

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and the Doctrine of Trinity

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They are surely disbelievers who say, 'Allah is the third of three,' there is no God but the One God. And if they desist not from what they say, a grievous punishment shall surely befall those of them that disbelieve. (Al Quran 5:74).

Christianity a Monotheist Religion at its origin: Christianity was one of the major monotheist religions given to mankind. The early followers of Christianity who had lived, heard and practiced the teachings of Jesus, may peace be on him, in daily life had no concept of the doctrine of Trinity. The belief that God is three distinct persons in one being, and that these three persons are eternal and equal in nature, authority, and knowledge was incorporated by the first Ecumenical Council of the Church in 325 CE.

The Bible Describes One God: Many verses can be quoted from various books of the Bible including the New Testament about One God. For example; Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." 1 Corinthians 8:4 is, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one." Galatians 3:20 states, "A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one." And 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

The triune nature of God came from the literal meaning of some of the verses such as: "I and the Father are one," John 10:30. Additionally, "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,'" Matthew 3:16–17. "And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit," Isaiah 48:16. Their misinterpretation was the beginning of the primitive Trinity.

Early Theological Diversity: The books of the New Testament were written in the first century. However they were not put together in one volume until much later. The first formal list of the books of the New Testament is believed to have been published in 140 CE by Marcion.ⁱ The complete canon of the New Testament was approved at the Council of Carthage in 397 CE.ⁱⁱ Such diversity of books led to a parallel diversity in the prevailing faiths. According to Prof Bart Ehrman:

"First two centuries were particularly rich in theological diversity among the early Christians. In fact, the theological diversity was so extensive that groups calling themselves Christian adhered to beliefs and practices that most Christians today would insist were not Christian at all--Christians who believed that there was only one God, the Creator of all--other people who called themselves Christian, however, insisted that there were two different gods--one of the Old Testament and one of the New Testament. ... Gnostic Christians insisted that there were not just two gods, but twelve.

Others said thirty. Others still said 365. All these groups claimed to be Christian, insisting that their views were true and had been taught by Jesus and his followers."ⁱⁱⁱ

Hadhrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad, Khalifatul Maseeh^{4th} in chapter 7 of his book, *Christianity a Journey from Facts to Fiction*, writes about early doctrine of Christianity:

“The doctrine of Trinity, which is one of the fundamental constituents of Christian dogma, was absent from Christianity during the lifetime of Jesus Christ. ... Christian beliefs and philosophy in its early formative part was of Jewish stock. Jewish influence remained predominant throughout the early part of Christian history ... with deeply embedded roots in the holy soil of Jesus’ instructions and way of life. ... In the second phase of Christian development, St. Paul acquired the most pivotal character in giving Christianity a new philosophy and ideology. ... The Western Church evolved along Pauline doctrinal lines, whereas the Church in Jerusalem developed along monotheistic teachings.”

Nazarene philosophy: Ebionites, Gnostics, Manicheans, Sabians, Mandeans, Nestorians and Elkasites were the original monotheistic sects in Christianity. Their philosophy has been referred to as the Nazarene philosophy which, according to Hadhrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad, "was characterized by, strict adherence to the Mosaic Law, recognition of Jesus as Messiah, belief in the normal human birth of Jesus and hostility towards Pauline views. ... Nazarene hierarchy escaped from Jerusalem after the destruction in 66 AD. ... Paul’s followers ‘abandoned the religion of Christ and turned towards the religious doctrines of the Romans.” He also adds in his book, *Christianity a Journey from Facts to Fiction*, “Of all the various doctrines which evolved during the formative stages of Christianity, only those who believed in the Nazarene philosophy can justifiably be given preference. These early Christians were taught the meaning of Christianity by Jesus himself.”

Trinity and Paganism: Trinity was actually a tradition of mystic and pagan religions and it infiltrated Christianity over centuries. Charles B Waite mentions in his book, *History of the Christian religion to the year two hundred*, about the doctrine of Trinity, “it was of very great antiquity, and generally received by the Gothic and Celtic Nations.”^{iv}

