

EDITORIALS

Nicaea: Creed, Culture, and Christendom

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Following the American Revolution, the United States emerged as a distinctive experiment in religious liberty, one in which the freedom to worship without submission to a state church was woven into a broader vision of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That experiment made possible a form of religious pluralism in which citizens could follow their deepest convictions while learning to live together in peace. For Christians, however, pluralism has always posed a theological as well as a political challenge: how can the church maintain fidelity to its confession while participating constructively in a diverse public order?

In recent decades, the social structures that once sustained a broadly Christian public culture have weakened. Declining church participation has meant not only the erosion of shared practices, but also the fraying of cooperation among religious communities. In such a setting, the recovery of a Christian pluralism faithful to the tradition of the American founding cannot mean the pursuit of a state-sanctioned church or the state imposition of confessional uniformity. It requires instead a renewed account of how Christians, grounded in their theological commitments, can affirm the freedom of diverse communities to coexist with equal protection under the law, mutual respect, and principled engagement in the public square. Such a vision asks Christians to hold together conviction and charity, confessing what is true, contending for it persuasively without coercion, and honoring the dignity and liberty of their neighbors.

To contribute to the ongoing conversation regarding religious pluralism, and in honor of the seventeen-hundredth anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which produced the Nicene Creed that expressed the fundamentals of Christian belief, the Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University and the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy cosponsored an ecumenical event entitled "Nicaea: Creed, Culture, and Christendom." Convened on September 23–24, 2025, this symposium featured public plenary addresses by Nadya Williams, Thomas Joseph White, and John Behr and welcomed a diverse group of scholars who presented papers related to the Nicene Creed and its legacy for the Christian community today. The articles published here ask what it means for Christians of different traditions to remember together the faith confessed in the creed, and they point out that the creed matters not only because it names essential truths about God, Christ, and salvation, but also because it provides a shared doctrinal grammar

through which divided Christians may recognize one another, engage one another, and imagine forms of common witness. If a renewed Christian pluralism is to be more than procedural tolerance, it must be rooted in substantive convictions capable of sustaining both unity and difference.

Turning to the contributions, John Behr's "Canon to Creed and Back Again" opens the collection by clarifying what the Nicene Creed is and how it functions within the life of the church. Rather than treating the creed as a detachable list of propositions, Behr situates it within the early Christian canon of truth, especially as articulated by the early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons. On this account, the creed does not compete with Scripture but provides the interpretive rule by which Scripture is rightly read as a unified witness to Christ. Behr thus presents Nicaea not as the narrowing of theological imagination, but as the condition for faithful participation in the church's liturgical life.

This constructive account is complicated by the historical realities explored in "The Failure of Nicaea? Struggles of Faith in a Christianizing Culture," by Philip Jenkins. This essay reminds readers that the authority of Nicaea was far from uncontested. For decades after 325, rival theological positions enjoyed imperial support. By tracing both the delayed reception of Nicene teaching and the persistence of groups that harbored anti-Nicene convictions, the essay shows how a doctrinal settlement eventually emerged. There is much we can learn from these ancient debates, especially in a modern world that is even more diverse and contested.

Next, we have Alex Fogleman's "Synonymous with Christ: Gregory of Nyssa on Biblical Language and Credal Orthodoxy," which turns from conciliar history to the theological force of credal language itself. Working with the assumption that the creed participates in the thick theological culture of the early church, Fogleman challenges the assumptions of a minimalist understanding of orthodoxy. Fogleman argues that in Gregory of Nyssa's response to Eunomius, credal language does more than mark doctrinal boundaries; it shapes how Christians speak of Christ and inhabit the life of faith. The essay suggests that ecumenical engagement today may actually require a fuller appreciation of the creed's formative role in Christian existence.

David E. Wilhite offers the next article, "What Has the Emperor to Do with the Church? Non-Nicenes and Constantinian Retractions." This work addresses one of the central tensions animating this symposium: the relationship between doctrinal orthodoxy and political power. By revisiting the Donatist challenge to imperial intervention, Wilhite traces a long Christian tradition of resistance to coercive state control over the church. He follows this counter-tradition from late antiquity through the Reformation and into modern Baptist thought, arguing that the defense of liberty of conscience is not a modern invention but a recurring Christian concern. In

doing so, the essay offers important resources for thinking about how Nicene orthodoxy and religious freedom might be held together rather than set at odds.

Daniel Lee Hill's essay, "Communing with the Triune God: Petrus van Mastricht, Ecumenism, and the Nicene Roots of Communion with God," comes next. Engaging the recent movement of receptive ecumenism, Hill argues that ecumenism is best understood not merely as the clarification of differences but as a shared participation in communion with the triune God. Drawing on Reformed theologian Petrus van Mastricht, he presents communion with God as a theological grammar for mutual exchange among ecclesial communities, offering a positive account of how Nicene faith can animate practices of receiving and giving across confessional lines.

The collection concludes with Francis J. Beckwith's "One and a Half Cheers for Integralism: Liberalism's Broken Promises and the New Draw of the Confessional State," which argues that the renewed appeal of integralism and Christian nationalism arises in part from the failures of liberal elites to sustain the promises of religious toleration they once championed. For those disillusioned with liberalism's present form, appeals to liberty can sound hollow. Yet, by diagnosing the attraction of the confessional state rather than simply dismissing it, Beckwith's essay sharpens the challenge facing Christians today: how to articulate a credible defense of religious liberty in a moment when both liberalism and pluralism appear fragile.

Taken together, these essays suggest that the recovery of a robust Christian pluralism depends on more than the preservation of procedural toleration or the retrieval of a vanished social consensus. What is required is a theological vision capacious enough to sustain doctrinal fidelity, ecclesial difference, and principled civic coexistence within a common political order. The Nicene Creed, precisely because it names the central mysteries of the Christian faith while providing a shared language across traditions, offers one such resource. In returning to Nicaea, these contributors do not propose an escape from the dilemmas of late modernity, but a deeper theological grammar for inhabiting them, where truth is confessed without coercion and Christian conviction and witness is celebrated in a genuinely pluralist society.

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