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## Theology Becomes Politics

### *Constantine and the Nicene Council*

#### The Reign of Constantine in the Church

##### *Toleration*

THE FIRST FEW CENTURIES OF THE CHURCH WERE MARKED BY MANY different claims of Christian identity. However, none seemed to engender more disdain from those within the church than the accusation of one as a *traditore* (someone who gave up the Scriptures for burning, rather than suffer some form of torture, and perhaps even martyrdom) or as having *lapsed* (one who had rejected faith in Christ when threatened with physical harm or death). The pure church included only those who could faithfully claim they had not compromised their commitment to Christ under the threat of punishment. While the actual threat of martyrdom was fairly inconsistent during the earliest centuries of the church, its presence was always looming. Each generation had its own stories of those who had stood fast and those who had lapsed when threatened with physical harm or death. Though the actual number of martyrs is relatively small, their faith set the standard for the church. To be a Christian meant demonstrating a willingness to face any persecution as the apostles had once done, even to the point of giving one's life for the faith.

In the spring of AD 311, the fortunes of the Christian church were about to change. Galerius, the ruler of the eastern Roman Empire, issued an edict of toleration for the Christian practice of religion. In 312, Constantine, after having visions of a Christian cross and symbol that promised victory, conquered Maxentius at the Milvian bridge outside

of Rome. This conquest made Constantine the sole ruler throughout the western Roman Empire. Early in 313, Constantine met with Licinius (eventual conqueror of Maximin Daia, Galerius' successor) at Milan. They came to terms in a letter to be issued regarding the practice of Christian religion. Since it was perceived as relatively harmless and could promote unity within the empire, Christianity was recognized as a legal faith within the Roman Empire. In what is known as the Edict of Milan, both Augusti agreed that

[N]o one should be denied the opportunity of devoting himself either to the cult of the Christians or to whatever religion he himself felt most suitable for himself, so that the highest Divinity, whose religion we obey with free minds, can exhibit to us in all things his customary favor and benevolence . . . Since you see that this has been granted to the same by us, your Excellency understands that, for the sake of peace in our time, free and open liberty of religion or cult has been similarly granted to others, in order that every individual may have unrestrained opportunity to pursue what worship he chooses.<sup>1</sup>

Latter portions of the Edict proceeded to restore seized property and places of worship to the churches. Constantine's reasons for tolerating the Christian faith, and for going so far as to return their property, may have been manifold. However, two seem to be suggested most prominently by scholars. First, it is believed that Constantine was simply recognizing the strength and size of the Christian populace, and therefore his toleration is politically motivated to help substantiate and solidify support for his rule.<sup>2</sup> This may have especially been the case following his defeat of Maxentius, who had suppressed, tortured and killed the Christians at Rome. If Eusebius' account of Maxentius' behavior is ac-

1. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X.5.5–8.

2. Smith, *Constantine the Great*, 145; Charles Cochrane (*Christianity and Classical Culture*, 214–15) also seems to attribute Constantine's favor of the Christian religion to political aspirations. For a brief discussion of the reasons for opposing the political interpretation and favoring a religious one for Constantine's favor of Christianity, see Keresztes, *Constantine A Great Christian Monarch and Apostle*, 41; Dörries, *Constantine the Great*, 43ff; and Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 1–24.

It is likely that the Christian population at the beginning of Constantine's reign was only about one-tenth the total population of the Roman Empire. But within a century, due primarily to imperial favor of Christianity and the eventual legislation against paganism, Christians comprised the majority of the population. See Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine*, 14–18.

curate, the Christians would have been ecstatic to receive Constantine as their deliverer:

Having grabbed the Imperial city, [Maxentius] was most daring in his acts of impiety and wickedness . . . He would, for example, separate lawful wives from their husbands, and insulting them most shamefully he would send them back to their husbands. He practiced this drunken behavior not toward common and obscure men, but to those who held the first places in the Roman Senate. Although he shamefully dishonored a great number of free women, nevertheless he was unable to satisfy his intemperate and undisciplined spirit. But when he made attempts against Christian women, he was no longer able to contrive an easy way to adultery. For they would rather lose their lives than submit their bodies to him for corruption . . . And even though [all men] kept quiet and suffered the bitter slavery, there was still no deliverance from the bloody cruelty of the tyrant. Once, for example, on some trifling pretense, he let the people be slaughtered by his own body-guard, and countless multitudes of the Roman people were slain in the very middle of the city by the spears and weapons, not of the Scythians and barbarians, but of their own fellow-citizens. It is, besides, impossible to count how many senators were murdered with a view to the seizure of their own estates, for at times multitudes were put to death on various fabricated charges.

