

## History and Theology in Dialogue on the Trinity

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**Abstract:** The relationship between historical studies and theological research is difficult and at times strained. How do we relate the output of armies of historical scholars to the work of systematic theology? The recent largely historical study by Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its legacy: An approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, raises fundamental questions about many assumptions operating within present day Trinitarian theology. The present article attempts to draw out some of the implications for current Trinitarian theology, things that systematicians may need to learn from these historical studies, while also suggesting there are some things historical studies may find benefit from in listening to theologians.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORICAL STUDIES and theological research is difficult and at time strained. Whether we are dealing with the tireless efforts of biblical scholars or patristic experts, it is often problematic to integrate the results of their work into the concerns of systematic theologians. There is a messiness about the historical data which runs counter to the systematising exigence of the theologian. There are also, I am convinced, quite different skills and intellectual horizons, between the two groups which do not always lead to clear communication among them. Finally, there is the voluminous output of high quality historical research which theologians find difficult to keep up with on top of their other interests.

Nonetheless there are overlapping concerns between the two groups, and this overlap is well illustrated through a consideration of the present state of Trinitarian theology. Trinitarian theology is currently being pulled in various directions, with different approaches making claims and counter-claims, often based on one's pre-determined stance

in relation to key historical figures. Most notably there is a chasm between those who appeal to the Greek Cappadocians and those who appeal to the Latin Augustine. Augustine's star has waned significantly among theologians, his theology regularly dismissed as providing a dead-end for theological investigation.<sup>1</sup>

Such claims, while they are theological claims, are not just theological claims. They are partly based on theological commitments and pre-suppositions, but also rest on particular readings of the historical data. Such historical readings are of course subject to revision as scholars revisit past accounts, bringing previous historical orthodoxies into question. At such times theologians must also learn from these revised historical accounts and if necessary revise their theological claims. This is certainly the situation we face in relation to Trinitarian theology. There is a significant amount of work being done revising our historical understanding of the Trinitarian debates of the early Church. These revisionist historians are in fact putting paid to a number of orthodoxies that theologians have been taking for granted and they should be forcing theologians to reassess their theological stances, or at the very least modify their claims.

In this paper I would like to focus on a recent work by historian Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its legacy: An approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*.<sup>2</sup> Ayres is one of a number of revisionist historians, which includes Michael René Barnes and Sarah Coakley, who are re-writing our understanding of this most significant era in the history of the Church. I would like to present a number of things that we theologians need to learn from these historical results. These things, if appropriated by theologians, must in the long run impact on the direction of our theological researches. However, so that the traffic is not all one way, I would also like to suggest one thing the historians may learn from theology (or at least some theological approaches), which might assist them in their work.

#### THINGS THEOLOGIAN CAN LEARN FROM THE HISTORIANS

Below I identify five areas from which theologians can learn from historical scholarship, as exemplified by the work of Ayres. It does not claim to be exhaustive but it does touch on a number of issues which have dominated Trinitarian theology over the last two decades or more.

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1. Colin E. Gunton, "Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990) 33-58; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

2. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

## East vs. West: A Dated Typology

Contemporary theologies have made a significant distinction between the approaches of the Eastern Fathers and that of the Latin Fathers, particularly Augustine.<sup>3</sup> Generally this distinction is stated as “western Trinitarian theology begins with (in the sense of ‘presumes’ and ‘is ultimately concerned with’) divine unity (i.e. the essence) while eastern Trinitarian theology begins with divine diversity (i.e. the persons).”<sup>4</sup> The suspicion is raised that the Latin position conceals a latent modalism because of its emphasis on the divine unity. Modern authors clearly prefer the approach of the Greek Fathers, which is felt to be more authentic or original to the newness of Christian revelation. The historical basis of the distinction is often traced back to the scholarship of Theodore de Régnon. As Ayres notes, “De Régnon’s account became the basis for many twentieth-century accounts of the wonders of Greek Trinitarian theology and the errors of Latin theology.”<sup>5</sup>

