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On Beethoven, the Blues and receiving Nicaea today

Marthinus J. **Havenga**
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
marnush@sun.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6040-7994

Robert **Vosloo**
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
rrvosloo@sun.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7144-9644

Abstract

This article explores how the Nicene Creed may be received today by drawing an analogy between theological tradition and musical reception. Beginning not with doctrinal exposition but with music, the essay engages the work of musician Jon Batiste, particularly his album *Beethoven Blues*, as a case study in how a classic, in the sense of David Tracy's notion, can be received as part of a living tradition rather than merely reproduced. From this vantage point, the article continues to develop an extended theological reflection on what it might mean to receive Nicaea today as something that continues to address, shape, and call those who hear and confess it in new historical and cultural contexts.

A "God-given companion" to theology

In his foreword to Raymond Carr's recently published three-volume tome on the theology of Karl Barth and James Cone, viewed through the lens of jazz musician and composer Thelonious Monk, *Theology in the Mode of Monk*, Willie Jennings describes music as a "God-given companion" to theology – one that theology often "lose[s] sight of".[1] By this, he does not primarily mean that those engaged in theology lose sight of the "relation of theology to the arts, or theological aesthetics, or a theology of music", even

1 Willie James Jennings, 'Introduction', in Raymond Carr, *Theology in the Mode of Monk: An aesthetics of Barth and Cone on revelation and freedom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024), p. xi.

though that, too, happens. Jennings is after something "more fundamentally urgent and compelling": the way we lose sight of the "musicality of theology" itself and fail to see and appreciate how "the sound, the rhythm, the chord progressions, the instruments, the voices and voicing, the crescendos and decrescendos, the accelerandos and ritardandos" found in music can aid us in thinking through the logics of the theologies we construct, confess, and live by.

In response to Jennings' remarks and inspired by the kind of theology Raymond Carr pursues in the work Jennings introduces, this contribution on how we receive Nicaea today will not begin with theology but with music. Beginning here is, of course, not entirely foreign to the theological task historically. It can be recalled that one of the first works Augustine composed after his conversion was a six-book treatise titled *De Musica,* in which the first five books focus entirely on the rhythmic qualities of music, before he turns – only in the sixth book – to theology itself in light of everything that has been said up until that point.[2]

Unlike Augustine, who attempted – in those initial five books – to give an almost exhaustive treatment of what he calls the "art of rhythm", our scope here will be more modest: we will briefly turn to one musician as a theological companion to thinking through this 1700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council and the Creed that bears its name. This musician is the acclaimed, genre-defying composer, pianist, singer, late-night television bandleader and actor Jon Batiste.

Jon Batiste and his Beethoven Blues

Born and raised in New Orleans – that city which, in the words of musicologist Burt Feintuch, "screams" and "blats" and "wails" and "purrs"[3] – Jon Batiste was immersed in the world of music from the get-go. In his early childhood, he began playing percussion instruments before, at the

2 See Marthinus J. Havenga, 'Augustine on rhythm (or how to do theology in conversation with the arts), *Verbum et Ecclesia,* Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 1–7.

3 Burt Feintach (ed.), *Talking New Orleans Music: Crescent City Musicians Talk about Their Lives, Their Music, and Their City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 10.

age of 11, transitioning to the piano at his mother's behest. Not only did she believe that the piano would offer a good foundation for any further musical pursuits, but there was also, Batiste notes, already enough drummers in the extended family.[4]

Following the early musical instruction he received as a child – training that embraced jazz, blues, gospel, soul, and, importantly, classical music under the guidance of a musical teacher called Ms Shirley (someone he would thank personally in an Oscar acceptance speech many years later)[5] – Batiste enrolled, at age 17, at Juilliard in New York. Here, he would go on to earn both a bachelor's and a master's degree in piano. Batiste often reflects on his time at Juilliard, where he now serves on the board, speaking about the challenges of fitting in within the institution,[6] but also about how these years profoundly transformed his life and his relationship to music. This transformation was driven not only by the formal instruction he received in the classroom, but also by the musical influences he encountered outside of the classroom during these years, which included, prominently, Thelonious Monk,[7] and the fact that he was beginning to make music all over New York City, including in the subways, with a group of Juilliard classmates. Batiste led this ensemble, which called themselves *Stay Human*,

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4 Margie Goldsmith, "Jon Batiste: So Much More Than Stephan Colbert's Music Director", *Forbes*, 9 September 2019.