The greatest of the tyrants crimes was that he had recourse to sorcery, when, for the purposes of magic, he, at times, ripped up women with child, but at other times he searched into the inward parts of new-born babies, and slew lions and was engaged in some abominable practices for evoking demons and averting the war. For he hoped that by these means he would gain victory.<sup>3</sup>

As is evident from this quote, Maxentius was indiscriminate in his oppression. He killed and tortured both Christians and non-Christians alike. Thus it is not surprising that both Christians and non-Christians celebrated Constantine's triumphal entry into Rome.<sup>4</sup>

The fortunes of Christians in the east would not be transformed as quickly as those of the Christians in the west. Licinius was slow to proclaim the Edict of Milan, and many of his supporters were old

3. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, I.33–36. The cited translation is from Keresztes, *Constantine*, 14–15.

4. Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.

Roman, meaning they did not support the toleration of Christians.<sup>5</sup> If Constantine foresaw the delays and eventual open hostility of Licinius toward Christians, it would have been politically prudent for him to demonstrate open acceptance of Christianity. His half of the empire would have looked much more attractive than the oppression occurring in the east, making eventual conquest and rule of the eastern empire much easier.<sup>6</sup> Another reason to consider Constantine's toleration of Christians as politically motivated is that though he professed to be a Christian, he waited until just before his death to receive baptism.<sup>7</sup>

A second reason that is offered for Constantine's openness toward Christianity is that he professed Christianity as his own religion. The reasoning behind this claim begins with his Christian visions (conversion?) prior to and during the conquest of Maxentius at the Milvian bridge. This was followed by declarations of toleration for Christianity, presumably motivated from some type of devotion to the Christian God. Constantine eventually made it clear in various proclamations that he wished to be considered a Christian. He finally took part in and convened various councils, Nicea (325) being the most prominent. During this period, Constantine appears to believe himself to be a guardian of the church, in many respects, similar to the role of the bishops within the church, though he himself was responsible for both Christians and non-Christians in the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup>

5. Keresztes, *Constantine*, 45ff.

6. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 239. Relying primarily on Eusebian record of Constantine's correspondences and the activities surrounding them, Keresztes (*Constantine*, 102–11) records the oppressions by Licinius and his eventual defeat by Constantine. After Constantine defeated Licinius, he issued several edicts relieving the oppression of Christians in the east.

7. Keresztes (*Constantine*, 167ff.) devotes several paragraphs to a defense of Constantine's Christian profession, despite his delayed baptism. Keresztes' reasoning is dependent primarily on the statements of Constantine at his baptism and what Keresztes believes is by this time a common practice of delaying baptism until the end of life. This would provide for a "clean slate" just before death, meaning no sins would follow the soul into the afterlife.

8. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 169–81. The thrust of many works regarding the life of Constantine has been to demonstrate and defend his Christian belief. Such an interpretation was first given by Eusebius of Caesarea in both his *Ecclesiastical History* and *Life of Constantine*. However, contemporary authors are no less prone to extol the commitment of Constantine to the God of the Christians and the Christianizing of the Roman Empire (e.g., Keresztes, *Constantine*).

Answering the questions concerning Constantine's Christian commitment is of little import for this study. What is important is that he demonstrated obvious favor toward Christianity, even to the point of using his office to further goals and purposes of the church. It is at this point in history that the church takes a decidedly different turn in its relationship with the state. Theology had functioned as a marker for true belief. Further, public confessions of faith served to provide warrant for martyrdom. However, the church had always been outside the workings of the state. She had previously been either opposed or tolerated, but never invited in as a positive force in the rule of the state. With Constantine, all this changed. How this change took place is the focus of our next section.

### *Calls for Unity*

One of the reasons it is difficult to measure the reasons for Constantine's initial toleration of Christianity is that his edicts were couched in calls for unity within the Empire. As quoted above in the Edict of Milan, Constantine's toleration was "for the sake of peace in our time."<sup>9</sup> Further examination of Constantine's letters/edicts during the early period of his reign demonstrates that he believed toleration would help sustain unity within the empire.<sup>10</sup> Whether he may also have a commitment to the Christian God is another issue. What is clear is that unity was of great importance to him for his continued rule.

### THE DONATISTS

It is not long after Constantine became sole ruler of the western half of the Empire that he learned of a schism within the church. He had previously assumed that the church was "one united body of Christians, distinguishable from adherents of other religious cults."<sup>11</sup> However, Constantine, now in control of Africa, soon learned that the church in that region was not at all unified. Constantine's concerns for unity, and perhaps his desire for the church to be a true witness to the love

9. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X.5.5–8.

10. Though attributing Constantine's concern to his Christian commitment, Keresztes (*Constantine*, 38–57) recounts several letters displaying Constantine's concern for unity and peace within the western half of the Empire.

11. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 236.

of Christ, led him to become involved in settling the dispute. Thus, Constantine began to direct a resolution to the Donatist schism. Though the origins of the schism may be traced back to 305, the situation in which Constantine intervened began in 311 when Majorinus was made rival bishop of Carthage. The existing bishop, Caecilian, was eventually declared the legitimate bishop by a court of church bishops on October 2, 313. Donatus of Casae Nigrae was excommunicated since he was the leader of the opposition. Not satisfied with the results of this court, the Donatists (owing their name to either this Donatus or the next schismatic bishop of Carthage) asked the emperor Constantine for a new trial, thus appealing to the state to intervene in the church. Constantine complied by providing public transportation for church bishops from various regions to the next meeting. The synod at Arles in August of 314 expanded its scope both in terms of the number of bishops and their representation of various regions and in the subject matter under consideration. While the Donatist schism was considered and finally condemned, several other issues both practical and theological were discussed.<sup>12</sup> A precedent was now established regarding the resolution of schism within the church. Though the Donatist schism was never completely resolved by the courts or synods, a similar pattern for resolution was used by Constantine and the church in the face of the next great debate.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE ARIANS

When Constantine conquered Licinius in 324, he hoped to find a unified church in the east—one that could help him restore the unity of the church in Africa. Instead, what he found was a church embroiled in controversy and suffering from its own schismatic problems. As Constantine explained in his letter to the two primary adversaries, Alexander and Arius,

12. Keresztes (*Constantine*, 62–68) records various correspondence regarding the convening and transactions of the Council.

13. Constantine himself recognized that the schism had not been squelched when on May 5, 321, he issued a rescript to the vicar of Africa, declaring that no further persecution of the Donatists should take place. About the same time he wrote a letter to the bishops of Africa expressing his regret that his work had not led to the promotion of peace and unity. God would finally judge the Donatist schism and bring it to an end Himself. See Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 238–39.

. . . I had a twofold reason for undertaking that duty which I have now performed. My design was, first, to bring the diverse judgments formed by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, secondly, to restore to health the system of the world, then suffering under the malignant power of a grievous distemper. Keeping these objects in view, I sought to accomplish the one by the secret eye of thought, while the other I tried to rectify by the power of military authority . . . Finding, then, that the whole of Africa was pervaded by an intolerable spirit of mad folly, through the influence of those who with heedless frivolity had presumed to rend the religion of the people into diverse sects; I was anxious to check this disorder, and could discover no other remedy equal to the occasion, except in sending some of yourselves to aid in restoring mutual harmony among the disputants, after I had removed the common enemy of mankind [Licinius] who had interposed his lawless sentence for the prohibition of your holy synods . . . But, O glorious Providence of God, how deep a wound did not my ears only, but my very heart receive in the report that divisions existed among yourselves more grievous still than those which continued in that country; so that you, through whose aid I had hoped to procure a remedy for the errors of others, are in a state which needs healing even more than theirs.<sup>14</sup>

The church in the east was in the midst of a schismatic debate that, in Constantine's opinion, was causing even worse division than the schism in Africa. While the specifics of the debate are well known and not relevant for our study, we must pay specific attention to how Constantine responds to this schism. Whereas previously he had provided the context in which to resolve division, he now took it upon himself to personally resolve the Arian debate. Continuing his letter to Alexander and Arius, he writes:

Feeling myself, therefore, compelled to address you in this letter, and to appeal at the same time to your unanimity and sagacity, I call on Divine Providence to assist me in the task, while I interrupt your dissension in the character of a minister of peace. And with reason: for if I might expect, with the help of a higher Power, to be able without difficulty, by a judicious appeal to the pious feelings of those who heard me, to recall them to a better spirit, even though the occasion of the disagreement were a greater one, how can I refrain from promising myself a far easier and more

14. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II.64–68.

speedy adjustment of this difference, when the cause which hinders general harmony of sentiment is intrinsically trifling and of little moment?<sup>15</sup>

Constantine continued in the remainder of the letter to address the need for unity. However, he did not seem to understand the depth and complexity of the differences between Alexander and Arius at this point. He appealed to them to set aside this “trifling” issue as though it were of little import to the faith. As he continues,

Let therefore both the unguarded question and the inconsiderate answer receive your mutual forgiveness. For the cause of your difference has not been any of the leading doctrines or precepts of the Divine law, nor has any new heresy respecting the worship of God arisen among you. You are in truth of one and the same judgment: you may therefore well join in communion and fellowship . . . But I will refresh your minds by a little illustration, as follows. You know that the philosophers, though they all adhere to one system, are yet frequently at issue on certain points, and differ, perhaps, in their degree of knowledge: yet they are recalled to harmony of sentiment by the uniting power of their common doctrines. If this be true, is it not far more reasonable that you, who are the ministers of the supreme God, should be of one mind respecting the profession of the same religion?<sup>16</sup>

