



The Nicene Council,  
the Origins of “the Trinity,”  
and the Limitations  
of Human Language

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# Outline

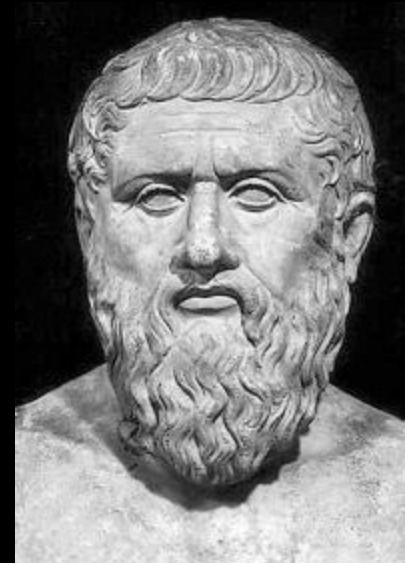
- The Problem of Human Language
- Arius and 'Arianism'
- The Council of Nicea, 325 AD
- Athanasius' Logic
- The Council of Constantinople, 381 AD

# The Problem of Human Language

- God is Father, Jesus is Son
  - Then: 'There was a time when the Son was not...when God was not a Father' (Arius)
  - Now: Is God male? Why use the male pronouns?
  - Now: Jesus is 'Son of God' but not 'God' (Jehovah's Witnesses)
  - Now: God is Father, Jesus is Son, and ... (LDS)
  - Now: God is Love, Love is God

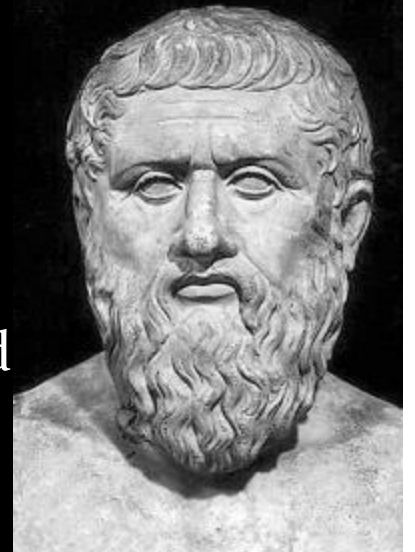
# The Problem of Human Language

- Plato's cosmology (*Timaeus*, 360 BC)
  - Dualist
    - *Kosmos noetos*: eternal, unchanging Forms (intelligible)
    - *Kosmos aisethetos*: physical, changing things (sensible)



# The Problem of Human Language

- Plato's cosmology (*Timaeus*, 360 BC)
  - The One (true God)
    - Above and apart from creation
    - Beyond all knowledge and being (no *ousia* or *physis*)
  - The Demiurge (craftsman/creator, malevolent)
    - Imposed order on pre-existing material (eternal matter)
    - Made the gods, who made the mortals (*Timaeus* 41d)
  - Humans
    - Souls (eternal, superior)
    - Bodies (temporary, inferior)
    - Life is for the purification of the soul
    - Death is where the soul leaves body, is amalgamated back to the stars, or is reincarnated for another try



# The Problem of Human Language

- What Word to Use?
  - Ousia (Latin *essentia/substantia*)
    - Essence/Substance/Being of a material substance
      - 'Primary substance' (Aristotle, *Categories* 2b5)
      - Inheritance as 'substance' (*Gospel of Luke* 15:11 – 24)
      - Gnostics used the word *homoousios* in a semi-material sense
  - Hypostasis (Latin *substantia*)
    - Substance/Existence of knowable beings
  - Prosopon (Latin *personae*)
    - Mask/Face of actors in the theater
- Don't words deliver content when you use them?
  - *Is God a material substance? Are persons temporary masks?*



# Arius and 'Arianism'



Arius (c. 250-336 A.D.)