5 Keith Spera, Meet "Miss Shirley", the New Orleans piano teacher Jon Batiste thanked in his Oscar speech, May 5, 2012: https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/music/meet-miss-shirley-the-new-orleans-piano-teacher-jon-batiste-thanked-in-his-oscars-speech/article_f722dba8-acf9-11eb-b056-3b6021cc39fc.html≥

6 Watch "Jon Batiste on being misunderstood his first year at Juilliard", YouTube Channel of *The Connecticut Forum:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_rdGE4Pt0E.

7 '[Margie Goldsmith]: When you were 18 and at Juilliard, you heard Thelonious Monk for the first time, and you listened to "Evidence" on record. What was that like for you? | [Jon Batiste]: My ears were very open because I was exploring, and the sound I was exploring was really exemplified most by Thelonious Monk. I did a deep dive on Monk for a year, and it's evidenced by the difference in my playing from my first two records as a leader … I like to show people the difference in my playing from 17 to 19, and it's really almost solely due to that experience, being deep in the shed and trying to figure out this sound that was kindred to Thelonious Monk'. Margie Goldsmith, 'Jon Batiste: So Much More Than Stephen Colbert's Music Director', *Forbes*, 9 September 2019. For more on Batiste on Monk, see also Marcus Moore, "5 Minutes that will make you love Thelonious Monk: We asked Jon Batiste, Arooj Aftab, Mary Halvorson and others to share their favourites", New York Times, November 1, 2023.

armed with an almost toy-like melodica, an instrument which remains intrinsically connected to Batiste's musical identity until today.

In the years that followed, Batiste's career exploded, not least because *Stay Human,* with Batiste at his helm, became the house band of CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,* one of the most-watched late-night talk shows on television. Alongside this high-profile, nightly gig, Batiste continued to score films, notably the Pixar film, *Soul*, for which he won the Oscar award mentioned earlier, collaborated and performed with a diverse array of artists, from Alicia Keys to Willie Nelson to Mavis Staples, and recorded and released various acclaimed albums, including *We Are* (2021), a fusion of R&B, Soul and Afro-Pop which won five Grammy awards, including the coveted Album of the Year award. Significantly, during this time, Batiste married acclaimed author and visual artist Suleika Jaouad, whom he first met at band camp when they were both 11 years old. Jaouad, now in her late thirties, has battled leukaemia since the age of 22,[8] and their life together – and her ongoing fight against cancer – has been an intricate part of Batiste's journey, also musically, as captured in the Netflix documentary, American Symphony.[9]

At this point, one might wonder why we've chosen to begin this article by turning to Jon Batiste, rather than, say, John Chrysostom, John Calvin or John de Gruchy. And the answer to this question is tied up with Jon Batiste's most recent record, which was released at the end of 2024 – an album titled *Beethoven Blues*.

In interviews, Batiste has mentioned how – as an 11-year-old child, sitting at the piano with Ms Shirley – one of the first pieces he learned to play was Beethoven's *Für Elise*. And now, many years later, to the surprise of many, he's decided to record a full length album where he arranges and plays through some of Beethoven most iconic but also technically demanding compositions, from the opening *Allegro con Brio* of the *Fifth Symphony*,

8 For more on Jaouad's journey with – but also amidst – her leukaemia diagnoses, see Suleika Jaouad, *Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of Life Interrupted* (New York: Random House, 2021). Also, to get a glimpse of Jaouad's own vision on creative praxis (and, especially, the habit of keeping a journal), see Suleika Jaouad, *The Book of Alchemy: A Creative Practice for an Inspired Life* (New York: Random House, 2025).

9 See https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/american-symphony-release-date-cast-news [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

to the lightning-paced finger-sprint that is the Waldstein Sonata to the Allegretto-movement of the *Seventh Symphony,* which Berlioz famously described as that "miraculous elegy" (miraculeuse élégie).[10] Also included is *Für Elise* itself, the first Beethoven-composition Batiste heard and learned to play in childhood. Yet, as the title of the album suggests, Batiste's record is not merely a replication of Beethoven's score and the myriad recordings of it that have been made in the past. No, in playing Beethoven, Batiste allows Beethoven's music to open up to the textures and expressions of the Blues.