Ayres’ work forces us to reconsider what has become a theological commonplace. Drawing on the work of Barnes,<sup>6</sup> he notes firstly that this account is a basic misrepresentation of what De Régnon was seeking to establish. De Régnon was not seeking to draw a distinction between East and West. Rather his distinction was between pre-Nicene Fathers operating within a “patristic paradigm” (both Greek and Latin), and the emerging post-Nicene scholasticism that develops in Augustine. His distinction concerned historical eras, not geographical location. Further, from De Régnon’s perspective the latter scholasticism was the preferable approach.

More importantly however, Ayres argues that no such distinction can be drawn between East and West. Ayres’ basic distinction is between the pro-Nicene party and the non-Nicene groups which existed within the fourth century Church. The pro-Nicene party, which had membership from both Greek and Latin sectors, all operated out of common assumptions and frameworks in relation to the issues at hand. Ayres

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3. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Seabury, 1974); John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985); Gunton, “Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West.”; LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*.

4. Michael René Barnes, “Rereading Augustine’s Theology of the Trinity”, in Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (eds.), *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 145-76, at 152.

5. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 303.

6. Michael René Barnes, “De Régnon Reconsidered”, *Augustinian Studies* 26 (1995) 51-79.

identifies three central principles of what he calls the pro-Nicene position:

1. A clear vision of the person and nature distinction, entailing the principle that whatever is predicated of the divine nature is predicated of the three persons equally and understood to be one (this distinction may or may not be articulated via a consistent technical terminology);
2. Clear expression that the eternal generation of the Son occurs within the unitary and incomprehensible divine being;
3. Clear expression of the doctrine that the divine persons work inseparably.<sup>7</sup>

Ayres reinforces the point by suggesting that “the deepest concern in the pro-Nicene Trinitarian theology is shaping our attention to the union of the irreducible persons in the simple and unitary Godhead”. Ayres does not deny that there are differences within the pro-Nicene party and that some of these differences may relate to their geographical origins, but overall East and West, “‘begin’, insofar as any theology can be said to ‘begin’, at the same point”.<sup>8</sup>

#### Social Trinitarianism

This deconstruction of the East-West antithesis has potentially enormous implications for contemporary Trinitarian theology. Over recent decades there has been a veritable explosion of interest in what is often called “social Trinitarianism”. Social Trinitarianism takes as its starting point for understanding the Trinity an analogy based on three distinct human persons. It defines itself by contrast with the classical western Augustinian analogy based on the psychological operations of a single human person. Those who promote social Trinitarianism claim to trace its origins to the writings of the Greek Cappadocian Fathers. They will often draw on the supposed distinction introduced by De Régnon that “eastern Trinitarian theology begins with divine diversity (i.e. the persons)”.<sup>9</sup> The main source for many of these claims is the Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas.<sup>10</sup>

Ayres is quite dismissive of the historical claims made by Zizioulas. One of the most prominent of these claims is that the Cappadocians

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7. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 236.

8. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 301.

9. Barnes, “Rereading Augustine”, 152.

10. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*. More recently Jean Zizioulas and Paul McPartlan, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

developed a new Christian “ontology” based on personhood rather than substance. Ayres rejects this claim, noting not a common ontology, but a common faith stance:

Zizioulas’s proposal quickly falls apart in the face of the evidence. While it is true to say that Basil sees the person of the Father as the source of all, insistence on the incomprehensibility of what it means for the Father to be a “person” means that this statement entails only that the universe is the product of a willed agency. Jews and Christians prior to the fourth century would have happily agreed.<sup>11</sup>

