Receiving Nicaea: On Creeds, Culture, and Christian Witness

Vincent Nkosinathi Mandla
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
vincentnathi99@gmail.com

Abstract

This research identifies the most innovative aspects within the new post-Cold War and post-apartheid context of African theology, suggesting that theology plays a vital role in recognising, valuing, interpreting, and empowering the agency of African Christians as they confront cultural, religious, and economic challenges in their everyday lives. This is in light of Africa's contribution to Christianity through the theological schools and churches of Alexandria, Carthage and Ethiopia, through a pivotal role they played in theological perspectives that became instrumental in developing a foundational doctrine "One Faith" in Nicaea, 325 AD. Focusing on the renewed acknowledgement of African agency, African theologians strive to develop a more harmonious and less conflicted connection between Africa and Christianity, as well as between Africans and their difficult Christian/church history through liberative theology and decoloniality. The role of a liberative paradigm is an impetus not only to global solidarity but also to church solidarity and unity. The Nicene creed has tenets of unity, theological convictions and peace, and the question this research will pose is whether Western theology, considering its past in the Third World share the same Christian convictions of unity beyond theological theory but as praxis in Africa?

Keywords

Introduction

This research investigates the position of the ecumenical movement today, considering the Christian doctrine that the Nicene council championed on confessing "the one faith" vis-à-vis the mischievousness of Western theology to change things – resulting in the foundational problems of the Western church. The method employed in this study is theological, reflecting on the message of equality and unity since all humanity was created in the same likeness and image of God. Europe's theological hegemony as the centre shapes the modern Western racist and capitalistic church – as it emerged and is responsible for colonisation, dehumanisation, etc. in Africa and Third World countries. The perpetual pervasive praxis of the Western church reflects a far different dogma from the doctrinal theology produced under a climate of a somewhat ecumenical church gathering. Today, the spirit that was demonstrated by the early constitution of a ecumenicist character of early church, the ecumenical character that made the church proclaim one faith today faces an ecumenical encounter with the Third World church which is poor and seeks justice from the wounds it has severed at the hands of Western mission that has grossly and theologically violated the statues of a one faith.

The Council of Nicaea

The ecumenical character of Nicaea is unique because it brought together bishops and leaders from diverse regions, cultures, backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives. Despite these differences, they shared a common goal influenced by the Gospel. This diversity enriched the discussions and decisions at Nicaea, ensuring that the resulting understanding was truly representative of the wider Christian community.

The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD, is the first Christian ecumenical council of its kind, convened by the Roman emperor, Constantine I, whose intention was to obtain unity for the empire and knew that unity of the empire also needed a united Christianity, mainly on the Christian doctrine, which was always agreed upon as the consensus in light of Alexandria (Grant, 1975, p. 1).

The Arian controversy, a heresy about the person and divinity of Jesus (Arianism claiming that Jesus was adopted and is not God), was one of the disputes to be engaged resulting in obtaining consensus on the divinity of Jesus, an ultimate success of the council reached on having theological pronunciations on what is to be classical Christian doctrine – Christology, Soteriology, etc. What is of particular importance in this period is that, beyond the diversity of regions, the church was in some sense one. The Nicene creed established unity amongst diverse theological perspectives that may be able to produce consistent divergencies on the faith; however, through the consensus of the nature of Jesus and his divinity and the confession of "the one faith", this was achieved (Grant, 1975).

The role of bishops and a political figure "the Roman empire, Constantine I, in the conference of Nicaea 325 AD have a theological dimension and benefit to it, however, we should not downplay the political dimension attached to it as well and it is imperative to provide a hermeneutical analysis to it too, it is vital that we as well unpack its primary intentions thereof. The idea of Nicaea and its dynamics do seem to be foundational on church unity; however, we should not downplay the reason behind the involvement of Emperor Constantine I, and his sole intention (Rugare Rukuni & Erna Oliver, 2019, p. 1).