Following the album's release, Batiste has done several interviews about it, including one with Terry Gross on NPR.[11] And in listening to him speak about how the album came to be and what he aims to achieve with it, the following becomes clear: in playing and recording Beethoven this way, Batiste is not firstly trying to disrupt or upend the classical music world, "moving fast and breaking things", to borrow that Silicon Valley tagline.[12] He is not attempting to negate, diminish or overwrite Beethoven's music, nor to stamp his own creative genius upon it or to modernise it for contemporary relevance. On the contrary, Batiste describes what he does as simply allowing this music that he has played and internalised from childhood and which has seeped so deep into his bones that it has become part of who he is, to spontaneously emerge – in real time – anew.

For Batiste, the key to doing the above-mentioned is to intently listen to – and take seriously – what is already there. In the interview with Gross, Batiste shows, for example, how what might be described as the "blues

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10 Hector Berlioz, *Beethoven* (Paris: Édition Buchet, 1979): 8–9; see also Jos van der Zanden, Peace Be with You, Calm Now: On the Fate of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony "Allegretto", *Nineteenth-Century Music Review,* Published online 2025:1-25. doi:10.1017/S1479409824000247.

11 For this interview, see https://www.npr.org/2024/12/09/nx-s1-5220956/jon-batiste-beethoven-blues [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

12 For insight into this tagline, most strongly associated with Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook and once displayed throughout the company's headquarters, see Sarah Wynn-Williams, *Careless People: A Cautionary Tale of Power, Greed, and Lost Idealism* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2025). According to Wynn-Williams's account, it was precisely this uncritical commitment to "disruption" that fostered what might be described as a carelessness toward everything from international and domestic law (see the chapter "Move Fast and Break the Law"), to political interference and manipulation, as well as the personal well-being of people using the Facebook platform

note" – the flattened third – is, if one listens carefully, already present in, and central to, the opening phrase of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. The same is true of the rhythmic structure Beethoven uses in his *Fifth Symphony*, which, according to Batiste, is the exact foundation on which the blues is built (which is why he says, "Beethoven's music was actually deeply African").[13] Batiste is thus not first adding to Beethoven's music, but listening to what is present, so that it can be imaginatively re-expressed. This mode of listening, it may be noted, is not unlike Beethoven's own compositional practice, particularly in his late works, where he repeatedly sought out, listened to, worked through, and gave new expression to the music of those who preceded him, most notably Bach.[14]

In short, we can thus say that Batiste's album is – at its core – an act of reception. As he has done since the age of eleven, when he first heard and played Beethoven's music and began to discern elements such as the blues note within it, Batiste attempts, through this album, to receive and enter into conversation with Beethoven's music anew as a living, breathing tradition. In doing so, one could argue that Batiste opens questions about how similar acts of reception – which, of course, are by no means simple or uncontested – might take place across time, which include something like Nicaea.

The classic

One way into the questions brought up by Batiste's album is to suggest that Beethoven's works – such as those Batiste engages with, for example, the *Ninth Symphony* – could be described by the designation of the "classic". And, then, not merely in the sense that it is often referred to as classical music, but in that it seems to fit the description that the late Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy gives for a "classic" in his acclaimed – and one can perhaps even say classic – work *The Analogical Imagination*.[15] In an oft-quoted passage, Tracy describes what he deems a "classic" in this manner:

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13 For this interview, see https://www.npr.org/2024/12/09/nx-s1-5220956/jon-batiste-beethoven-blues [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

14 Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2001), p. 386–7.

15 See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981).

> My thesis is that what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols and persons "classics" is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth … [W]e find something valuable, something "important"; some disclosure of reality in a moment that must be called one of "recognition" which surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks, and eventually transforms us; an experience that upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible … Their memory haunts us. Their actual effects in our lives endure and await ever new appropriations, constantly new interpretation.[16]

Tracy's description of the "classic" resonates strongly with the way Batiste describes his understanding of and encounter with Beethoven as music which – in the past but also now – continues to speak *to us*, but also, by way of acts of "appropriation" and "new interpretation", *through us*. In Tracy's framework, what would make Beethoven's compositions "classics" is not only that they have endured – and continue to do so – as anything in a vault or archive could, but that this endurance is linked to the music actively addressing and inspiring listeners in each new age, which is exactly what happens when it comes to Batiste, who – as he makes clear – engages with the music not out of obligation to the "canon", but because he cannot help responding to it and giving it new articulation. Here – one could argue – lie interpretive keys to also engaging with the Nicene Creed.