Zizioulas’s claims are said to be “extravagant”.<sup>12</sup> Ayres backs his stance with a detailed analysis of Gregory of Nyssa’s *To Ablabius: On not Three Gods*, which Ayres argues is written to “point the reader away from speculating about the possibility of a ‘social’ analogy” rather than as a means of promoting such a position.<sup>13</sup> A number of issues emerge clearly in Ayres account. First, there is a strong emphasis on the unity of the divine nature evidenced in the unity of divine operation. “Natures and their intrinsic powers are known by the operations of those powers, and the divine operation is always observed to be one. Therefore the divine power and nature is indivisibly one.”<sup>14</sup> Secondly, while Ayres acknowledges that at one point Gregory draws an analogy between the Trinity and three human beings, he “is not concerned with deriving an analogy from the interrelatedness of human community. The argument he offers rest not on an account specifically of human nature (let alone human ‘community’) but on an ontological or cosmological conception of natures in general.”<sup>15</sup> In other words Gregory’s argument would work just as well if any other nature were used apart from human nature. Thirdly, Ayres notes the emphasis on the ineffability of the divine nature. “The divine nature remains unknown but its power is revealed to be one.”<sup>16</sup> This ineffability extends to what we can know of the divine persons: the “internal order [of the persons] does not reveal the nature of the person as such, but only their mode of having or exercising that which remains ineffable”.<sup>17</sup> In particular Ayres stresses that Gregory is far from applying “psychological categories to explain what it means for the persons to be distinct within the unitary divine

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11. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 313. Also: “To be a little more precise, one does not find in pro-Nicenes extended attempt to develop an ontology of personhood” (p. 280).

12. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 365, n.6.

13. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 345.

14. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 348.

15. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 350.

16. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 355.

17. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 359.

power and deploys no language that obviously relies on metaphors of co-operation".<sup>18</sup>

These three observations are a devastating critique of any social Trinitarian account which would seek to stake a claim to the authority of the Cappadocians. Of course there may be other good reasons for the promotion of social Trinitarianism, but the authority of the Cappadocians would not seem to be one of them. It is important to note here that Ayres is not alone in his criticisms of Zizioulas and those who draw on his work. Coakley has also questioned the historical accuracy of Zizioulas's account of the Cappadocian position,<sup>19</sup> and from within the Orthodox tradition voices of criticism can also be heard.<sup>20</sup> It is time theologians began to take these scholars seriously.

#### The Importance of Divine Incomprehensibility and Simplicity

A major theme throughout Ayres' account of the pro-Nicene authors of the fourth century is their common commitment to the divine simplicity and incomprehensibility. He describes their commitment to divine simplicity as "the most fundamental shared strategy" in the unfolding of their Trinitarian position.<sup>21</sup> He notes that while they were "loose and inconsistent in their definitions of that simplicity...this inconsistency does not necessarily prevent them *using* the doctrine in very similar ways".<sup>22</sup> Further "the language of simplicity is inseparable from the language of divine incomprehensibility".<sup>23</sup>

Ayres notes a consequence of this particularly in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. He refers to Gregory's writing as austere, indeed "many of his contemporaries may have found [him] too austere".<sup>24</sup> Ayres further describes this approach as a "deliberate and focused *askesis* of the imagination" and an "epistemological reserve".<sup>25</sup> Divine simplicity places severe constraints on us to the point of demanding an intellectual asceticism. In particular our imaginations, conditioned by

18. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 358. He emphasises the point again in n. 27 on the same page.

19. Sarah Coakley, "'Persons' in the 'Social' Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion", in Davis, Kendall, and O'Collins, *The Trinity*, 123-44.

20. For example Lucian Turcescu, "'Person' Versus 'Individual', and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa", *Modern Theology* 18 (2002) 527-39.

21. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 278.

22. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 287.

23. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 287. The reader is directed to the index entries for both simplicity and incomprehensibility to see how widespread the topics are in Ayres.

24. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 359.

25. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 361.

categories of space and time, are not a suitable basis of theologising on God and can easily mislead us.<sup>26</sup>

Of course one does not need to go far to find various contemporary theologians who draw heavily on the categories of space and time in their Trinitarian theologies, Hans Urs von Balthasar being a major case in point. The appeal of social Trinitarianism is also, I believe, to be found in its appeal to the imagination, in contrast, for example to the rigorous intellectual asceticism of Aquinas. A more subtle example, I would suggest, is the regular popularity of the notion of the Holy Spirit as the mutual love of the Father and the Son. This indeed is a satisfying image, that of a bond of love between two persons. But in his handling of this image Aquinas quickly deconstructs it into a variant of the *filioque*.<sup>27</sup> This rigorous intellectual asceticism of Aquinas has its schooling in the Church Fathers, and it is a lesson we perhaps need to learn once more.

#### The Basic Account: one God, three Persons, two Processions<sup>28</sup>

What then is the major outcome of the process of theological and doctrinal development? What is the basic account that the fourth century leaves us with? We are very familiar doctrinally with the notion of “one God, three persons”. Of course it is true, as Ayres points out, that this does not mean there is terminological uniformity among all the authors of this era. Person may various be called *hypostasis*, *prosopon*, *persona* and so on. What is “one” might be described as *ousia*, *substantia*, *hypostasis*, *physis* and so on. But the one-three account remains constant throughout. There is a three-fold distinction within the one God.

However, this is not the whole picture that emerges. There is another element in the basic account that arises from the ways in which the three persons are related to one another. The Son and the Spirit are “from” the Father. This notion of relationships of origin is also part of the basic account which occurs throughout the authors of this era. There is an ordering or priority which is asserted at the same time as a refusal to make this ordering a distinction in honour, power, wisdom, and so on between the Three who share in the one divine nature. So it is that while the Nicene Creed asserts the consubstantiality of Father and Son it also

26. I have made a similar point in Neil Ormerod, *Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005) 18-20.

27. *Summa Theologiae* I q37 a2 ad4.

28. I use the word “account” rather than model because of what I view as the Kantian undertones of the word model, which would see it as “just a model”, a construction we project onto the data, which could be replaced by some alternate model.

asserts that the Son is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God”, and that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father”.<sup>29</sup>

While the language of processions to describe these relationships of origin is not all that prominent in Ayres’ book, he repeatedly adopts terminology from the work of Barnes, that of “X from X”. He notes how the use of this language allows for a sense of real participation between (principally) Father and Son, while upholding their distinction.<sup>30</sup> Also prominent is the language of generation to express the relationship of Father and Son. The generation of the Son from the Father distinguishes the Son from created reality, and from the Father who is ingenerate. It is a specification of the more general “X from X” account. Ayres tracks the use of generation language through various authors and views it as a fundamental element in the pro-Nicene account of the Trinity.<sup>31</sup>

Reflection on the Holy Spirit in this period is far less developed. Ayres notes the common features of the positions of Basil and Athanasius, that “they and all pro-Nicenes face common pressures when they argue that the Spirit is a co-equal member of the triune Godhead. The most important pressure is to find a place for the Spirit in the Trinity as distinct and not simply as another Son.” In this regard “the distinction between generation and ‘procession’ used by some writers on the basis of John 15:26 delivers a distinction but little more”.<sup>32</sup> Despite this lack of overall reflection the Creed is nonetheless able to affirm that the Spirit “proceeds from” the Father.

And so we are left with a basic account of “one God, three persons and two processions”. However, the status of this account has been called into question by just about every modern author outside the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition of Trinitarian theology. Some seek to add other relations, particular those possible relations that might give a role to the Holy Spirit in the procession of the Son.<sup>33</sup> To others it implies the evils of ecclesial hierarchy, of sexism, and of social inequalities by placing hierarchical relationships within the Godhead.<sup>34</sup> They respond

29. As is well known, what is commonly called the Nicene Creed actually emerges from the Council of Constantinople, though it is largely reflective of the outcomes of Nicaea. I will continue to refer to it by its more traditional name.

30. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 59, 73, 120, 165.