For quite a while, Roman emperors persecuted Christians, and all of a sudden, Constantine, the Roman emperor officiates a meeting for the church to discuss the unity and formulation of a Christian council (Grant, 1975, p. 1). A leader of an empire with supreme power that is also responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus suddenly takes a seat amongst church leaders to discuss theology. Is it not that his involvement was due to how helpful the church could be for the benefit of the Roman Empire and its sovereignty? (Grant, 1975, p. 1). The political dimension embodies a definitive implication for Christianity. Grant (1975:1) asserts that:

> The Council of Nicaea met during the first year in which
> Constantine the Great was ruler of the whole Roman world
> from Britain to Mesopotamia. He himself regarded the year as
> his nineteenth, for in the summer of 306 he embarked upon his
> campaign for supreme power. By 312, he had realised how helpful
> the Christian church could be, and with the aid of a secretary for

church affairs, he began to intervene in such matters so he could promote the unity of the church. In North Africa, the Christians were sharply divided. Constantine judiciously sent funds to support the more reliable clerics.

Uniting the church is usually romanticized but looking at this from a political point of view, this was a strategy to obtain sovereignty through a rapidly growing religion that has tenets of greater growth and influence. Therefore, to retain sovereignty of the imperialist Roman Empire, it was to utilise the division amongst churches to imperialize Christianity (Rugare Rukuni & Erna Oliver, 2019, p. 2), but firstly, uniting the Christian body is a viable strategy to influence the globe (Rugare Rukuni & Erna Oliver, 2019, p. 2). The emperor had several attempts, such as subsidising two councils of the church in the West; however, the attempt to settle issues was unsuccessful. Another attempt was persecution, but still it was useless, and he finally adopted the strategy of Licinius, his brother-in-law, which was toleration (Grant, 1975, p. 2).

Toleration might have worked for a while until Licinius had to prohibit meetings amongst bishops by 321 because many issues caused disunity between bishops (Grant, 1975, p. 2). Amongst many issues, the famous is the feud between the Eastern and Western church when the conflict arose when the bishop of Alexandria differed with Arius on the place and understanding of the person of Jesus (Grant, 1975, p. 2). Arius argued that Jesus was created out of nothing and that he is inferior as well as different to God the Father; therefore, as a consequence, the bishop Alexander, being unable to argue through scripture and tradition, utilised the political influence he had to excommunicate Arius as a heretic (Grant, 1975, p. 2).

Arius went to Palestine and joined the Eastern church since he was banished in Alexandria and there he joined those who shared similar views as him as a result won the support of the eastern empire which became hostile and threatened the empire of Licinius until Constantine defeated Licinius, took over and discovered the disunity between the churches and through the counsel of Ossius his ecclesiastical adviser that he should sought to unite the church for the benefit of an imperial succession (Grant, 1975, p. 3). Ossius held a council meeting to avoid excommunications and called upon the bishops from eastern provinces and had already agreed to

disagree with the Arian controversy at Ancyra (Grant, 1975, p. 4). Eusebius of Caesarea still held to the Arian views, calling "the Son of God a created being" (Grant, 1975, p. 4).

Alexander believed that Jesus is of the same essence as God and convinced Ossius at Nicomedia that at the next council they should use the term "homo-ousios", meaning, "of the same essence" (Grant, 1975, p. 4). The episcopal quarrels had Constantine change the next council venue from Ancyra to Nicaea so that he can also be part of the council to restore unity as well to be in control of the council (Rugare Rukuni & Erna Oliver, 2019), and as a result Arius with his different view got banished since his views were seen as belittling the essence and person of Jesus. Grant (1975: 4) argues that:

> More important than either dates or numbers is the question of representation. Who came to Constantine's council? Some of the earliest witnesses call the council "ecumenical," but the term means no more than "Roman imperial." What the council actually represented was the area formerly controlled by Licinius. Apart from the emperor's agent Ossius, and two presbyters from Rome, all the bishops whose names are reliably reported came from the provinces Constantine had just taken from Licinius. The lists include a few bishops from the west and from Crimea, but their names may well have been added after they expressed their agreement with the council's decisions.