Like works of Beethoven, which have withstood the test of time by ever anew addressing listeners and inviting interpretation and re-articulation, we can say that the Nicene Creed has endured for 1700 years not by being locked away somewhere, but through countless, active recollections, interpretations, and liturgical and ethical re-performances, as it continued to resonate with and address successive generations. In this sense, it indeed corresponds to Tracy's description of a classic. Also the fact that we are today commemorating – as part of a wider ecumenical reception – the Council where the Nicene Creed in its early form originated indicates its enduring power to evoke that "moment of recognition" to which Tracy refers: the sense that something of "vital importance" is disclosed here,

16 Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, pp. 108–109.

something which – as Tracy powerfully states – "expands the sense of the possible", is charged with transformative power, and therefore asks to be heeded.

Contestation

This said, one can add that classics are never uncontested. Perhaps we can even argue that classics *par excellence* invite argument and contestation. Because they do not offer easy disclosure – where everything is cheaply laid bare – but allow something of the mystery to remain, they demand to be wrestled with. Indeed, as part of the *classic's* significance lies in a certain elusiveness that resists closure and hasty interpretation, with its meaning and relevance not easily exhausted, engaging with it often takes the form of an honest grappling with the work. This is seen, again, in Beethoven's music, and in the ways Batiste – or even conductors such as Bernstein, von Karajan, Fricsay, or Gardiner – respond differently to it by wrestling with the mystery of the music, of what is revealed and what is veiled.[17]

As we remember the Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed, as has been done throughout the world and also here in South Africa during this year of commemoration, it becomes clear that we – in engaging with this theological "classic" – need not shy away from "conflicts of interpretation" and "a hermeneutic of suspicion" (to use terms often associated with the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur).[18] This is true of the Creed itself, but also

17 In terms of the four conductors mentioned, one can look to the iPhone app *Beethoven's 9th Symphony*, developed in collaboration with Deutsche Grammophon, where four "classic" performances of the work – by the conductors mentioned, are placed side by side. By pressing on the different recordings, one can listen in real time to the various ways the conductors interpret and give expression to the music. Another layer is added with real-time commentary, in which famous music writers provide their own interpretations of what the conductors are doing with the work. See https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/sep/06/how-we-made-beethoven-ninth-app [Accessed: 22 December 2025]. A particularly fascinating listening experiment, then, is to listen to these four engagements with Beethoven's 9th while also incorporating Batiste's interpretation of the same score, as presented on his album, from which one gains further insight into the diverse ways the work can be interpreted and expressed.

18 See Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflicts of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974) & Allison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

of the historical conditions within which it first emerged. Figures associated with the Council and its aftermath, such as Constantine, Arius, Alexander, Athanasius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Eusebius of Caesarea, to name but a few, have been, and continue to be, remembered in markedly different ways. The figure of Arius is particularly instructive in this regard. He is often portrayed as the arch-heretic, at times even cast in near-diabolical terms. Yet alternative, and arguably more nuanced, interpretations are also possible. As Frances Young suggests in *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, in carefully studying the figure of Arius, he might be understood less as a daring troublemaker and more as a reactionary conservative concerned with "monotheism and morality" in the face of the more "daring" trinitarian theology that was then taking shape.[19]

Because it is born out of, and continues to call for, not only conversation but also contestation, we should furthermore recognise that in commemorating and engaging anew with Nicaea and the Council in which it originated, the Council and the Creed may, for some, be not something to remember but something to forget. For them, it may be associated with a faith that has been left behind, whether because it has caused harm, left scars, engendered indifference, or even antagonism. Yet even for those who continue to identify with the Nicene faith, difficult questions remain. Among these are questions related to gender that many are grappling with today, including whether a confession formulated by an exclusively male council can still be trusted. And what about the fact that the Council was called by the emperor, and that it and some later ecumenical councils gathered under the sign of the Empire? These are important questions to be aware of.