- Arius, born in Libya (Berber?)
  - Taught by Lucian of Antioch
    - Ordained as a presbyter in Antioch
  - 'Father-Son' relation: temporal origin *and* subordination
    - 'The Father is greater than I' (Jn.14:28)
    - 'The firstborn of all creation' (Col.1:15)
    - 'God brought me forth' (Pr.8:22 – 26)
    - 'There was a time when the Son was not'
  - Fighting Sabellius: Accused bishop Alexander of modalism
    - If you use *prosopon*, you imply F, S, Sp are temporary 'masks'

# Arius and 'Arianism'

- Arius' cosmology (*Thalia*, 3 Letters, quotations)
  - Creator
    - The Father, unbegotten
    - The Son, begotten from the Father's will, from nothing, made the world
  - Humans
    - Salvation
      - Union with the Son?
      - Moral exemplar atonement?
  - Implied Results
    - Protecting monotheism?
    - Salvation?
    - True knowledge of God?



# The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

- Attendees: May 20 – June 19, 325 AD
  - 318 bishops (majority of sources)
  - ‘Western’ church: only 5
  - Outside the Roman Empire:
    - John from Persia/India
    - Theophilus from the Goths
    - Stratophilus of Georgia



# The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

- “Some 22 of the bishops at the council, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, came as supporters of Arius. But when some of the more shocking passages from his writings were read, they were almost universally seen as blasphemous.”
  - Warren Carroll, *The Building of Christendom*, p.11



- Structured on Baptismal creeds (Mt.28:18 – 20; 1 Cor.12:4 – 6, 13) and “the Apostles’ Creed”
- Result: All but 2 bishops signed the Nicene Creed



# HERETICS

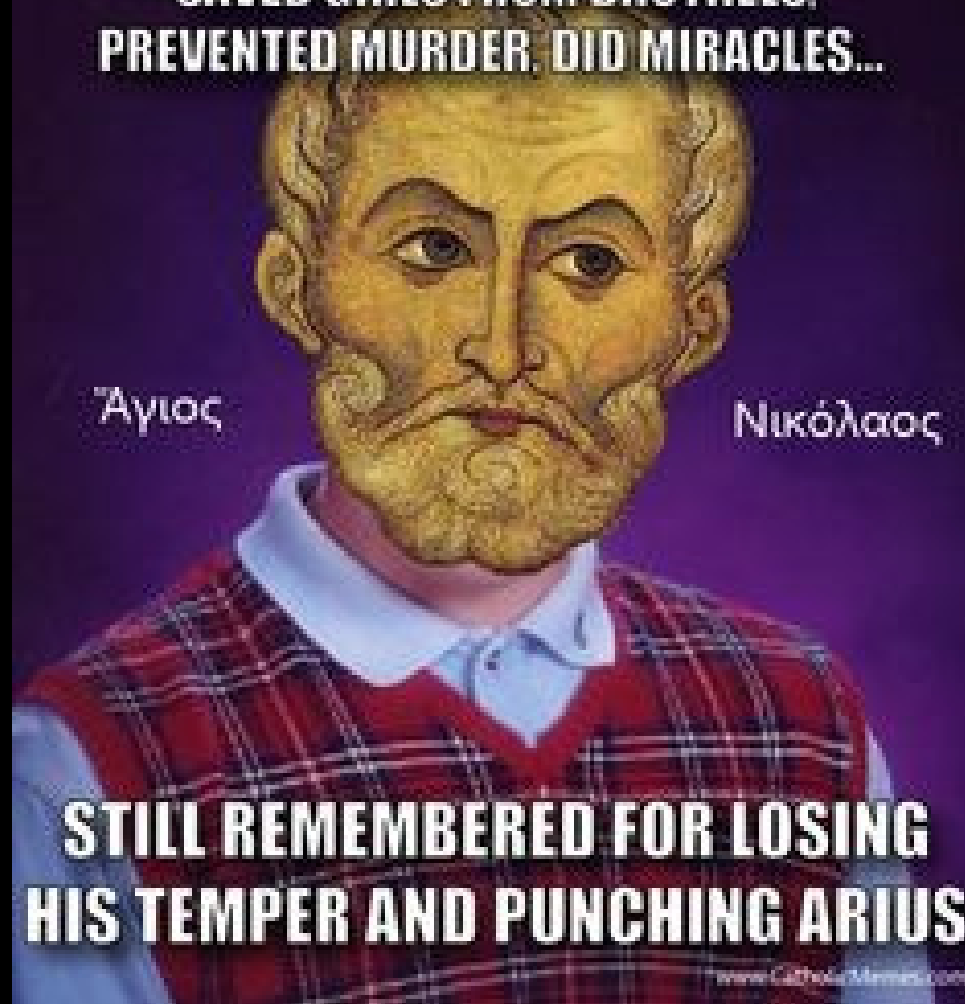
PUNCHING THEM WON'T STOP PEOPLE FROM BELIEVING THEIR LIES, BUT IT FEELS SO GOOD.