Constantine obviously did not have a firm grasp yet on what was the difference between Alexander and Arius.<sup>17</sup> What is perhaps more interesting from this statement for our study is the way in which Constantine conceived of the faith as similar to the beliefs of the philosophers. Whether or not his comparison is accurate, it is still interesting that he depicts the doctrines of the philosophers as something that can be considered as a whole unit consisting of distinct parts (doctrines). Constantine’s conception of resolution seems to reflect a belief that the faith of the Christians can be defined as a whole in fairly clear terms, while still maintaining some distinctions in the various doctrines. While he was still obviously concerned for preserving orthodoxy, Constantine was willing to allow for some flexibility in doctrines he did not consider crucial to the united

15. Ibid., II.68.

16. Ibid., II.70–71.

17. Keresztes, *Constantine*, 123.



front of Christianity. Certainly this was a fairly naive approach to the Arian problem by Constantine, but it seems likely that the Nicene creed was an attempt to fulfill these expectations for unity in system, with difference in particulars. Constantine appears to have believed relative unity in the theological system or summary represented by the creed would likewise bring about social unity in the Empire, at least amongst Christians.

After learning of the schisms of Colluthus and Melitius, Constantine decided to call a council to settle all the schismatic problems facing the church, in particular the Arian controversy. Originally to be held at Ancyra, it was later changed to Nicea, which was a much better location. This council was preceded by the Council of Antioch, which took upon itself not only to settle on a successor to Philogonius, bishop of Antioch, but also produced a decidedly anti-Arian creed. This set the stage for Constantine's council at Nicea to settle the questions regarding Arianism in the church. Hosius (or Ossius), Constantine's ecclesiastical adviser, had presided over the Council of Antioch. The great Council of Nicea was overseen by the Emperor himself. Eusebius records for us the opening ceremonies including the Emperor's entrance and opening address to the Council, calling them to peace and unity.<sup>18</sup> A detailed account of the proceedings at Nicea is not available to us. However, from what can be pieced together from the correspondence that surrounded the Council, it seems apparent that Constantine not only presided over the Council, but even participated by suggesting that "homouousios" be added to the creed to make it absolute in its opposition to the Arian interpretation of the second person of the Trinity.<sup>19</sup>

#### UNITY AND UNIFIED KNOWLEDGE ENFORCED BY THE STATE

Shortly after the Council of Nicea concluded, Constantine addressed letters to the church and to certain groups of heretics. The letters to the churches simply explained the results of the Council and exhorted the churches to unify in their worship and belief. He also wrote a letter establishing a single date on which to celebrate Easter. The letter to the heretics was quite direct and specific about its import.

18. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.6–12.

19. Athanasius records the letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his church, in which Eusebius indicated that Constantine had inserted the word "Consubstantial." See Athanasius, *Epistola Eusebii*, 4.

Constantine addressed this letter to the “Novatians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Paulians [of Samosata], and you who are called Phrygians [Montanists], and all you who devise and support heresies by means of your private assemblies.”<sup>20</sup> Though not addressed specifically to the Arians or Donatists, since they had supposedly been dealt with or left to the judgment of God, certainly they are aware that this letter’s contents could be directed toward them in the future, if they were not reconciled to the church.<sup>21</sup> The text of the letter and its directions for how to handle these heresies are of primary interest for our study.

Forasmuch, then, as it is no longer possible to bear with your pernicious errors, we give warning by this present statute that none of you henceforth presume to assemble yourselves together. We have directed, accordingly, that you be deprived of all the houses in which you are accustomed to hold your assemblies: and our care in this respect extends so far as to forbid the holding of your superstitious and senseless meetings, not in public merely, but in any private house or place whatsoever. Let those of you, therefore, who are desirous of embracing the true and pure religion, take the far better course of entering the catholic Church, and uniting with it in holy fellowship, whereby you will be enabled to arrive at the knowledge of the truth . . . And in order that this remedy may be applied with effectual power, we have commanded, as before said, that you be positively deprived of every gathering point for your superstitious meetings, I mean all the houses of prayer, if such be worthy of the name, which belong to heretics, and that these be made over without delay to the catholic Church; that any other places be confiscated to the public service, and no facility whatever be left for any future gathering; in order that from this day forward none of your unlawful assemblies may presume to appear in any public or private place. Let this edict be made public.<sup>22</sup>

Though Constantine had previously intervened and even made proclamation regarding the Donatist schism, he is here taking his resolution a step further by confiscating the meeting places of the various heresies. These are smaller heresies than the Arian schism, but such an Imperial act serves as a warning to the followers of Arius. Arius had been excommunicated at the Council of Nicea, but Constantine was unwilling to al-

20. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.64.