Through careful consideration of how matters were dealt with, Grant may have a strong political analysis in terms of attendance to obtain credibility, and why Arius was banished for having different views. What was most important in this meeting was how to allow one to adhere to the regulations of Alexander, Ossius and above all Constantine (Barnes, 2011). Constantine closed the council meeting by addressing the theme of maintaining harmony in the church as well as in the state, and he maintained that harmony by giving gifts to the church so that there may be food provisions to people through regional governors. However, quarrels and accusations arose against Athanasius for stealing (Grant, 1975, p. 9). The council agreed to contribute towards the creed according to their conviction, and their contribution came to a final creed on the confession of the one true

faith. Another appalling matter is when Constantine brought Arius and Eusebius back into the council and ordered that should any amongst the bishops in the council illtreat them, he would order someone to remove them from their seat. He, Constantine, was later baptised by Eusebius of the Arian community on his deathbed (Grant, 1975, p. 12). The emperor's rule was not only effective in Rome but throughout the church as well, which, in conclusion, brings us to the reality that the Nicene council was sure under an imperial force; even though the council can be celebrated as the first ecumenical council, it is also imperative to acknowledge its political dimension (Brent, 2009).

Ecumenical dimensions

The ecumenical turn to be taken now with the coming of the Third World requires beyond theological loftiness in doctrine because Christianity, 1700 years later, is "Eurocentric", "racist" and capitalistic in its formation, pedagogy and praxis. It is common to the Third World that Christianity, whose Gospel is a humanising process through Imago Dei, who incarnated, was used for subjugation and dehumanisation. At a pedagogical and hermeneutic level, whereas Africa had its place in theology, today, theological silos exist in the empire. Thus, to look anew on Nicaea and the ecumenical character of the faith, we contend that the Eurocentric theological paradigm becomes foundational to the imperatives of a decoloniality discourse, because the mischievousness of the Western church in matters of influence and control provides a firm need for the liberative paradigm when reflecting on grappling with Nicaea and the Ecumenical movement. Granted, it was not race that split the church, but Western theological imposition on the Filioque controversy. The church-maintained unity up until 1054 AD, when there occurred a split between the Eastern and Western churches (McGrath, 2017, p. 287). This split was a result of the double procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son and the various approaches between the Eastern and Western church which led to the formation of the Orthodox in the East and Roman Catholicism and Reformed churches in the West. McGrath (2017: 289-290) states that:

> Similar ideas were stated by later councils. Thus, the Council of
> Lyons (1274) stated that "the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father

and the Son, yet not as from two origins but as from one origin." However, despite such clarifications, the doctrine remains a source of contention between Eastern and Western Christians, which is unlikely to be removed in the foreseeable future, despite a recent warming of personal and institutional relations between the Eastern and Western churches.

In some sense, what has been learned from Nicaea beyond even the split is the Ecumenicism to address the theological controversy between the doctrine of the Eastern church vis-à-vis the Western church, the plethora of issues proved its lack to maintain its principles from Nicaea, as well as the outdated focal points that guided the movement, which can no longer render adequate and contextual guidance (Tesfai, 1994, p. 13). Various scholars point to heterogeneous events which rendered the council weak and lost its grasp on its primary vision. The disputes that led to this split are not limited to the notion of the Holy Spirit and its place among the trinity, but rather a displacement of sovereignty from the movement claimed by Europe as the centre.

The researcher proposes that in light of Nicaea and Filioque controversy the issues that will shape our theology and a proper ecumenism requires the interrogation of the church stemming from when Europe began to want to be centre and therefore as an emphasis the study presents a powerful case, which is to ask if the Western church can produce a united church because it is not in the language of the Western church to promote unity. After all, Western Christianity belongs to the matrix of power; the church of the West is not based on human relations but the Western Christian human ruling over subhuman – a betrayal of the Gospel, theological anthropology, soteriology, etc. A considerable trait on the matter of the split, future division, different Christian practising some emerging out of existential necessity is not necessarily stationed on the issue of the Bible vs Tradition, but it is based on who the final voice, to be precise, rested on power dynamics, power dynamics in knowledge. As we discuss the history and future of Christian theology, we must consider the Third World church in bastions of higher learning content with Grosfoguel's (2013:74) postulations of Eurocentric paradigms being privileged epistemologically.