We can, furthermore, also be conscious of the fact that even though Nicaea is often seen as the first "ecumenical" synod, thus a gathering of unity, the churches commemorating and even celebrating Nicaea today are doing so in a polarised and increasingly polarising world and are themselves for the most part deeply divided. These realities were brought into focus at the 6th World Conference on Faith and Order, which met in October 2025 in

19 Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 48.

Alexandria, Egypt, with its theme "Where now for visible unity?"[20] In the booklet prepared for this conference, we read:

> A world of climate catastrophe, pandemic, war, and economic concern requires a fresh engagement of the churches with one another on the core issues of faith, unity, and mission that both unite and continue to divide them.[21]

And:

> Like Nicaea, the conference will seek to draw together faith and contemporary thought. It will not avoid practices of discipleship resulting from the church's association with imperial powers that requires intense self-reflection by churches today.[22]

Tradition

These reflections remind us that receiving Nicaea demands more than the uncritical repetition of fixed formulas or the affirmation of dominant historiographies. As with the reception of Beethoven, it is not about merely providing a carbon-copy of how the "classic" was originally conceived and expressed without – indeed – wrestling with the content and the context in which it originated.[23] This, it could be argued, is precisely what it means to be traditioned beings, people who live within and from the tradition they've received.

Central to receiving Nicaea – as with receiving Beethoven for Batiste – is indeed, then, the question of our hermeneutic of tradition. Any fossilised understanding of tradition is problematic and unhelpful. It is accordingly

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20 See https://www.oikoumene.org/events/sixth-world-conference-on-faith-and-order [accessed 22 December 2025]

21 *Towards the Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order. Commemorating the Council of Nicaea: Where Now for Visible Unity?* World Council of Churches (2025), p.3. https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/TowardSixthWorldConf_ENG_Web_0.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

22 *Towards the Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order,* p. 4.

23 For an interesting description of how today one could wrestle with that which has been received – making use of the story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel of God – see Lamorna Ash, *Don't forget we're here forever: A New Generation's Search for Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), especially the book's preface.

crucial to distinguish carefully between tradition and traditionalism. Pelikan's oft-cited remark remains instructive: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living".[24] More recently, the Christian theologian David Bentley Hart, in his book *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*, has described traditionalism as "a fretful, even at times neurotic, fixation upon the past configurations of the faith".[25]

Over against such a reductive understanding, Hart sees a tradition as "truly vital to the degree that it is always, in every epoch, in a state of patient but dynamic reconstruction". When this occurs, Hart suggests, "recollection, imagination, and inspired invention" work in "inseparable concert".[26] This, it could be argued, is precisely what happens in Batiste's reception of Beethoven, and – one might add – what could also be hoped for in receiving Nicaea today, as this was exactly the spirit in which it was first conceived. Indeed, according to Hart, traditionalism could be said to have marked the thought and ideas of the Arians, while the pro-Nicene theologians were concerned with tradition as a "living faith", as Pelikan would put it. Hart writes:

> The Arians … were traditionalists, and for that reason their theological language, blessed though it was by a formidable collection of past orthodoxies, ultimately proved sterile; the latter [the pro-Nicene faction] were theological and metaphysical radicals, and consequently their language gave the tradition new and enduring life.[27]

As was the case with those at Nicaea, we are thus called, in our "embeddedness" in our cultural contexts, to live in and from the tradition we have received. This does not mean to invoke the South African theologian Wentzel van Huysteen's ideas from his book *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology,* that we should be "prisoners" of the past, but rather that what we receive should be seen as a "starting

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24 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 65.

25 David Bentely Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Academic, 2022), p. 12.

26 Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, pp. 111–112.

27 Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, p. 129.

point" for further reflection. Tradition, on this account, empowers us epistemologically, and also as part of our witness in the world, "to cross contextual, cultural, and disciplinary borders to explore critically the theories, meanings, and beliefs through which we and others construct our worlds".[28] This insight seems particularly important if we desire that what we receive does not remain insulated from the fresh air of public conversation and truth seeking, but is instead taken up and revoiced more broadly, not unlike the way Batiste's reception of Beethoven has made Beethoven part of the blues conversation. It is, after all, not every day that Beethoven is discussed in, say, New Orleans' OffBeat magazine, which is mostly dedicated to jazz and blues.[29]