Typically, the Pagan traditions of Trinity included a Creator, a guide/leader and a third member. In Hindu Mythology Brahma (god), Vishnu (the leader) and Siva (the Holy Breath) were the three components. In the Mexican Trinity, Y Zona was the Father, Bascal the Word, and Echvah was the Holy Ghost. When Sesostris invoked the oracle, to know who could subjugate all things before him, the answer was, "First God, then the Word, and then the Spirit." Egyptians believed in many gods and incarnation of the Holy Spirit was known to them. Plato taught a Trinity of the soul pointing to a higher form of the doctrine. Ancient Greek inscription on the great obelisk at Rome shows The Mighty God, The Begotten of God and Apollo the Spirit. The Chinese Bible states, "God pronounced the primeval Word, and his own eternal and glorious abode sprang into existence." The Zend-Avesta says that it was the Word, more ancient than the world, that Ormuzd created the universe. The ancient Greek writer Amelias, speaking of the

god Mercury or Hermes said "And this plainly was the Logos (Greek for 'word'), by whom all things were made.

Monotheistic Philosophies of the 2nd Century: Along with Trinity, monotheistic philosophies also kept evolving in the two centuries after Jesus. 'Adoptionism,' that Jesus was born to Mother Mary and Joseph in a natural way and then adopted by God, Monarchianism; that God is one person and the only ruler of His kingdom and Arianism were few of the non-Trinitarian creeds in the early centuries.^v The first Ecumenical Council of church was in a manner of speaking called to reject Arianism.

Ariainism: Arius who was a church priest in 250–336 CE advanced teachings that came to have the label of Arianism.^{vi} The title of Son given to Jesus raised questions regarding his mode of birth, nature, status, existence period, divinity and role in relation to the Father. St. Paul wrote letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians saying that Christians chanted a hymn to Christ as God in their assemblies. But the question is how the Son was related to the Father, Who is the one Supreme Deity. The Gnostic schools maintained that Jesus conjugated divine powers, and he "emanated" from the Supreme unknowable God (the "Deep" and the "Silence"). This led to the theory that the Son was like his Father and he was same in essence.

Arius clarified the situation by denying that God could not have a son in any true sense. This in a way was in line with what the Holy Quran tells us: "God neither begets, nor is He begotten." (Al Quran 112:3). Arius, however, described the Son as a second or inferior God, standing midway between the First Cause and the creatures; as Himself made out of nothing, yet as making all other things; as existing before the worlds of the ages; and as arrayed in all divine perfections except the one which was their stay and foundation. God alone was without beginning and origin and the son was originated, and once had not existed. He denied that the Son was of one essence, nature, or substance with God: He is not consubstantial or 'homousios' with the Father, and therefore he is not like Him, or equal in dignity, or co-eternal, or within the real sphere of Deity. Arius reaffirmed his thoughts in his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, that the son 'is no part of the Ingenerate,' and the son was 'unlike' the Father and his followers defined God as simply the 'Unoriginate.'

Given his far better ideas about monotheism, in all fairness, Arius should have been declared a saint rather than a heretic!^{vii} "And thou shalt assuredly find those who say, 'We are Christians,' to be the nearest of them in love to the believers. That is because amongst them are savants and monks and because they are not proud." (Al Quran 5:83)

The first six Ecumenical Councils and their role in Trinity: An Ecumenical council is a conference of the bishops of the whole Christian Church convened to discuss and settle matters of doctrine and practice.^{viii} There have been 21 significant councils in the history of the Church with wide division of acceptance among various sects of Christianity. The first five councils invented, defined, regulated and propagated the first scriptural description of Trinity doctrine. Its evolution, clarification, explanation and

definition continued through to the sixth council, which put an end to the concept of monotheism.^{ix} The first six councils played sequential, confirmatory as well as distinct roles in shaping the doctrine of Trinity. The Nicene Creed in 325 CE defined that Jesus, the Son of God, is truly divine, equal and of the same substance as God Himself. The Second Council added the clauses to protect the divinity of the Holy Ghost in the Nicene Creed. The Third Council declared Mary the Mother of God. The Fourth Council in 451 CE defined the two natures (divine and human) in Christ, so on and so forth. Their distinctive roles are given below in a table. However, we will mostly focus on the part the First Council played to shape the doctrine of Trinity.