21. Keresztes, *Constantine*, 137.

22. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.65.

low the Arian controversy to dispel itself or be handled by the bishops of the church. He became quite proactive on behalf of what he believed to be the orthodox position. In a letter to the catholic church of Nicomedia, he makes it clear he is exiling two bishops for their support of the excommunicated Arius. Regarding the prominent bishops Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognius, he writes:

But to pass over the rest of his depravity, please hear what he [Eusebius], a short while ago, carried through with Theognius, the accomplice of his madness. I had ordered some Alexandrians who had fallen away from our faith to be sent to this place, because, through their activity, the torch of dissent was blazing up. But these excellent bishops, whom the truth of the council once brought back to repentance, not only received them, but also consorted with them in their depraved ways. Therefore, I decided to do this concerning these ungrateful people: I ordered them to be seized and banished to a place that is as far away as possible. Now it is your duty that you look to God with that faith which is known to have always existed, and ought to exist, and that you conduct yourselves in such a way that we may rejoice in having holy, orthodox and dutiful bishops. If anybody dares, thoughtlessly, to go so far as to revive the memory of or praise those destructive persons, he will be immediately restrained in his boldness by the power of the servant of God, that is, mine.<sup>23</sup>

The people of the churches at Nicomedia and Nicea listened and elected new bishops. Eusebius and Theognius were eventually allowed to return to their sees, but not until they had submitted to Constantine and proven full acceptance of the Nicene creed, particularly the meaning of the term *Consubstantial*.<sup>24</sup> Constantine continued his mission of unifying the faith according to the creed by writing to Theodotus, a bishop who supported Arius and was previously excommunicated at the Council of Antioch. In the letter, Constantine simply reminded him of what happened to Eusebius and Theognius when they disagreed with the orthodox creed. Apparently, Theodotus heeded the warning and agreed to the creed.<sup>25</sup> Constantine then took up the task of bringing Arius himself back to the fold, inviting him in 326 to the palace to discuss the issues.<sup>26</sup>

23. Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 41; as cited by Keresztes, *Constantine*, 140.

24. Keresztes, *Constantine*, 140-41, esp. n. 48.

25. *Ibid.*, 140-41.

26. *Ibid.*, 141-42.

While we don't know if any such meeting took place, we do know that Arius attempted to regain his position by offering an alternative creed.<sup>27</sup> This creed was somewhat vague and didn't address the crucial issue of Consubstantiality. However, Constantine relented and wrote to bishop Alexander of Alexandria to re-admit Arius to the church. In his letter to Alexander, Constantine states that Arius was "professing that he has the same views concerning the Catholic faith as were defined and confirmed by you at the Council of Nicea."<sup>28</sup> It is unclear whether Constantine was willing to accept the alternative creed offered by Arius or if Arius had actually professed agreement with the Nicene creed. Whatever the case, Alexander did not believe Arius was truly in agreement. This was the beginning of a struggle over Arianism and unity in the church between Constantine and Alexander. Alexander's successor, Athanasius, was eventually dismissed as bishop of Alexandria, partly because of his unwillingness to re-admit Arius. Alexander and Athanasius did not believe that the former pro-Arian bishops or Arius himself had actually come to agree with the Nicene creed. Instead, they felt that Arius and his followers had simply succumbed to the threats of Constantine and the pressures of being excluded from the church.<sup>29</sup>

As is evident from our discussion above, the creed became a tool in the hands of the state. Though perhaps Constantine's aggressive pursuit of unity was born from a heartfelt desire to see God's church prosper, the means by which he accomplished unity was state induced coercion. In other words, while the church may have been the primary concern in Constantine's mind, which remains questionable, he was using his position as Emperor to accomplish goals of the church.<sup>30</sup> The creed served

27. For Arius' letter to Constantine containing this creed, see Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.26, and Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, II.27.

28. Cited by Keresztes, *Constantine*, 143.

29. Ibid., 142–66. Keresztes records the various correspondence and edicts that resulted in what he believes is a deception of Constantine by the pro-Arian bishops and finally Athanasius' exile by Constantine.

30. When some of Arius' followers, the Meletians, were attempting to have Athanasius exiled by Constantine for actions he had in fact not done, Constantine warns them with civil punishment. Writing to Athanasius, Constantine states, "And finally, I will add, I wish this letter to be read frequently by your wisdom in public, that it may thereby come to the knowledge of all men, and especially reach the ears of those who thus act, and thus raise disturbances . . . Wherefore . . . I have come to this determination, that if they excite any further commotion of this kind, I will myself in person take cognizance of the matter, and that not according to the ecclesiastical, but according to the civil laws,

as the standard by which the state could measure orthodoxy, not unlike the oaths of allegiance given by prior generations of faithful Romans to the Emperor. Christian theology had evolved from its position as the schismatic disease of the Empire into an integral part of the design of Imperial identity. Though one need not necessarily be a Christian to be a Roman citizen, the Emperor now considered Christian allegiance an important attribute for the Empire. He became the one who protected orthodoxy and sought unity in the church. Doctrinal considerations that were once only the concerns of theologians for the sake of Christian identity were now under the influence of the Emperor for the sake of ecclesiastical orthodoxy, dare we even say Imperial orthodoxy. Theology is now wed to politics. But what does this theology look like?