Theology

It is important to note that all the above does not imply less theology but, in fact, more. This ongoing process of receiving, interpreting, and articulating what we "receive" anew should, at least when it comes to Nicaea, be intentionally and robust theological acts, that is, continued deeds of critical yet creative theological engagement. The former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it well in his book *Arius: Heresy & Tradition*:

> There is a sense in which Nicaea and its aftermath represent a recognition by the Church at large that *theology* is not only legitimate but also necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate as a means of securing continuity at anything

28 Wentzel van Huysteen, *Alone in the World: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 25.

29 See https://www.offbeat.com/music/jon-batiste-beethoven-blues-batiste-piano-series-vol-1-verve/ [Accessed: 22 December 2025]. The description of Batiste's renderings is quite instructive: … It's the first of many delights, surprises and masterful turns. "Symphony No. 5 Stomp" takes the da-da-da-DUH into Cosimo's J&M Studio—you can practically hear the drum part Earl Palmer would have played. Batiste himself lets out a "whoop!" toward the end. With the "Moonlight Sonata Blues", he coaxes the blues from the original as if it were always there in the shadows and we simply couldn't hear it. And then he follows that with his own "Dusklight Movement" (one of several inspired-by homages spread out through the album), exploring other shades of day turning to night. The manic frenzy of Beethoven's "Waldstein" piano sonata becomes a boogie-woogie – "Waldstein Wobble," it's called – so suddenly but so naturally that you have to try to remind yourself that Beethoven didn't write it that way.

> more than a formal level; Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, so that they might be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another. They need to be made more *difficult* before we can accurately grasp their simplicities. Otherwise, we read with eyes not our own or think them through with minds not our own; the deposit of faith does not really come into contact with ourselves.[30]

For the Creed we "receive" to become not only something we inherit but something we, ourselves, *confess*, it must be taken up in sustained theological work: in asking God-questions, in careful and patient engagement with Scripture, and in critical yet faithful conversation with the tradition that has formed us. Only in this way does the Creed move from being a formula we repeat to a *confession* proper, which expresses and also shapes our understanding of God and our public witness in the world. When this happens – as was the case with Batiste and Beethoven – what we receive becomes a wonderful gift, one that can be passed on, with the hope that others might also receive it without regret. One is often struck by how frequently Augustine, in the context of the Latin West and North African Christianity, speaks in his sermons, as part of baptismal catechesis, of the *Symbol* as a "treasure"[31] – one ultimately opening us up to the glory of God to which it points.

A recent study by the International Theological Commission of the Vatican, titled *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour: 1700th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325–2025)*, uses precisely this kind of language by placing theologising about Nicaea explicitly within the context of doxology. In its opening paragraph, we read:

> 1700 years later, we are celebrating this event above all with a doxology, a praise of the glory of God, since this glory has been manifested in a priceless treasure of faith expressed in the Symbol: the infinite beauty of the God who saves us, the immense mercy of Jesus Christ our

30 Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy & Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p.236.

31 See, e.g., Sermons 212, 213, 215, in Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, tr. Edmund Hill (New York, NY, New City Press, 2007), pp. 261 – 277.

> Saviour, the generosity of the redemption offered to every human being in the Holy Spirit.[32]

And a little later on, we read:

> To celebrate Nicaea is, first and foremost, to wonder at the Symbol bequeathed to us by the Council and at the beauty of the gift.[33]

Linked to notions like superabundance and beauty, we can sense here the surplus of meaning in the *Symbol*, a surplus that gives it a haunting presence, in Tracy's description of the classic. Creeds are, as Willie Jonker – following Van Ruler – reminds us, not a rod to punish others with, but at their heart a song to be sung.[34] Accordingly, we should also have a keen eye for their embeddedness in liturgy. As the Vatican document *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour* notes, the participants of these councils were keen to discuss the whole of ecclesial life. It states: "To grasp the spiritual and theological significance of the Nicene dogma, we need to explore how it is received in the liturgical and sacramental practice, catechism, prayer and hymns".[35]

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32 See https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20250403_1700-nicea_en.html# [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

33 See https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20250403_1700-nicea_en.html# [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