NO	TITLE OF COUNCIL	MAJOR ROLES PLAYED IN SHAPING TRINITY
1	THE FIRST COUNCIL OF NICAIA: held in Nicaea (now Iznik in Turkey) 325 CE ^x	The Nicene Creed defined that Jesus the son of God is truly divine, equal and of the same substance as God Himself.
2	FIRST COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE: held in 381 CE	Added the clauses to protect the divinity of the Holy Ghost in the Nicene Creed. Filioque, Latin for "and (from) the Son," was added in Western Christianity to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.
3	COUNCIL OF EPHESUS: held in Alexandria in 431CE	Defined the true personal unity of Christ and declared Mary the Mother of God (theotokos).
4	COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON: in 451CE	It defined the two natures (divine and human) in Christ. ^{xi}
5	SECOND COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE: held in 553 CE	It condemned the errors of Origen and certain writings of Theodoret, the Bishop of Mopsuestia and of Ibas, Bishop of Edessa.
6	THIRD COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE: held in 680-681CE	It put an end to Monotheism by defining two wills in Christ, the divine and the human, as two distinct principles of operation. It anathematized significant Unitarians priests like Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, Macarius.

Role of Constantine I in the Council of Nicaea: Roman Christianity grew amidst paganism. Therefore a belief in a God-system that would be understandable to the pagans was essential for the survival of the Church. If the 'Son of God' was equated to the 'Sun god' or 'Sol Invictus' the pagans and Christians would both be satisfied and

Constantine would be winning over both the political and the religious powers.^{xii} When Constantine I became the emperor of the Roman world, he determined to restore the matters of the Church, regarding Arianism in the East. The emperor was not well acquainted with Greek language and church theology but he was ambitious to exercise pagan traditions over the Catholic Church. His ambitions clearly spoke of his political rather than theological motives.

He convened a council in Nicaea, in Bithynia (Turkey) which held its sittings in the Imperial Palace from May 20th to July 25th, 325 A.D. Even though it was first-ever Ecumenical council of the Church, the acts of the Council have not been preserved. It was perhaps a deliberate omission to feign the continuity of the new belief to the one from the early years of Jesus. He received a ceremonious reception on his appearance at Nicaea and delivered an address on the occasion and exercised considerable influence on the discussions. The council was presided by Bishop Housius of Cordova. The Pope, St. Sylvester, was represented by his legates.^{xiii} Three hundred and eighteen bishops attended, almost all from the East. The West was poorly represented.

Terms of Discussion at Nicaea: Much of the debate hinged on the difference between being 'born' or 'created' and being 'begotten' or declared at resurrection. Arians saw these as the same; followers of Alexander did not. 'Begotten' means that Jesus had always existed as Son of God and Mary only carried him to his birth as a human being. Begotten at resurrection means that he was a human being and God adopted him as a son at his resurrection.

The technical terms of doctrine came from Greek. The words like essence (ousia), substance (hypostasis), nature (physis), person (hyposopon) had a variety of meanings which were unclear and misunderstood by most.

The word homoousia was unscriptural because of its associations with Gnostic heretics (who used it in their theology), and it had been condemned at the 264–268 Synods of Antioch. The Arian creed was presented first. It was described by Eusebius of Caesarea as a creed in which every term of honor and dignity, except the oneness of substance (Homoouseous), was attributed to Jesus. It aroused a storm of indignation and poor acceptance in the synod. Eusebius of Caesarea then submitted the baptismal creed and this met with the imperial approval. Since this creed dated before the Arian struggle so it did not address the current controversy. It was acceptable to most but the Emperor needed a new modified creed to put an end to the Monotheism of Arius and he had genuine representation to show a decision based on their vote. Both Groups referred to the Bible as the reference source. Polytheistic Homoousians believed that Arius view was in contravention of the Scriptures which say, "The Father and I are one," John 10:30. The Arians likewise appealed to Scripture, quoting verses such as John 14:28, "the Father is greater than I." The Arians claimed that since God, the Father created the Son, he must have emanated from the Father, and thus be lesser than the Father, in that the Father is eternal, but the Son was created afterward and, thus, is not eternal. Homoousians countered this argument, saying that the Father's fatherhood, like

all of His attributes, is eternal. Thus, the Father was always a Father, and that the Son, therefore, always existed with Him.

The deliberations passed through several distinct stages before the final condemnation of Arius and his doctrines was reached. The negotiations lasted two months and twelve days.^{xiv} An attenuated group stayed with Arius' view and another small section of delegates adhered with the Alexandrian view. The bulk of the members occupied a position between these two extremes. They rejected the formulae of Arius, and declined to accept those of his opponents.