**HE SEES YOU WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING,  
HE KNOWS WHEN YOU'RE AWAKE**

**HE KNOWS IF YOU PROFESS THE  
CONSUBSTANTIALITY OF THE SON WITH THE  
FATHER**

memegenerator.net

**GAVE TO THE POOR, SUFFERED FOR FAITH,  
SAVED GIRLS FROM BROTHELS,  
PREVENTED MURDER, DID MIRACLES...**



Άγιος

Νικόλαος

**STILL REMEMBERED FOR LOSING  
HIS TEMPER AND PUNCHING ARIUS**

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# The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

- We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
  - Maker of all things visible and invisible.
- And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
  - begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence [*ousia*] of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homousious*] with the Father;
  - By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];
  - Who for us men, and **for our salvation**, came down and was incarnate and was made man;
  - He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;
  - From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
- And in the Holy Ghost.
- [But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance [*hypostasis*]' or 'essence [*ousia*],' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]

# The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

- Orthodox Motivation: Salvation as *theosis* or *theopoiesis* (divinization), God recovering human nature
  - “That which is not assumed is not healed”
    - Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, etc.
  - “God became man that man might become God”
    - Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, ~180 AD



# The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

- Orthodox Motivation: Salvation as *theosis* or *theopoiesis* (divinization), God recovering human nature
  - Movement of God to Human in Christ: He became...
    - Flesh (Jn.1:14)
    - Man, Servant (Phil.2:6 – 8)
    - Sin (2 Cor.5:21)
    - Poor (2 Cor 8:9)
    - Curse (Gal.3:13)
  - Movement of Human to God in Christ: We become
    - “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4)
  - Atonement: Incarnational, Medical
    - Person of Christ = Work of Christ



# The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

- Orthodox Motivation: Real Knowledge of God
  - ‘Through the Inhomination of the Word the universal Providence has been made known, and the Leader and Maker of all things, the Word of God himself. For he was made man that we might be made divine (*theopoiethemen*) and he manifested himself through a body, that we might receive a conception of the invisible Father.’ (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54)