34 See Willie Jonker, *Bevrydende Waarheid: Die Karakter van die Gereformeerde Belydenis* (Wellington: Hugenote Uitgewers, 1994. See also A.A. van Ruler, "Plaats en functie der belijdenis in de kerk" in *Visie en Vaart* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Te Amsterdam, 1947), pp.65–66. Karl Barth also famously compared the act of confession to joining in on a game or a song: [By confessing their faith, human beings] temporarily step out of the sphere of purpose, intention and pursuits. [They do] not confess with an aim in view nor to effect and carry out this or that … they aim at no result and expect none. [They confess] because God is God … [and they] therefore cannot keep silent … In its freedom from purpose, it has more of the nature of a game or song than of work and warfare. For this reason, confession will always cause headshaking among serious people. Why? they will ask themselves and us, and the more seriously we confess, the less they will find an answer, for as confessors we are not concerned with any end but only with the honour of God. Karl Barth, *CD III/4*, p. 83.

35 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20250403_1700-nicea_en.html# [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

Sensing and sense-making

We conclude with one of our favourites, "Roman Catholic theologians", Bruce Springsteen, whom Batiste incidentally cites as one of the most formative influences on his songwriting.[36] In a video of him in the series *VH1 Storytellers*,[37] Springsteen reflects on the origins and meanings of his songs and gives a detailed explanation of one in particular, *Devils & Dust*, which has the following chorus:

> I got God on my side / And I'm just trying to survive / What if what you do to survive / Kills the things you love / Fear's a powerful thing ... It can turn your heart black, you can trust / It'll take your God-filled soul / And fill it with devils and dust.[38]

After talking about the song's title and the ideas it conjures up, followed by an almost line-for-line exposition of the lyrics, and the way it fits – or rather, according to Springsteen, stands in tension – with the song's melody, he asks aloud the following question: "So, how much of this was I thinking about when I wrote the song?", to which he answers, "None of it", which naturally elicits laughter from the audience. "I wrote all of that [meaning the exposition he just gave] yesterday afternoon at my kitchen table", he continues, which brings forth more laughter. But then he says the following: "How much of it was I feeling when I wrote the song?", to which he answers – with a smile on his face – "All of it".[39]

These words by Springsteen – which resonate strongly with Batiste's description of his interaction with Beethoven (he, after all, speaks about how he *experienced* the blues in Beethoven before trying to understand or explain it) – remind us that our engagement with Nicaea, as a second-order reflection, is not separated from, and is often preceded by, how we *sense* – or, to use Springsteen's language, *feel* – its meaning when we say it,

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36 See https://monarchmagazine.com/article/jon-batiste/ [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

37 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hZjw2aqAE&list=RDa_hZjw2aqAE&start_radio=1 [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

38 See https://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics.php?song=devilsdust [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

39 The specific part of the concert can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZzKPkIJiBw&list=RDXZzKPkIJiBw&start_radio=1 [Accessed: 22 December 2025].

whether in childhood, now, or in future moments of our lives. To return to Willie Jennings' musical metaphors, perhaps it is already in the "sound", the "rhythm", the "voicing", and the "crescendos and decrescendos" of Nicaea's words that we come to recognise that which the Creed witnesses to: the God revealed in Christ. To quote Dirkie Smit:

> The reasons for the differences of opinion and the many expressions are clear. They did not know exactly what they were talking about. They did not have the words to accurately describe what they stood for. They stuttered about something, a mystery, that lay beyond their experience and insight. Because of what they actually wanted to say, there was no difference of opinion. They are just confused about which images, what human expressions, can name this best. What they wanted to say was crystal clear. And with this, the church through the ages agrees: In this Jesus, we have to do with God himself. In Him we see the face of the living God … In his Light we see the Light … In his incarnation, we discover that we are safe, that we belong to him … that we don't have to save ourselves, but that we are freed to love and hope.[40]

Much more could be said about receiving Nicaea today, but perhaps we should begin, not only by attempting to understand, or to explain, or to defend, or to reject what has been passed on, but simply by listening – allowing its melody, its rhythm, and its voice to speak to us, just as Batiste would listen to Beethoven. In doing so, we may indeed enter anew in a conversation with what has been handed down, letting the Creed – like a living composition – move us, shape us, and call us to respond to it in and for our time. Perhaps in the register of the blues?

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40 Dirk J. Smit, *Ons Glo: Gedagtes en motiewe uit wat die kerk bely oor God as Vader, Seun en Heilige Gees* (Wellington, South Africa: Bybelmedia, 2018), p. 84 [our translation].

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