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## Le molte vie per Nicea

a cura di Emmanuel Albano  
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MARK EDWARDS\*

## The Concept of God at Nicaea

The Nicene Symbol of 325 was not a philosophical composition; nor was it designed for liturgical use, or as a compendium of belief. It acquired both uses only when the anathema were removed and the text of the Creed was reinforced by clauses pertaining to the Spirit and an affirmation of the Virgin Birth. Some have maintained that the function of such oecumenical formulae as the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition is not to impress substantive propositions on the memory but to lay a grammar for theological ratiocination<sup>1</sup>. This is hardly a typical use of that term, for rules of grammar tend to be unwittingly violated rather than purposely contradicted, and the violation of them no more entails an error in thought than the observance of them renders our thoughts infallible. By contrast the contents of the Nicene Creed were resolutely debated, both before and after its promulgation, by holders of high ecclesiastical office, all of whom were convinced that their opponents were guilty not of solecism but of dangerous blasphemy. Some controversies may indeed have turned upon the proper use of words<sup>2</sup>, but this is not what we mean by grammar, and while such terms as *ousia* and *hypostasis* were conventional, it was held by all that once they had been defined their application was determined by the nature of God himself. The protagonists after Nicaea were more apt to accuse one another of bad philosophy than of poor grammar, and many articles of the Creed had been maintained before the Council by

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<sup>1</sup> The approach of George Lindbeck, exemplified for example in L.O. AYRES, «Not Three People: the Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*», in *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. S. COAKLEY, Wiley, London 2003, p. 16 and p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> For a reading of [BASIL], *Letter 38* as an exercise in the study of words insofar as they signify (*i.e.* as Porphyry read the *Categories* of Aristotle), see: M.J. EDWARDS, «Porphyry and Cappadocian Logic», in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 60(2015), pp. 61-74.

philosophical arguments – it being the shared assumption of the apologists and their pagan interlocutors that the aim of philosophy, whether its subject be words or things, is to put away falsehood and embrace the truth. The aim of the present study is to explain the intellectual prehistory of those articles which admit of attack or defence with the tools and methods of philosophy; since, as I have observed, the creed itself is not itself a philosophic text, I shall make no reference to those propositions regarding the Word and his incarnation which by common consent lay outside the province of reason and were known only by those to whom God chose that they should be revealed.

## 1. We Believe in One God

The Shema – «Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord» – is an indefeasible axiom of Christian, no less than of Jewish thought, repeated word for word by Christ and cherished by the Catholic tradition in defiance of all temptations to tritheism and all accusations that they had already fallen into this heresy<sup>3</sup>. It admits, however, of more than one exegesis. Monolatry, conceding the existence of other deities who are lawfully revered by other nations, reduces it to the First Commandment, «thou shalt have no other gods before me»<sup>4</sup>. The henotheist understands it to mean that one God is superior to all others, but allows that the others may also be «gods and children of the most high»<sup>5</sup>. The strict monotheist, declaring that «all the gods of the nations are idols» will not grant even the name of God to any other being. It may be objected that, since no Christian doubted the existence of angels or demons in antiquity, their monotheism is only a matter of nomenclature: if by «god» we mean a superhuman agent, the Christian will be a henotheist, whereas if we mean a being worthy of worship, his religion will be a species of monolatry<sup>6</sup>. Be that as it may, it is characteristic of Christians in the Roman world, and wholly untypical of Greek philosophy in the same period, to assert that there is one God and one God only. All Platonists

<sup>3</sup> *Deuteronomy* 6.4-5; *Mark* 12.29. See: *Luke* 10.27, *1 Corinthians* 8.4 and B. GERHARDSSON, *The Shema in the New Testament, Deut 6.4-5 in Significant Passages*, Nova Press, Lund 1996.

<sup>4</sup> *Exodus* 20.3. For further examination of this premiss of Israelite thought see: L. HURTADO, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, Bloomsbury, London 2015, pp. 24-40.

<sup>5</sup> *John* 10.34, quoting *Psalms* 82.6.

<sup>6</sup> See further: M.L. WEST, «Towards Monotheism», in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, eds. P. ATHANASSIADI – M. FREDE, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 21-40.

are polytheists in the sense that they never question the existence of a multitude of deities; the greatest of them are not even henotheists, for in Plato and Plotinus the sovereign principle is most properly described as the Good or the One and has none of the personal attributes that Jews and Christians ascribe, least of all the capacity to will, to love and to act with purpose on the material world<sup>7</sup>.

Porphyry and Plutarch perhaps deserve to be regarded as henotheists<sup>8</sup>, while a certain measure of syncretism finds its way into all philosophies and civic cults. In its inchoate form, this was simply the identification of one nation's gods with those of another, with no reduction in the number of beings worshipped by either. In a more advanced form, it implies the creation of one God from two – as Serapis is said to have been a conflation of Apis and Osiris<sup>9</sup> – and at its extreme the negation of all difference, as when a speaker in Macrobius argues that any God may be identified with the sun<sup>10</sup>. In this case, however, the claim that only one God exists is logically equivalent to the claim that all gods exist, and this is clearly not the intention of the exordium to the Creed. It may appear paradoxical that they assert this singularity of the Father alone, and do not go on to decree that the Father, the Son and the Spirit jointly are one God and not three. As we shall see below, however, the Son is *homoousios* with the Father only because he is «true God from true God», and it is therefore because the Father has none beside that he and the Son (as Christ proclaimed at *John* 10.30) are one.