This argument by Grosfoguel has an identical meaning to the contribution of Enrique Dussel when he hermeneutically engaged the historicity of Eurocentrism as a paradigm, a spirit as centre and how their perception of modernity is falsified to present that westernization is a product of their "individual" experience, emerging from the annals of their history alone without respect of the universal setup of the world and its participant from various parts of the world and the significance of their context as well as the imperative for interpretation in light of their historical experiences. Decoloniality as a framework is important, reflecting Nicaea and ecumenical character but also the fact that Africa and the Third World are only new because of erasure, humiliation and exploitation; therefore, we are not only suspect of other factors around Nicaea, but what language is used to reflect today on Nicaea. To reflect on Nicaea as a great heritage in Africa is problematic because today's context requires a broadening of reflection. Theology is contextual, and as far as Africa is concerned, Western theological perversion is not contextual for Africans to relate to their God and a universal Christian experience. The Eurocentric paradigm opposes the broader world paradigm because it has esteemed the humanity of its people at the disposal of the humanity of the people from poor, oppressed peripheral countries. This perspective derives from the deliberate Eurocentric attitude towards modernity and the practical conceptualisation of deeming Africa as a place of savages without souls and sub-humans whose being is subject to their humanity. This foundational problematic signals a careful response to ecumenicism as it should include the struggles of sovereignty and lack of justice towards the oppressed who suffer a totalizing Western global ecclesiology and epistemology. The church is silent because the divisions are many. Tesfai (1994: 13) underlines that in speaking about the modern crisis of ecumenism, which underscores a different language, he asserts:

> If not, the cause of the current crisis is "the coming of the third world" into the ecumenical encounter. I will contend that ever since the fifties, when the third world became not just the passive recipient of ecumenical efforts, but an active participant, urging new ideas and new emphases, it has been both a stimulus, a "shot in the arm." And a provocation to ecumenical progress. This development has

been most visible within and among the communions represented in the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The coming of the third world into the ecumenical discourse shows an attempt at a paradigm shift. The Third World church is poor and seeks justice, which is far different from the ecumenical message of church unity without a church in deep, historical and existential introspection. The perpetual salvaging of any knowledge produced with different worldviews, history, epistemologies and politics, as well as theologies are proof enough of how inferior non-Western produced knowledge is treated; it is not only knowledge but their humanity that is ignored. The structures that are foundational to the Western body of knowledge manifest both as racist and sexist (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 75).

The coming of the third world into the movement showed the movement's inadequacy in terms of the "focal points" that led the movement, as well as provided it with a vision of the future and destabilised the foundations upon which it was established. Among the many discoveries is that of the church and how of a Western model it is, because it calls peace but cannot call Christians to justice. The very foundations of the movement were laid on imperialist material. If we consider that Constantine the Great was an imperialist and, relatively, the Western missionary movement was a religious extension of the intransigent expansion of the West, no culture, community, or religion could oppose, outsmart or outrun the worldview of the West, which explains the unwillingness to condemn Western hegemony.

The rise of Christianity in the third world produced a displacement whereby Christianity was no longer viewed as a Western religion by which the rest of the world was non-Christian and needed to be Christianized. It was no longer influenced by the Western worldview, and this was outlined during the eighties by the formation of base communities that gave the church new perspectives that shifted it from the West. The third world church possessed the quality to foster its own path by way of relating God to man through their daily struggles and being in solidarity with the poor, oppressed, alienated, exploited, dehumanized and racialised people because its members are the very ones it opts for, the poor. The relation to God becomes a contextual matter whereby the church embraces God

because they relate to him from their historical background of oppression and alienation as the God of the oppressed. Western theological paradigm shaped the modern Western racist and capitalistic church – as it emerged and was responsible for colonisation, dehumanisation, etc.

Third world churches developed new relational theologies and realized that theologies they had gotten from their "mother churches" were inadequate to their situations an example can be drawn from the theology of liberation from the Latin American church as a response to the poor people who needed to relate to the God of the oppressed and see the person of Jesus through their poverty and situations, therefore, they seized being mission fields due to such theological developments (Tesfai, 1994, p. 19). Such theological developments stimulated significant conflict as well as debate, which progressively impacted numerous segments of the ecumenical movement. The influence was evident more especially at the WCC assembly at Nairobi in 1975 (Tesfai, 1994, p. 19).

