kingdom is not so much inaugurated or “coming”; it “will have no end”!

One may therefore say that the creed is a condensed narrative, capturing the meaning of the story, if not in narrative form. Any explication of the creed is soon in need of storytelling to illustrate the content and significance of the confession (see Smit 1994:46). In this way, the dynamic interplay between movement and institution can be maintained. However, there may also emerge a need for critical reflection, conceptual clarification and argumentation, especially if there are conflicting interpretations of the same formulations. Such conceptual clarification can easily become an end in itself, although this is not necessarily the case.

I would suggest that any contemporary retrieval of the Nicene creed will need to engage with the tension between its Trinitarian logic and its narrative structure, between its (Hebraic) emphasis on a God of history and the (Greek) contemplation on what being divine means. Note that this tension was one that all parties grappled with – before, during and after the Council itself.<sup>11</sup> This tension is evident in the two halves of the second (Christological) article of the creed. The narrative in the second half mentions that Jesus was crucified under the imperial rule of Pontius Pilate.

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11 It is a matter of scholarly dispute how Arius, Arianism and the Arian controversy are to be understood. From what I can gather, if anything, Arius himself wished to protect the intuition of Hebrew monotheism on God’s utter transcendence with Greek philosophical categories against crudely materialist and polytheist forms of Roman religion for the sake of an apophatic spirituality in a divided church under former persecution (see Lyman 2021:57). Arius thus wanted to maintain the absolute qualitative distinction between God and that which is not God. The Son as begotten (see γεννηθέντα) therefore, cannot be God but had come into being (see ἐγένετο) like other creatures. Such a God has no direct contact with creation but is by definition insulated in an unchanging perfection (see Torrance 2001:52, 53). The question posed at Nicaea may therefore be put accordingly: how can the primacy of the confession of Christ as Lord be reconciled with a maximised sense of divine primacy (Anatolios 2011:39)? Given the need to safeguard God’s transcendence, how is God’s immanence in the world in Jesus as the Christ to be understood? How can the Son of God be both creature and Creator? How can the Logos be the creator of *all* (Jn 1:3) if it is itself created or begotten?

Both sides accused each other of thinking too materially of God (Ayres 2004:43). By contrast, the need to think materially about God, to speak of God’s own body, is stressed nowadays, especially in various forms of ecofeminist theology.

However, it is the logic of the first half that was the focus of contestation at the Council of Nicaea itself.

Given the vivid presence of emperor Constantine, the temptation was to imagine the emperor as Christ-like and Christ as emperor-like (Van Dam 2021:39). After all, Roman emperors had divine status too, albeit that in imperial succession new emperors were to be made, not begotten in a hereditary mode (Van Dam 2021:28). Constantine as the (illegitimate?) son of Constantius was a Son of (a) God too. The imperial duo of father and son mimicked the divine duo of Father and Son (Van Dam 2021:35). Like Jesus, Constantine had both a human and a divine nature. In the imperial tetrarchy, there was a need to explain how four divine emperors (two Augusti and two Caesars) shared one undivided rule over the Empire. At Nicaea, there was a need to clarify how three divine persons remain distinct from each other but share the same substance (Van Dam 2021:35).

One may observe that there was more at stake than philosophical and theological jargon in opting for terms such as “one Lord” (ἓνα Κύριον), “only begotten” (μονογενῆ) “begotten from all ages” (γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων), “of one substance” (ὁμοούσιον) and “through Whom all things came into existence” (τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο). Apparently, the extra-biblical term ὁμοούσιον was inserted in the creed precisely to resolve conflicting interpretations of the same text at the Council of Nicaea itself.<sup>12</sup> One may add that no philosophical concept could in any case express what was an apparent contradiction, namely that a divine being could become human or that a human being could be divine (Henderson & Kirkpatrick 2022:26).

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12 See Gwynn (2021:100): “The assembled bishops sought to express the orthodox faith in scriptural terms, but under cross-examination the ‘Eusebians’ were constantly able to interpret those terms along ‘Arian’ lines. The bishops were thus forced to invoke language from outside the scriptures and so affirmed the Son as ‘from the *ousia* of God’ and *homoousios* with the Father.” If “begotten” is not to be understood in a crudely biological or material but in an ideal or intellectual sense, then the sameness in *ousia* is also not to be understood in a material sense. This is probably what allowed Eusebius to accept the term (see Johnson 2021:209). Even so, it remains surprising that the term “begotten” and not the more rational “logos” is used in the creed to express the relatedness of Father and Son. Ever since that Council the danger of inserting such terms has become evident but there may be one thing that is worse than that, namely not employing such terms given the context.

If the need for some clarification was obvious, the dangers of allegiance to Empire were also evident, especially given the imperial policies that now favoured Christian affiliation, leading to a weakening of Christian identity as a *religio licita*. Nevertheless, such terminology also suggests that the critique of Empire was retained, not least given the living memory<sup>13</sup> of the Roman Empire’s last, largest, and bloodiest official persecution of Christians (303–312) under Diocletian: It is not the emperor who is lord; there is only *one* Lord – Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain. On this core confession of Jesus as Lord, there was basic consensus at Nicaea (Anatolios 2011:37).

## Conclusion

There is no need here to dwell on the contemporary significance of this dialectic between movement and institution. Contemporary engagements with the legacy of Nicaea in “receiving” or “retrieving” (Anatolios 2011) Nicaea should not merely assess its constraints on movement but explore how its theological framework continues to shape and sustain God’s mission in diverse and evolving contexts. The dangers of fossilising Christian identity are as apparent in every era as is the need for clarification through formulas and institutions. At best, such formulas should capture something of the inspiration behind the movement. It takes an artist, not a photographer, to paint a bird in flight. Given the specific nature of the Jewish-Christian movement in search of a more egalitarian society under conditions of Empire, the temptation to align any creeds, canons, concepts, or church structures with imperial power – and an imperial language – is all too apparent.

However, there is only one thing that would be worse than capturing this bird in flight, and that would be not noticing the bird at all. What is needed is to follow the bird in flight to discern a sense of direction, to see whether the Wind is blowing in order to set one’s sails accordingly. From a Trinitarian perspective, that is not just any bird, but the one that

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13 One such vivid reminder was the confessor Paphnutius who was present at the Council. As reported by Rufinus the emperor kissed his empty eye socket to indicate that a new dispensation arrived (see Gwynn 2021:107).

hovered over the waters from the beginning, the one whose wings protect, who nourishes, the holy dove. The Council of Nicaea (325), with its Christological focus, needed a Pneumatological correction at the Council of Constantinople (381). What Christ has done for us, but without us, needs to be supplemented by what the Spirit does in us and through us. In this way, the dynamic between the Spirit's movement and the body of Christ as institution can be held in creative tension.

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