# Anti-Nicene and Pro-Nicene Movements

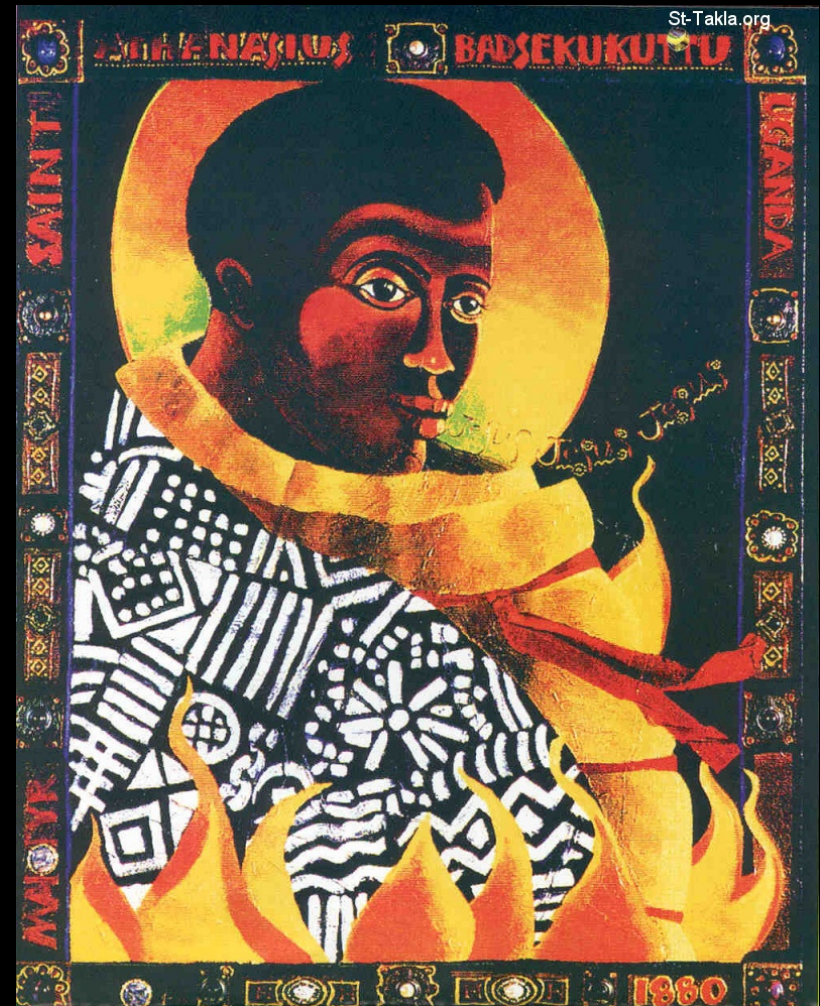
- Challenges to Nicaea
  - The First Ever 'Creed': So what?
  - Church: Very decentralized
  - Leadership: No 'jurisdictions'
  - Multiple 'Schools'





# Anti-Nicene and Pro-Nicene Movements

- Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD)



# Athanasius' Logic



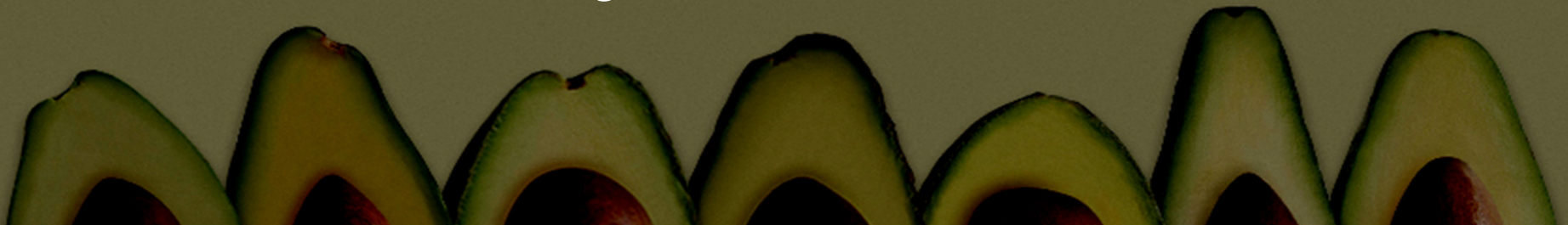
- Athanasius' theology of atonement

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent **corruption**, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the **corruption** proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing? Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the **corruption** of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to **corruption**, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.’ (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2:8 – 9; on the nature of corruption see 1:5)

- Nicaea was safeguarding ‘salvation’ and ‘atonement’

# Athanasius' Logic

- Athanasius' use of language for the Father-Son relation
  - Human language as applied to God:
    - Univocal
    - Equivocal
    - Analogical
      - It is more proper to name God 'Father' after the Son than to name Him 'Creator' after His works
  - Use of 'ousia' and 'homoousios' *depends on context*
    - 'Substance' of an avocado (material)
    - 'Substance' of an argument (immaterial)