Another formula was then designed to serve as a test of faith of the church. It was not found in Scripture, yet it summed up the doctrine of St. John, St. Paul, and emperor himself, "I and the Father are one" was translated as "consubstantial." The majority accepted the ruling of the Alexandrians; not due to internal conviction, but partly to indifference, partly to the pressure of the imperial will. A small number of bishops supported Arius in the beginning. After a month of discussion, on June 19, only two bishops were left in his favour i.e. Theonas of Marmarica in Libya and Secundus of Ptolemais. Maris of Chalcedon, who initially supported Arianism, agreed to the entire creed. Similarly, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nice also agreed, except for certain statements.

Councilor Statement: Housius drew out the councilor statements, which also included punishments for those who would affirm that the Son once did not exist, or that he did not exist before He was begotten, or that He was made out of nothing, or that He was of a different substance or essence from the Father, or was created or changeable. The council compromised some of the most basic tenets of their faith.

The method of fixing the date of Easter independent of the Jewish calendar was also settled by the council. Canons of the council were also passed. All these steps served to alienate Christianity from its Jewish origins. The date of Easter was fixed on a Sunday which was the day of the sun-god in the pagan calendar. It does not represent the 'historical' crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ but the annual crossing of the sun through the vernal or spring equinox. According to pagan mythology this is the time when the sun is 'resurrected,' as the day begins to become longer than the night. Apparently it closed many ties to Judaism and inserted paganism. However, this was only the beginning of a strife that led to the additional complicated proceedings of the Church in the fourth century. Constantine I, however, emerged as a champion both political as well as religious.

The Nicene Creed: The new creed was unambiguous and incompatible with the beliefs of Arius. It was to serve as a mean of inclusion and recognition, especially at baptism.

The Council declared that the Father and the Son are of the same substance and are co-eternal. That means that Jesus always existed even before his birth as Son of God and is made of the same substance and essence.^{xv} The non-scriptural word 'homoousios' was added to signify the absolute equality of the Son with the Father.^{xvi}

The emperor carried out his earlier statement: everybody who refuses to endorse the Creed will be exiled. Arius, Theonas, and Secundus refused to adhere to the creed and were excommunicated and exiled to Illyria. They were perhaps the Trinity of genuine monotheists who were metaphorically martyred. The works of Arius were ordered to be confiscated and consigned to flames while all persons found possessing them were to be executed. Such punishments apparently reflected the solidarity of church and state. All these developments, however, underscored the role of secular patronage in ecclesiastical affairs. According to Wikipedia, the Nicene Creed is described as follows:

1. Jesus Christ is described as 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,' proclaiming his divinity. When all light sources were natural, the essence of light was considered to be identical, regardless of its form.
2. Jesus Christ is said to be 'begotten, not made,' asserting his co-eternality with God, and confirming it by stating his role in the Creation.
3. Finally, he is said to be 'from the substance of the Father,' homoousios, or consubstantial.

The place and nature and role and status of the Holy Spirit were not included in the Nicene Creed that came in subsequent Ecumenical Councils. Here, basically, they were saying that Jesus was God, and God's son, not a creation of God. In a manner of speaking, Christianity entered into pagan groups of religions with myths and dogma. Before the Nicene Creed the Christians followed the Apostle's Creed that was attributed to the twelve Apostles of Jesus, may peace be on him. A table below contrasts the two creeds.

Table showing the changes made in the Baptismal Creed:

	Apostle Baptismal Creed	Nicene Baptismal Creed
<u>FATHER</u>	The Father The Almighty, creator of heaven and earth	The Father, the Almighty maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen
<u>JESUS BIRTH</u>	He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary	Eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation. He came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man, 'and His kingdom will have no end.'
<u>THE HOLY SPIRIT</u>	I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of	We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son, He is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy

	saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. AMEN	catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come
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Epilogue: It is time to give up the convolutions of the doctrine of Trinity and its complicated and unreasonable history. It is time to try the simple yet elegant creed of Islam, 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is a prophet of God!' For Muslims, it is time to extend a cordial invitation to each and every Christian in the world, whether in the East or the West, in the words of the Holy Quran:

Say, 'O People of the Book! come to a word equal between us and you — that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partner with Him, and that some of us take not others for Lords beside Allah.' But if they turn away, then say, 'Bear witness that we have submitted to God.' (Al Quran 3:65)

It is time! It is time to remedy the mistakes made at Nicaea 1685 years ago!

References:

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ⁱⁱ The History of Christianity, Dr. Tim Dowley, p.109.
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^{iv} Charles B Waite. History of the Christian religion to the year two hundred. Chicago, 1908. Page 437.
^v <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arianism>
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