## Creed as Theology and Apology

The earliest creeds likely derived from baptismal formulae in specific regions. They were not initially used to measure the standard of orthodoxy within each community. Instead, they were pedagogical tools to help instruct and indoctrinate novices into the church. As Frances Young makes clear, “Creeds did not originate, then, as ‘tests of orthodoxy,’ but as summaries of faith taught to new Christians by their local bishop, summaries that were traditional to each local church and which in detail varied from place to place.”<sup>31</sup> The earliest baptismal formulae were likely interrogatory creeds divided into three parts. In his *Apostolic Tradition*, Ps.-Hippolytus (170–236) records an early tripartite baptismal formula:

Dost thou believe in God, the Father Almighty?

Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?

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and so I will in future find them out, because they clearly are robbers, so to speak, not only against human kind, but against the divine doctrine itself” (Athanasius, *Defence against the Arians*, 68).

31. Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 3.

Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost, and the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?<sup>32</sup>

These three questions seem clearly patterned after the command to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit given to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew (28:19). It is likely that the candidate was submerged after giving an appropriate response to each question, three times in all. While it remains uncertain how the interrogatory baptismal creeds evolved into the more declaratory creeds of the late third century, we do know that the practice of reciting a creed and answering creedal questions prior to baptism remained a practice even well after the development of declaratory creeds. It is also likely that the tripartite shape of later declaratory creeds derived from the baptismal formulae.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the content of each creed, whether interrogatory or declaratory, no fixed formula was agreed upon by the entire church until the fourth century. Prior to that, each community had formulated its own creed with specific attention being given to each local context. However, some common language was used by the authors of these various creeds and the Father, Son, Holy Spirit pattern was a constant. Scripture provided a familiar language, as did the writings of later theologians. As was seen in the first chapter above, Irenaeus and Tertullian, among others, relied on the rule of faith. This rule was not a fixed statement of faith, but rather a context specific summary of the faith.<sup>34</sup> Within each community, creeds were designed to give converts a concise summary of the faith that is proclaimed in Scripture. This was necessary, as Cyril of Jerusalem (318–386) explained, “For since all cannot read the Scriptures, some being hindered as to the knowledge of them by want of learning, and others by a want of leisure, in order that the soul may not perish from ignorance, we comprise the whole doctrine of the Faith in a few lines.”<sup>35</sup> This “summary” of the faith was to be committed to memory and treasured in the heart because “the articles of the Faith were not composed as seemed good to men; but the most important points collected out of all the Scripture make up one complete teaching of the Faith.”<sup>36</sup>

32. Quoted by Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 6.

33. Ibid.

34. For further discussion on the relationship of creed to the rule of faith, see *ibid.*, 23ff.

35. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, V.12.

36. Ibid.

These early creeds were also somewhat flexible in their form and content to allow specific communities to combat heresies arising within their midst. Devising a creed to indoctrinate candidates for baptism into the church was also a means to guard against heresy. Though the early forms of the creeds were not tests of orthodoxy, at least not in the sense they finally became tests in the fourth century, they were nevertheless a way to ensure that the tradition of true faith was handed down to future generations without error. In the midst of competing claims concerning God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, it was important for the church to tell the story well. This is how the creed functioned apologetically in the pre-Constantinian centuries of the church—as a pedagogical tool, not as an exclusionary device.

When Constantine and the church leadership began to use the creed as a test of orthodoxy, this was something new to the faith. As Young explains, “Bishops had met in Council before to deal with members of their own number who failed to teach what their consensus demanded. Excommunication had been used before, and false teachers anathematized. The new elements [with Nicea] lay in using a creed to define orthodoxy, and in the availability of imperial power to enforce the decisions of the council and provide the bishops with greater effectiveness in exercising their authority on earth.”<sup>37</sup> The creed formulated at the Council of Nicea served this function in evolving ways until it was finally “canonized” at the Council of Constantinople (381). The creeds, in particular the Nicene creed, became a fixed formula used to measure the orthodoxy of individuals and the communities who followed them. It was certainly not that the earlier church had been unconcerned with truth, since Christianity was committed to a singular notion of what (or should we say Who) was the truth. The innovation is that now truth could be measured by the church according to a written standard that is enforced by the state. The creed was no longer locally contextualized; it was true for all the Christian (i.e., Roman) world. In other words, its summary was regarded as enduring, even universal.

As mentioned earlier, these confessions of faith are in many ways similar to how the Romans had measured “orthodox” allegiance to their Ceasers prior to Constantine.<sup>38</sup> It was this criterion that had been used

37. Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 13.