# Athanasius' Logic

- Athanasius' use of language for the Father-Son relation
  - 'Theologia' as 'Scientia'
    - Scientific thought in Alexandria
      - At its highest point during Athanasius' lifetime
      - Anatolius: proper deployment of terms in a scientific and technical frame (T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, p.180 – 1)
  - To Arius: neither godly, nor scientific
    - 'You are thinking out of a center in yourself'
      - 'When our ordinary terms are applied to God they must be *stretched* beyond their natural sense and reference and must be employed in such a way that they indicate more than the actual terms can naturally specify.' (T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, p.204; quoting Athanasius *Contra Arianos* 1.23; 4.27; *De synodis* 42; *De decretis* 12; *Ad Marcellinum* 11 – 13; *Ad Serapionem* 1.8 – 9, 16 – 20). See also Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*

# Athanasius' Logic

- Athanasius' arrangement of theological principles
  - Rooted in Hebraic concerns
    - Alexandria received Jewish Christian migrants since 70 and 135 AD (Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, p.179 – 180)
      - Concern for real history, reasoning from God's activities
      - Perceived the inner structure linking redemption and revelation
      - Son reveals the Father (Mt.11:25 – 27; Lk.10:21 – 22)
    - Contra Hellenistic mind in Philo and the Catechetical School
  - Safeguard the true divinity of the Son
    - Believed that 'essence' (*ousia*) language is the best way
    - Placed the Triune relations (Father, Son, Spirit) *within* the principle of divine simplicity
  - Condemned both Sabellian *and* Arian thought



# The Council of Constantinople, 381 AD

- Called by Emperor Theodosius, May 381
- Attended by 150 Nicene bishops and 36 Arian bishops



# The Council of Constantinople, 381 AD

- We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
  - Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
- And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
  - begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousious*] with the Father;
  - by whom all things were made;
  - who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;
  - he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father;
  - from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead;
  - whose kingdom shall have no end.
- And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life,
  - who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.
  - In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

# Comparing 325 and 381

- We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
  - Maker of all things visible and invisible.
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# Comparing 325 and 381

- And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
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  - By whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth;
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  - By whom all things were made;

# Comparing 325 and 381

- Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;
- He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;
- From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
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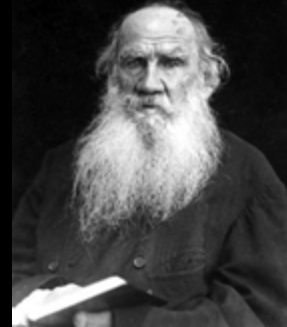
# Nicene Legacy



- Orthodox Motivation: Salvation as *Theosis*
  - Incarnational Atonement or ‘Medical Substitution’
  - The Person of Christ is the Work of Christ, and vice versa
    - Nicene Trinitarianism:
      - Unity of operations by F, S, Sp (Athanasius onward)
      - No ‘Broken Trinity’ view (Thomas McCall, *Forsaken*)
    - Penal substitutionary atonement? Father against Son?
- Effects
  - ‘Persons’ (*hypostasis, prosopa*) are eternal and relational (not atomistic as in Aristotle) →
    - A *relational* human rights ethic to correct Aristotle
    - A coherent answer to the problem of evil

# Nicene Legacy

- Orthodox Motivation: Real Knowledge of God
  - We really do *apprehend* God as *He is and knows Himself*
  - Human language gives limited but real knowledge



Knowledge is real knowledge only when it is acquired by the efforts of your intellect, not by memory.

(Leo Tolstoy)

- Effects:
  - Cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) theology
    - Apprehension, not comprehension, and worship
  - Foundation for empirical science
    - Unitary (not dualist) and relational universe
    - Realist mode: We can perceive things as they really are
    - John Philoponus (490 – 570 AD) of Alexandria
    - James Clerk Maxwell, Michael Polanyi