The curiosity of liberation theology was more of an attribute to fear because it questioned everything, intending to establish social & political liberation; therefore, this attribute was argued, warned against and debated to have an effect of replacing church unity, which is a core basis of ecumenism. Third world theology went further to investigate the universality of classical theology and why western worldview was centre as well universal to the guidance and structuring of the ecumenical movement (Tesfai, 1994, p. 19) this enquiry aroused fear to the "theological establishment" of the likelihood that "liberation become the guiding term of theology" (Tesfai, 1994, p. 19). A shift such as this meant the third world would no longer be a mission field but an active equal participant in the ecumenical movement and that signalled what Johann Baptist Metz called a polycentric world church, meaning a vast move from traditional mission which derives from the West to the rest of the world but that churches around the globe will participate actively in providing a unique perspective and contribute diversely to God's mission (Tesfai, 1994, p. 19). This can be a recovery of the ecumenical character of Nicaea.

While thinking about Nicaea, we should ask if our Nicaean moment is to discuss the question of race that subverts all other achievements of Nicaea as it pertains to authentic Christian doctrine. Injustices, racism and

oppression are perpetuated in the world, more especially in Africa, with South Africa being categorised as the most unequal country in the world, with white monopoly capitalism being the centre and vantage point for white domination. The recent racial tension in South Africa has become increasingly unavoidable, so that black people do not see their God in Western mission churches because how can we confess "the one faith" when the very same confession does not constitute our behaviour. We confess "the one faith," yet racism perpetually segregates us. Black people have suffered oppression and injustices often at the hands of white Christians, and that in itself is a questionable trait of colonialism in our ecclesiology in South Africa and the Third World (Vellem, 2015, p. 2). Vellem (2015: 2) states that:

> There are defects of Christian faith that Black Theology of liberation should respond to, including naming, signification, and now the commodification of life resulting from the history of denials black Africans have endured up to this day (cf. Vellem 2013:146-162). The entrapment of black African faith and the black church in such defects calls upon the church in South Africa to move out of the 'mission station', the 'Berlin Conference Zone' and the matrices of neocolonial power manifest in the dominant ideological views of the 21st century, especially the commodification of life.

The role of Black Liberative paradigm is to unshackle and decolonise the Western worldview and, in turn, develop a new perspective of seeing God beyond colonialism and racism in a positive, theologically anthropological lens that awakens the consciousness of our humanity and makes us embrace our blackness in the likeness of God's image. Our theological vantage point is not resting upon a perverse Western worldview, the few Western philosophers or history writers, but an iceberg of survival throughout oppressive regimes, segregative times and exploitive periods. Simon Maimela (1993: 54) wonderfully articulates that:

> Black theology further represents an articulated form of black resistance to white power structures in general for the liberating transformation of unjust, racist social structures in which they live. Beginning with their concrete experiences of oppression and suffering in white-dominated societies, where Christian faith has

been and continues to be used as an oppressive instrument to legitimise white people's domination of people of colour politically and economically, black Christians have become increasingly aware that there is something wrong in their so-called Christian countries.

The church as an institution inherently entails flaws because no denomination could claim to uphold the entire truth. A practical instance in our present-day South Africa is our historical context and how colonial influence modelled this concept to exploit natives of their resources, land and means of production (Vellem, 2015, p. 3). Vuyani Vellem, in his article "Unshackling the Church" 2015, correctly states that the church as a model embodies various images; it can be understood as the "body of Christ, a building, a servant or even a sacrament", and the duty of this embodiment is to assist our human understanding within the limits of what the church is. Vellem (2015: 3) states that:

> We need to distinguish between three models of the church: the Settler Model, Missionary Model, and the Struggle Model. The names are self-explanatory. About the Settler Model, we should have in mind the churches that were established by Europeans who settled in our land. The feature of this model is that these churches were meant to serve Settler communities and their interest. The missionary model entails churches that were established by missionaries in black African communities. The last model entails the churches that were established by black Africans as a response to the defects encountered in both the Settler and Missionary church models – the well-known Ethiopian Movement and the African Initiated Churches.

The study has outlined concrete realities amid various church models and the frustration thereof within the ecumenical movement from a liberative outlook because the missionary church model and the settler church model seem to have an inherent blindfold to the systemic colonial aspect that these churches continue to thrive on in South Africa and the broader third world. Colonization, conquest and Christianity as a model of slavery and exploitation in Africa and Third world are an undeniable phenomenon therefore through a paradigm of decoloniality liberative theologies would correctly utilize them to have a progressive strategy in

addressing and redressing matters such as subjugation, racism, economic alienation and oppression because at their disposal is their advantages, flaws and weaknesses which will successfully develop a model to benefit black Africans in their daily struggles by redefining how life should be lived in light of the God of the oppressed.