31. He notes its use in Ambrose (264), Athanasius (111-2), Augustine (378-9), Basil of Ancyra (151-2), Basil of Caesarea (197-8) and Cyril of Alexander (155-7); Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*,

32. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 217.

33. David Coffey, *Grace: The Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Sydney: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1979), and his various other writings; Thomas G. Weinandy, *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

34. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns, Theology and Liberation Series. (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); Gavin D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London: SCM, 2000); LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*.

by symmetrising the relationship between the persons, so that each person “proceeds” from every other person in some sense. For many works on contemporary Trinitarian theology the processions almost drop from sight. Certainly most authors seeking to develop a social model of the Trinity find little reason to refer to the processions at all. Yet for Thomas Aquinas the very first question he considers in relation to the Trinity is “are there processions in God?” (ST I q27, a1).

The shift here is significant and involves fundamental differences in what we consider to be the task of theology. For Aquinas (and the tradition within which he stands) the basic account of “one God, three persons and two processions” is a truth of faith which it is the theologian’s task is to understand. It is a truth proclaimed in the Nicene Creed and the work of the theologian is to provide an account whereby what is believed in faith may, through suitable analogies (which are known naturally), be rendered at least partially intelligible, or perhaps more minimally, not completely unintelligible. In achieving this goal the psychological analogy operates with moderate success. In contrast, much modern Trinitarian theology, while accepting the account of “one God and three persons” as given in faith, tends to view the “two processions” as a negotiable matter. In this sense much of the modern concern is more one of “dogmatics”, seeking to determine what is or is not the case, rather than one of “systematics”, seeking to understand what is given dogmatically as of the faith.

I shall return to this question again when I shift attention to what historians can learn from theologians, because the nature of dogma remains obscure for many in the contemporary world, both theologians and historians. For the moment I shall just draw attention again to the basic account and the significance of the notion of the two processions within it. It raises the question, “how are these processions to be understood?”

### The Psychological Analogy

The question is: where does this leave the so-called psychological analogy? The psychological analogy developed by Augustine in *De Trinitate* and further refined by Thomas Aquinas has become something of a *bête noire* for modern theology. It has been met with a range of responses from incomprehension to outright rejection.<sup>35</sup> Some have argued that its deployment by Augustine is the root cause of modern individualism which now needs overturning through a recovery of the

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35. For an account of the analogy and its place within contemporary theology see Neil Ormerod, “The Psychological Analogy for the Trinity: at Odds with Modernity”, *Pacifica* 14 (2001) 281-94.

social analogy of the Cappadocians.<sup>36</sup> If the historical claims about the social analogy are exaggerated at best and inaccurate at worst, then what about the corresponding rejection of the psychological analogy. Is the analogy nothing more than an Augustinian aberration which has no place within the tradition?

Here again Ayres dispels modern myths. Far from being an aberration, he provides evidence that Augustine's analogy is continuous with much of the previous tradition. This is particularly the case of the procession of the Word from the Father, which is often linked to the exercise or faculty of reason within the Godhead. Thus Marcellus of Ancyra argued that "just as a human person possesses a reasoning faculty that is intrinsic to her existence, so too does the Word eternally exist with God".<sup>37</sup> Lactantius spoke of the Son as "the intelligible Word from the mouth of the Father, representing the mind of the Father".<sup>38</sup> Ayres notes that the language adopted by Athanasius "serves to reinforce his tendency to present the Father/Son relationship as most like that of a person and their faculties".<sup>39</sup> Of even greater interest is the position of Basil of Caesarea:

Human persons for Basil possess a peculiar dignity because in their rational minds they possess the image of God and are the most appropriate site for exploring the nature of God. At a number of points in the *Contra Eunomium* Basil treats the harmonious, passionless emergence of thought as an analogue for the emergence of Son from Father: the human *nous* stands as an ideal site for the exploration of the immediacy of relations between the immaterial divine "persons".<sup>40</sup>

In a more detailed discussion of the place of the psychological analogy for the procession of the Word, Ayres finds substantial agreement between theologians both East and West, "in both languages [Latin and Greek], theologians are agreed on the possibility of using the mind's act of generation as a model for understanding the Word: it is the act of generating without material division that such analogies offers".<sup>41</sup> He

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36. Perhaps most notably in Gunton, "Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West". For a detailed critique of Gunton's position see Neil Ormerod, "Augustine and the Trinity: Whose Crisis?", *Pacifica* 16 (2003) 17-32.

37. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 62.

38. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 73.

39. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 115.

40. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 208.

41. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 290.

concludes that Augustine “builds on the long tradition of using the ‘psychological’ analogy of a person and her or his word”.<sup>42</sup>

Thus there is considerable agreement that the procession of the Word from the Father can be understood as analogous to the some form of intellectual generation within the human mind. Augustine did not create this *ex nihilo* but drew on the whole tradition of Trinitarian theology, both east and west. Augustine does give the analogy more precision than previous authors, as is evident in his explorations in Book 9 of *De Trinitate*. And he is far more creative in relation to the procession of the Spirit as a procession of Love, since the tradition in this area (as in many other areas) was far less fulsome on the Spirit than on the Son. But overall Augustine’s work on the psychological analogy demonstrates considerable continuity with the previous tradition, both east and west. If this is indeed the case one can only ask why Augustine is singled out for such repeated condemnation by contemporary theology for his deployment of this analogy.

In fact the analogy delivers precisely what is asked of it in relation to the basic account of the Trinity that Nicaea bequeaths to us. It provides an account of divine unity, of three-fold distinction of Persons within that unity, and a way of grounding those distinctions of Persons by relating them to two processions which are then understood in psychological terms. What more could be asked of it? If this is the case then the real issue that contemporary theology has with the psychological analogy is really a reflection of its difficulties with the basic account.

#### THINGS HISTORIANS MIGHT LEARN FROM (SOME) THEOLOGIANs

On the above analysis theologians have much to learn from contemporary historical studies in relation to the theology of the Trinity. The historical scholarship of Ayres and others calls into question substantial schools of thought in contemporary Trinitarian theology, and so demands appropriate theological adjustments. However, lest the dialogue appear all one sided, I think it fair to also point out how certain theological perspectives might help shed light on the historical task. Just as one cannot write an insightful history of mathematics without being a competent mathematician, so one cannot write insightful ecclesial and theological histories without adopting well thought out theological commitments. Overall Ayres’ work is theologically sophisticated. However there is one matter which I think might be of assistance in further clarifying his work. In particular, I would like to add a

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42. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 291.

suggestion from the work of theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan.

#### Distinction between Dogma and Theology

One of the underlying theological questions pervading the discussion concerns the validity or lack thereof of a distinction between dogma and theology. Of course this is a problem not just for historians, but also for many theologians. It arises, above all, in relation to what I have called the basic account of "one God, three persons and two processions". This is the basic account of the Trinity provided in the Nicene Creed. What is the status of this account? Is it in some sense binding on Christian faith or is it an interesting but historically conditioned construction which we are free to tinker with in the ways proposed by various authors?

In this regard Lonergan's methodological distinction between the functional specialties of doctrines and systematics is particularly helpful.<sup>43</sup> Lonergan bases his distinction on the distinction between the cognitive operations of judgement, with its question "Is it so?", and of understanding, with its question, "What is it?" In this regard Lonergan further distinguishes between understanding data, much as a scientist understands the empirical data on a graph, and understanding facts, where a given situation is known to be true but is not fully comprehended.<sup>44</sup> For Lonergan, the specialty of doctrines is concerned with judgements of truth, and Church dogmas are a particular instance of such judgements. The task of systematics is then one of understanding the truth presented in doctrines and dogmas.

