

Perspectives on Nicaea – the Church of England

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I guess for the vast majority of churchgoers in the Church of England, if you asked them the question, ‘What’s the significance of the Nicene Creed?’, they would look completely baffled. There are people – I’ve certainly encountered them – who attend our churches and yet struggle to say the creed with full confidence because they’re not really sure what it means, or whether they really actually believe all it says. But for most people, I suspect, it’s another text which simply washes over them. They may have a sense that it’s important, that it helps to define what it means to be a Christian, that somehow it tells us something vital about the Father and the Son and the Spirit, but they probably couldn’t put very much of that into words.

We use the Nicene Creed, and other creeds, in Anglicanism almost exclusively in worship, in the liturgy, and if you want to know what the significance of Nicaea is for the Church of England today, you really have to start there, in use, in worship. The Nicene Creed is used only at the eucharist, on Sundays and Feast Days. For some ‘low’ or short celebrations, it might be omitted altogether. It is indelibly associated for Anglicans, in other words, with the central act of worship in which we commemorate and in a sense recreate (or re-appropriate – all the words here fall short) our Lord’s offering of himself for our sins, for our salvation. So I’d say that the creed of Nicaea is like a golden thread which connects us first as worshippers today back to the faith of the early centuries of the Church, and in turn – since the Church Fathers thought they were only clarifying and recognising the core of the faith – back to Jesus himself, his life and death and resurrection, and the Gospel he preached.

We don’t as Anglicans require anyone to sign a document or ‘confession’ which includes the creed as a condition of membership. Belonging to the church is for us primarily a matter of association and practice, rather than cognitive precision. Famously, attempts to produce a comprehensive catechism or compilation of what Anglicans believe have failed, because of the great range of theological opinion in Anglicanism. We are a liturgical church, and what we think as a church is expressed officially above all in our public prayer. So we always try to find a liturgical form for some new commemoration or event. There’s a back-handed tribute to this in the occasional extract from the so-called ‘Alternative Rocky Horror Service Book’ in the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, which takes its cue from our previous public liturgy, *The Alternative Service Book*, and sends up the Anglican habit of devising new prayers, rites and collects for any and every public occasion. This conviction that it is the way we pray together which above all defines who and what we are as Christians has always seemed to me to put things the right way around, privileging the relationship with God in the very speech we use about him, and making the intellectual formulation of doctrine effectively a secondary matter. So my first key point is that Anglicans accept, and have always accepted, the Nicene Christological formula as expressing the very heart of Christian faith, because when we pray together, we are celebrating the Son who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, as that implies, there is such a thing even in Anglicanism as ‘credal orthodoxy’: it is summed up for us (and protected) in the saying of the creed in worship. Right back to the Act of Supremacy of 1559, in the Church of England at any rate, the Council of Nicaea was recognised as the first of the series of ecumenical councils whose statements of belief could be taken as defining the boundaries of Christian faith. That position was reinforced in the 8th Article of the 39 Articles of Religion, where the Nicene, Athanasian and Apostles’ Creed are commended as “thoroughly to be received and believed” because “they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture”.

So here is my second key point. The Anglican Reformers said what they said in the Articles, and elsewhere in our historic formularies (in the *Books of Homilies*, for example), precisely because they thought that the creeds said no more nor no less than what was referenced in Scripture. On this they were of course completely at one with other Protestant traditions. They did not think they were inventing a new church. They saw themselves in full continuity with the beliefs of the early Christian Church, because they saw the early Church as entirely in continuity with Jesus and the Apostles. So when people say – as they still sometimes say – that Anglicanism is Patristic, this is essentially what they mean. It still remains the case that at the heart of Anglican Christianity is the conviction of the supreme authority of Scripture, albeit mediated through reason and tradition. And that supreme authority of Scripture means – in our terms – that there is an essential inner logic binding together the interpretation of Scripture, the administration of the Scriptural sacraments of baptism and eucharist, the use of the Catholic Creeds which sum up the saving truth of Scripture, and even the ordering of the Church. Any one point of that quadrilateral, Anglicans believe, leads to the others. Nicene Orthodoxy, if we use that term, for us captures the essence of the Gospel and of the practice and order of the Church.

But – for that very reason Anglicans also think that Nicene Orthodoxy ultimately is a key element of our vision of unity, and so of the ecumenical goal. So my third key point concerns the ecumenical significance of Nicaea. Precisely because we believe that this formula of faith, ultimately traced back 1700 years to the Nicene fathers, expresses the essential truth of the Gospel, Anglicans also think that it, or at least what it implies about the content of faith, belongs to the whole Christian world. Of course I recognise that there’s a separate argument about the place, the necessity, of the actual use of creeds, whether in worship or some other way in church life. But what Nicaea signifies for us – and in particular its central, distinctive assertion of the substantive identity of Father, Son and Spirit - is central to the reality that all Christians we believe are called to embody in the full, visible unity of the Church. So the Nicene Creed is not only a statement of faith which roots us in the past, but also a proleptic statement, a goal or programme or horizon for the future which reminds us of our shortcomings as divided churches and calls us to something greater and deeper in our unity in Christ.

People who use the term ‘Nicene Orthodoxy’ can give the impression that they want to tie everyone to a set of propositions, like a legal document, and so to constrain and shackle the

freedom of faith. But really, for Anglicans, the reverse is the case. The Gospel is our freedom, we are all one and all free in Christ, and the Nicene Creed is simply a long-held and widely recognised summary of the Gospel. First, then, is living in Christ, then there is the worship in which we celebrate and express that life, and *then* there are the verbal formulae we use to try to say what we mean by that. Provided we're aware of that essential order, we can and should celebrate Nicaea 1700.