38. Though the Romans used no particular creed to measure allegiance to themselves and the ancient Roman gods, their edicts requiring everyone to offer sacrifice to

against the church during her centuries of martyrdom. Now the church, under Roman Imperial compulsion, measured orthodoxy according to her statements of belief. Denials of allegiance could, and eventually would, have just as dire consequences as for those who denied allegiance to the Caesars.

Ironically, the very tool being used for unity became a pry-bar that wedged the schismatic factions apart. While this is true of many of the early schismatic divisions (e.g., Arianism), the *filioque* statement that was included in the creed by various churches in the west also serves as a good illustration. Meant as a clarification of doctrine, and therefore, a means to bring the true church together in appropriate belief, it served instead to help pry the east and west apart. Certainly this does not mean that creeds are an obstacle to fellowship, nor does it mean that belief should be left so vague as to conceal differences for the sake of unity. It is simply a historical observation that the fixedness of doctrine in the creeds meant to provide unity of belief served also as the means for dissolution of the unity of fellowship.

The creeds functioned as a summary of the Scriptures, though perhaps not a complete summary since little is mentioned of the history of Israel.<sup>39</sup> It must be recognized that the creeds were not simply a list of “articles of belief,” nor were they meant to be a systematic set of doctrines.<sup>40</sup> One will notice that even one of the crucial doctrines under discussion, the Trinity, is not mentioned by name, though certainly doctrinal language is being formulated and used regarding these various issues. Instead of a system, they are “confessions’ summarizing the Christian story, or affirmations of the three ‘characters’ in the story.”<sup>41</sup> Once again we see that the definition of system, if narrowly construed, does not fit with the actual theology of historical communities. If broadly defined, perhaps the ideas of organization and unity, and even internal consistency, might fit as a description of the creeds. However, an even more

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their gods amounted to a written rule requiring compliance. Those who did not comply were beaten and sometimes killed. Those Christians who complied were excommunicated. See Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 225–34; and Sordi, *Christians and the Roman Empire*, 171–79.

39. Ibid., 5.

40. Ibid., 12.

41. Ibid. However, Young does seem to be somewhat flexible in his definition of system. He declares that Irenaeus “created the first ‘systematic theology’, a comprehensive attempt to see Christian teaching as a coherent whole” (22).



glaring similarity does exist between the use of the creeds to measure orthodoxy and the modern notion of system. The fixedness of belief in a single statement of the faith is a parallel use of each. The creed is being used to establish one statement of belief for all the communities in the Roman Empire, presumably for all time. Systematic fixedness also relies on the notion that its statements are universally true and ahistorical.<sup>42</sup> While each type of rigidity may have arisen from differing concerns and certainly with different ends in mind, nevertheless, each claims a stability that denies any notion of the context specific nature of belief.

## The Golden Age

An interesting twist on the use of the creed as a test of orthodoxy and the way it became a fixed standard of faith is observed in its fusion with certain eschatological beliefs. Robert Grant points out the various approaches to eschatology taken during the second through the fourth centuries.<sup>43</sup> What is most interesting is the view attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea. The idea of the “Golden Age” had already been developed by Clement of Alexandria. Grant believes that Eusebius equated the inauguration of the Golden Age with the rule of Constantine. As Grant states, “[F]or a court theologian like Eusebius of Caesarea (himself an admirer of Origen) the golden age had really been initiated by the reign of the Christian emperor Constantine. The victory of the church was clearly a close approximation to the coming of God’s reign.”<sup>44</sup> This seems a plausible assertion given some of Eusebius’ comments comparing Constantine’s reign to that of Moses.<sup>45</sup> Eusebius goes even further to explain that certain prophecies meant for the coming kingdom were fulfilled by the reign of Constantine:

[T]he Roman empire, the cause of multiplied governments being thus removed, effected an easy conquest of those which yet remained; its object being to unite all nations in one harmonious whole . . . And surely this must appear a wondrous fact to those who will examine the question in the love of truth, and desire not to cavil at these blessings. The falsehood of demon superstition was convicted: the inveterate strife and mutual hatred of the

42. One is again reminded of modern efforts such as Hegel’s “Absolute knowledge.”

43. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 283.