Here I think Ayres' work would be assisted by making use of such a distinction. He regularly refers to the "theology" of Nicaea, a form of expression not uncommon among historians and theologians alike. Yet to refer to it as a theology is to place it on the same level as other theological writings. Thus we have alongside one another the theology of Athanasius, Augustine and Nicaea. Of course this is a very modern stance, certainly not that of Athanasius and Augustine. For these authors the position of Nicaea was the teaching of the Church, something to be believed with divine faith. It bore the authority of the Church and could not be equated with their own theological writings. Augustine is very clear that you may agree or disagree with his

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43. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1971).

44. Lonergan, *Method*, 348. See also Robert Doran, *What is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 133-36.

theological opinions but to fail to believe the teaching of the Church put one outside the faith.<sup>45</sup>

Ayres has the right elements in his work to move to such a position. He speaks of the work of Nicaea as “deliberative” and its conclusions as “judgements”,<sup>46</sup> though at one place he places the word judgement in inverted commas.<sup>47</sup> He also draws attention to the use of the notion of judgement in the work of David Burrell.<sup>48</sup> This raises the historical question as to the nature of the work of councils such as Nicaea. Are they best understood as providing an interpretation of the faith, or of making judgements on the content of faith? I think the historical evidence would indicate that at the very least the self-understanding of the collected bishops at a church council was one of making a judgement, in the case of the council of Nicaea a judgement about the ontological status of the Son as co-equal with the Father, in light of the counter claims made by Arius. Moreover that judgement is made not just by a group of theologians assessing the work of their peers, but also by bishops with a specific ecclesial responsibility and mandate to protect and pass on the content of the faith.

If Nicaea is an ecclesial judgement rather than an act of theological interpretation then a different set of questions can arise. What are the limits and scope of that judgement? What are the grounds of such a judgement? What is the ongoing validity of that judgement – more basically, did they get it right? And as believing Christians, what is the ongoing normative force of that judgement? Theological commitments in relation to such questions affect the ways in which one reads the historical material in terms of “what is moving forward”, as Lonergan puts it.<sup>49</sup> However, if we view the work of a council such as Nicaea in terms of judgement we can break through the dominant position which understands the work of theology as a hermeneutic process of experience-interpretation-reinterpretation. Judgement raises the question of truth, and without a recognition of the distinctiveness of judgement the issue of the truthfulness of Christian belief cannot arise.

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45. As he notes, “So whoever reads this and says ‘This is not well said, because I do not understand it,’ is criticizing my statement, not the faith.... on the other hand, if anyone reads this work and says ‘I understand what is being said, but it is not true,’ he is at liberty to affirm his own convictions as much as he likes and refute me if he can.” Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle O.S.A, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn NY: New City Press, 1991) Book 1.5.

46. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 86-7.

47. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 135.

48. Ayres cites Burrell’s source as Gilson, though given Burrell’s familiarity with Lonergan it is hard to imagine Lonergan’s influence is not present as well.

49. Lonergan, *Method*, 178.

## CONCLUSION

It is often difficult to identify the impact of historical work on systematic theology, particularly the impact of scholarly work on the Scriptures. There appears to be no straight path from biblical exegesis to systematic theology. The path is perhaps more straight when we are dealing with the historical accounts of the periods which led directly to the formulation of the basic doctrines of Christian belief on the Trinity and Christology. These doctrines have provided the normative framework for all theological reflections ever since, perhaps until the present era. Recent theological attempts to draw on particular readings of eastern Church Fathers of the Nicene era have led theology in various directions away from the previously dominant Augustinian-Thomistic tradition. The work of Ayres and other historians must cast a doubt on those readings. Certainly claims about conflicts between East and West and the grounding of social Trinitarianism in the writings of the Cappadocians do not seem to be correct. Further, elements of the psychological analogy seem to be the common possession of both East and West well prior to Augustine. If this is in fact the case Trinitarian theologians need to reconsider much of the present direction of their craft.