

ASSIGNMENT COVER PAGE



THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
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GEOFFREY D MADDEN

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Assignment Title: Identify & Discuss the significant agreements and differences

between the creed at Nicea and those which sought to modify this. Topic No: (1)

Lecturer's Name Dr. Ian Gillman

Due Date: 23/8/11 Date Forwarded: 22/8/11

Approx. Number of Words Written: 1000

If you wish acknowledgement of this assignment please enclose a *stamped* assignment receipt card.

Comments This shows good understanding of the issues at stake & good comprehension of what is said in the documents. You should not have trouble extending this when you write the major essay. You have been helped by Andy, James, et al, is OK. — but rely more on your own reading of the primary sources! Keep at it.

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Date received:

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16/20

Identify and discuss the significant agreements and differences between the creed of Nicea and those which sought to modify this, as shown in Bettenson I:II:ii(b), and I:IV:vii(e). What do these reveal about the course of the debate in the fourth century?

The creed of Nicea attempts to succinctly explain the understanding of the nature of the Christian God as it had been worked out to the time of the Council of Nicea in 325 by the tradition we now regard as orthodox. The problem has been noted to have been: "by its very nature, insoluble."(1) Bettenson(2) has collected three responses to the creed of Nicea from synods over the next fifty years; "the Dedication Creed", "the Blasphemy of Sirmium", and, "the 'Dated' Creed", which act as landmarks of what those who emerged as triumphantly orthodox by the end of the century had to deal with.

Many would join Constantine in dismissing speculation upon the Trinity as: "merely an intellectual exercise,"(3) and certainly with his interests in maintaining stability in the Church rather than any doctrinal interest, he preferred whatever doctrine was politically expedient. Defining Christianity into a creed is however useful as a way of determining what is not Christianity; that is determining what is heresy.

*Yet he knew that he held the Empire as a fief for
had so could not allow expediency or completely
be hard.*

The creed from the council of Nicea was designed to make it plain that the views of Arius were outside the orthodox path. The other creeds have other axes to grind and this is obvious from their subtle distortions of, and outright opposition to, the creed of Nicea.

These alternative creeds do agree on many points with Nicea in the acknowledgment of a Sovereign God the Father, creator of all things, and Lord Jesus his Son who is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit. They also share a confidence that in saying "we believe," they are distilling the true meaning of Christianity, claiming a universal truth for the results of their deliberations. There also is a sense in which all these creeds reveal a hidden agenda, in which the task of defining the faith becomes an exercise in anathematising enemies and extending the boundaries of the faith to include friends.

The thrust of the alternative creeds is to a greater or lesser extent to accommodate the Arians.

While the creed of Nicea specifically anathematizes those who hold to the catchphrases of Arius, these phrases are altered in the Dedication creed. There is the appearance of an anti-Arian thrust in anathematising: "there was a time or season or age before the begetting,"(4) to appease the Niceans, but as Bettenson points out(5) Arius, who avoided the suggestion of time in his formulae, could be accommodated in this new creed. The Dated creed addresses the same problem within its definition of Jesus, stating that his begetting was: "before conceivable time,"(6) which can be interpreted in an Arian or orthodox fashion. While these merely are ecumenical[?] fudges on Nicea that allow a broader range of doctrinal opinion, the Blasphemy of Sirmium is frankly Arian stating that: "there is no doubt that the Father is greater."(7)

The use at Nicea of the novel solution that Jesus was begotten: "of the substance of the Father"(8),

offends many opponents and their objections surface in these creeds. The controversial use of "ousia" is merely avoided in the Dedication creed, where it is replaced by a monotony of [?]redundant terms for Christ. There is a sense in which this synod has rejected the innovations of Nicea and replaced them with as many familiar sounding terms as possible. To further the appeal to tradition, this creed contains quotations from scripture(John 1:1 and 6:38, and Matt. 28:19) as proofs of their interpretation of the natures of the persons of the trinity and to expand the skeletal Kerygma in the creed of Nicea. The Dated Creed and the Blasphemy of Sirmium use the fact that the concept of "ousia" is not scriptural as a reason for the outright rejection of the concept. The Dated Creed also reveals itself as a compromise document, which aims to minimise cause for dissent as a document capable of favourable interpretation by Orthodox and Arian, when it rejects the concept of "ousia" simply because it is poorly

understood and causes offense. The blasphemy of Sirmium adds that the concept is "beyond the understanding of man."(9) These two creeds also make use of scripture, both the Gospels and the Septuagint, to make their points.

That the creed of Nicea says little of the Holy Spirit except to indicate belief in ^{his} ~~its~~ existence suggests a reluctance to wade into the problem of the nature of the Holy Spirit not shared by those who framed the Dedication Creed. An attack on Arianism as at Nicea need not address itself specifically to this problem, but as: "Sabellianism is regarded as the real foe,"(10) by those who compiled the Dedication Creed, the mention of the Holy Spirit provides an opportunity to insist upon the separate natures of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But note that the issue is to be settled in principle in the relation of the Son to the Father - the Spirit comes under focus later & since the latter day 'Arians' were winkled out of their views re the Son, but then applied them to the Spirit.

The doctrinal disagreements quickly became inextricably associated with matters of order, discipline, and authority. Above all they became bound up with the gradually growing tension between the Greek East and the Latin West.(11)

The creeds which sought to replace that of Nicea, because they are documents which arose from synods of the eastern bishops, act as barometers of their beliefs showing a swing to Arianism especially in the years that followed the death of Constantine. The support of emperors Constantius II and Valens for the Arians allowed the conditions in which the creed of Nicea could be superseded by the Dated Creed in the East and West. If the Dedication Creed subtly changed Nicea so that the Arians could now be signatories without the coercion of Constantine, the Blasphemy of Sirmium denotes the high watermark of Arian success in the East, while the Dated Creed, in seeking compromise, perhaps marks the beginnings of a process which leads to the return to favour of the creed of Nicea at Constantinople in 381.

The success of what is now considered orthodox in the creed of Nicea was hard won through the political and doctrinal manoeuvring of the fourth century. The Dedication Creed, the Blasphemy of Sirmium and the Dated Creed, because of their wide eastern acceptance, illustrate the strength of the appeal of Arianism in the East. The fight against the subtleties found in these creeds forced those who would oppose the followers of Arius to a degree of exactness in expression such that: "Arianism helped to keep Churchly doctrine both honest and evangelical."(12)

ENDNOTES

1. Johnson,P. A History of Christianity,
Penguin, Harmondsworth,1976 , p.89.
2. Bettenson,H. Documents of the Christian Church,
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1963, pp.41-4.
3. Johnson, op.cit. p.88.
4. Bettenson, op. cit. p.42.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. p.43.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid. p.25.
9. Ibid. p.43.
- 10.Ibid. p.42.
- 11.Chadwick,H. The Early Church,
Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p.133.
- 12.Pelikan,J. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition,
University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971, p.200.

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