44. Ibid.

45. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, XII.

nations was removed: at the same time One God, and the knowledge of that God, were proclaimed to all: one universal empire prevailed; and the whole human race, subdued by the controlling power of peace and concord, receiving one another as brethren, and responded to the feelings of their common nature. Hence as children of one God and Father, and owing true religion as their common mother, they saluted and welcomed each other with words of peace. Thus the whole world appeared like one well-ordered and united family: each one might journey unhindered as far as and whithersoever he pleased: men might securely travel from West to East, and from East to West, as to their own native country: in short, the ancient oracles and predictions of the prophets were fulfilled, more numerous than we can at present cite, and those especially which speak as follows concerning the saving Word. "He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth." And again, "In His days shall righteousness spring up; and abundance of peace." "And they shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into sickles: and nation shall not take up sword against nation, neither shall they learn to war any more." These words, predicted ages before in the Hebrew tongue, have received in our own day a visible fulfillment, by which the testimonies of the ancient oracles are clearly confirmed.<sup>46</sup>

Subsequently it is not a far stretch to assert that, for many, Constantine's rule marked the initiation, or perhaps consummation, of the reign of God on earth. This may be a fairly simple form of apocalypticism, or it may be a combination of Christian apocalypticism and triumphalism.<sup>47</sup> Though subsequent generations would have difficulty reconciling the inauguration of God's Kingdom to the actuality of life on earth, it seems to have been the predominant view of most orthodox theologians regard-

46. Eusebius, *The Oration of Eusebius*, XVI.7. Eusebius is here quoting Psalm 71:7–8 and Isaiah 2:4 (Septuagint). For further comments on the nature of Eusebius' sermon and its triumphalistic nature, see Baker, *Constantine the Great*, 295–320.

47. David Olster (Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*, 30–50) believes the triumphalist spirit typically associated with imperial conquest also became a part of Christian belief as the Emperor Constantine attributed his victories to the Christian God. This seems a fair judgment when one reads Eusebius depiction of the wars following the Milvian bridge. According to Olster, "As Christians conflated imperial wars and pagan persecutions, they began to measure God's power, and his believers' faith, through military, not martyrial victory. The civil wars of Constantine were recast so that love of Christ inspired Constantine; hatred of Christians, his enemies" (31).

ing the relationship between church and state, at least up to the time of the Reformation.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The impact on theology by this union between church and state and the expectation that the state was the new kingdom of God was tremendous. No longer were theology and creed simply the design of a local community, which could at any moment be dispersed through persecution or martyrdom without causing theological difficulties. Now the kingdom of God was represented in the whole of the earthly kingdom ruled by Constantine and later his heirs. Disloyalty to the emperor was equivalent to disloyalty to God.<sup>49</sup> Theology had become fixed in the form of a creed and was also being fixed in the form of a governmental structure. Precedent had been established for how the church would deal with schism and controversy. Ultimately, final appeal could be made to the emperor since he was God's agent for seeing that the church flourish in unity.<sup>50</sup> Theology as reflection on Scripture and doctrine was relatively fixed, since to challenge any doctrine was a challenge to the creed and the kingdom of God, and subsequently, a challenge to the state. Orthodoxy was guarded by the state. Though this by no means meant that schism and division was done (Pelagianism was yet to rear its head), it does mean that issues were now dealt with according to a pattern—a hierarchical form of governmental control—even, a political system. The sovereign had the right, indeed, the duty, to assist the church in maintaining unity and ridding its membership of heresy. Debates still occurred and churches, in fact, drifted further

48. Problems, of course, began to arise during and after the fall of the Roman Empire. Augustine wrestles with the relationship of the church and state in his *City of God*. However, it is still quite apparent throughout the next several centuries that the state feels compelled to act on behalf of the church, albeit at times for suspect reasons (e.g., during the crusades). Though questioned on grounds of authenticity, the church during the Reformation does not wish to separate itself from the state completely, although obvious separations occur due to Protestant and Catholic allegiance. For a good discussion of these issues during the earlier centuries of "Christendom," see Greenslade, *Church and State from Constantine to Theodosius*. For further discussion of the problems encountered by the church in its relationship to the state up to the Middle Ages, see Herrin, *Formation of Christendom*.

49. Greenslade, *Church and State*, 11.

50. *Ibid.*, 9–23.

apart, but the church had now entrenched its theology in the laws of nations.<sup>51</sup> Theological methodology is now a part of the political process. The creed had established the boundaries in which debate could occur. It also established the boundaries inside which the state would tolerate disagreement. Those who stepped outside the confessions of the church were enemies of the state.

Two innovations have now helped to solidify the way in which theology will be done for centuries. By becoming fixed in the form of the creed, theological reflection was now bound to a written document external to Scripture, which presumably summarized Scripture. By becoming wed to political structure and the triumphalism of the empire, theology now must be consistent with the political progress of the “kingdom.” To question or challenge doctrines was not simply heretical, but also treasonous. Theology, and perhaps even the interpretation of Scripture used to support orthodox theology, were now (though perhaps somewhat ignorantly) subject to the state.

To see what this means for later theological method, we must devote our attention to two figures of the Middle Ages: Thomas Aquinas and John Wycliffe.

51. Constantine himself began to legislate according to what he believed was a Christian morality. See Greenslade, *Church and State*, 21.