Conclusion

The Nicene creed has tenets of equality and oneness, but, on the other hand, Western mission theology seems to have given tacit support to the privilege of white people compared to black people (Maimela, 1993, p. 54). The confession of the creed is transformative and has the salvific power to change every individual who confesses it to have a Christ-like mindset, which becomes a conviction to do right and extend kindness because the confession of "the one faith" now becomes works. Phillip Potter, the General Secretary of the WCC, correctly stated that:

> More recently, the immensely complex problems of social and racial injustice, of development and peace have forcibly reminded us that "ecumenical" rightly understood is about "the whole inhabited earth," the world of men, of cultures, religions, and social and political structures. These are the concerns of the ecumenical movement, and in a new way, they are strongly pressed by the Third World.

The Western churches' involvement in addressing the issues of racial injustice as articulated, experienced and suffered by the third world would be a paradigm shift and a transformation of their worldview into acknowledging the historically severed Western hegemony in Africa because of Europe as the centre. This perspective would bring about a different Christian hermeneutic of seeing people through the lenses of God and opting for the poor. The church's functionality should be solidarity for the poor, and its fundamental focal points would be visible through its struggle alongside the oppressed for liberation, and that will be a visible sign of God being present and the church being an active participant in God's mission (Vellem, 2015, p. 4). Vellem (2015:4) contextually states:

The church is subversive. The church has subverted several challenges in her history, such as the Jewish identity, which sought to be the heartland of the church. The church did so to the heartlands of Hellenistic culture, the Roman Empire, and now indeed the modernist Enlightenment paradigms too. In this regard, the emergence of a new church in South Africa could be sought in other heartlands, but for us, the heartland of the church in South Africa is the black poor person's lived experience. The Model of the Struggle to which we trace an ecclesiology that speaks to the condition of the black African, is by its very nature a subversive one in the light of the dominant paradigms of ecclesiology – the Settler and Missionary Models.

He (2015: 4) further argues:

For some of us, it is impossible to imagine the relevance of the church in South Africa without the memory of the miserable – the wretched of this world, when things fell apart between the white race and the black. It is difficult for one to imagine the church in South Africa without the cultural dispensation of the black Africans and surely the historical dismantlement of the indigenous genius of the historically oppressed. One of the most important factors today is the widely discussed matter of Africa as the heartland of the church in the world.

The African church is not arrogant or boastful but rather ignorant of the diverse global existence. It does not nullify various historical backgrounds, experiences and knowledge, but one thing and one thing for sure it shall never trade its vantage point to accommodate perverse colonialist and capitalistic Western worldview. There is an old saying that goes "the writers of history always document parts that embrace the one who benefits over the one who is oppressed and exploited", therefore, our history is best understood through our suffered experiences that we understand the God of the oppressed and his option for the poor, along with the church in solidarity of the poor. The church shall continue to subvert all power dynamics that seek to capture its liberation and curb its dynamism. De La Torre (2015: xx) states beautifully that:

> To do theological analysis from the margins of society, that is, to study God from the context of the disenfranchised, makes the role of power paramount in the development of any theological discourse. The quest for any theological "truth" by those who are marginalised becomes a response to the use, misuse, and abuse of power rather than adherence to religious traditions, issues of doctrines, church teachings, tenets, or spiritual rituals or practices. We begin our liberative theological quest with those who experience massive, ever-present oppression, while remaining cognizant that not all who are marginalised have similar experiences. The world's oppressed are not some monolithic group.

Within the Christian framework we need to redefine our stance in light of social problems faced by the Third World and peripheral countries, because they are abundantly rich in raw materials and their poverty is engineered, therefore, the criticism of capitalism from the vantage point of Christian ethics provide our theology with a firm grip to seek liberation for everyone more especially the people of color whose identity and dignity has experienced a lot of dehumanizing storms of land dispossession, alienation, racism, oppression and exploitation which are a result of spoilt capitalistic perverse theology.

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