## 2. The Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth

In the Old Testament passages styling God the Father of Israel are neither so frequent nor so memorable as those which portray him as her dishonoured spouse. At *Jeremiah* 3.19 he himself gives a pledge of his fatherhood, having previously complained at 3.4-5 that his sons do not show him due reverence; at *Isaiah* 63.16 and 64.8 his claim is acknowl-

<sup>7</sup> See: L. GERSON, «The Personhood of the One», in *The Byzantine Platonists 284-1453*, eds. S. KLITENIC WEAR – F. LAURITZEN, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 2021, pp. 1-13.

<sup>8</sup> See: PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus* 23 on the «God over all»; C. DELLE DONNE, «Who is the Demiurge according to Plutarch? The Cosmic Soul in the IV Platonic Question», in *Methexis* 33(2021), pp. 137-150.

<sup>9</sup> The evidence is mixed; see: S. PFEIFFER, «The God Serapis, his Cult and the Beginnings of the Ruler Cult in Ptolemaic Egypt», in *Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World*, eds. P. MCKECHNIE – P. GUILLAUME, Brill, Leiden 2009, pp. 387-408.

<sup>10</sup> MACROBIUS, *Saturnalia* 1.9 and 17-24.

edged by the prophet (almost certainly a younger contemporary of Jeremiah), while at *Malachi* 1.6 he expostulates, «If I be a father, where is my honour»? It was long before the composition of any of these works that Zeus was extolled in Homer as «father of humans and gods»<sup>11</sup>. The Latin word *pater*, moreover, is a title of the god Liber and an element in the name Jupiter<sup>12</sup>. These accolades can only be honorific, as Zeus himself was the Son of Cronus and it was always a mark of distinction in the classical world to have a deity among one's forebears. In the *Timaeus* Plato accepts their pretensions with a smile<sup>13</sup>, but treats the lesser gods as creatures of a supernal *nous* or intellect, whom he calls the Demiurge. In a famous text he adds the caveat that it is hard to discover this «father and maker of all» and, even if one discovers him, impossible to make him known to others<sup>14</sup>. Plato's appellation for the first principle is not Father but the One or the Good<sup>15</sup>; it was left to his later interpreters to conflate the language of myth with that of philosophy, so that Father becomes a sobriquet for the First God or First Intellect (who is otherwise called the Good) in Numenius of Apamea<sup>16</sup>. Plotinus suggests that Hesiod's genealogy of the gods, in which Uranus gives birth to Cronus and Cronus to Zeus, symbolically represents the emanation (or more properly *aporrhōia*, «flowing away») of *nous* from the One and the subsequent procession of Soul from Nous<sup>17</sup>.

The New Testament reserves the epithet Bridegroom for Christ<sup>18</sup>, who professes to be the Son of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> *Iliad* 1.544; *Odyssey* 18.124 etc. G.M. CALHOUN, «Zeus the Father in Homer», in *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 66(1935), pp. 1-17, argues that fatherhood in Homer does not entail kingship, in contrast to HESIOD, *Theogony* 886 and 923, *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 367, etc.

<sup>12</sup> See: A.B. COOK, «The European Sky-God III: the Italians», in *Folklore* 16(1905), pp. 260-332, in particular pp. 260-261 and p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> PLATO, *Timaeus* 40e-41a.

<sup>14</sup> PLATO, *Timaeus* 28c.

<sup>15</sup> See now: M. BALTES, «Is the Idea of the Good in Plato's *Republic* beyond Being?», in his *Dianoëmeta. Kleine Schriften zu Platon und zum Platonismus*, Teubner, Stuttgart-Leipzig 1999 (reprint: De Gruyter, Berlin 2011), pp. 351-372; D. GARDNER, «The Ambiguity of the One on Plato's *Parmenides*», in *Methexis* 30(2018), pp. 36-59.

<sup>16</sup> His First and Second God seem to share the epithets and attributes of Plato's Demiurge; see: J.M. DILLON, *The Middle Platonists*, Duckworth, London 1977, pp. 366-372. Even this passage bears out the judgment of P. WIDDICOMBE, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000, p. 63 that Origen «does not discuss the nature of divine fatherhood in abstraction from either his doctrine of the Trinity or his doctrine of salvation».

<sup>17</sup> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* 5.8.13; see *Enneads* 3.5.6 and 5.5.3 with F.M. SOLMSEN, «Plotinus V,5, 3,21ff., a passage on Zeus», in *Museum Helveticum* 43(1986), pp. 68-73.

<sup>18</sup> *Mark* 2.19; *Matthew* 9.15; *John* 3.29; *Ephesians* 5.25-32; *Revelation* 21.2.

<sup>19</sup> *Matthew* 16.16; *Mark* 12.26-27.

Although Israel is collectively the Son of God at *Hosea* 11.2, no claim to personal filiation had hitherto been made either by or on behalf of any Israelite except the king, and even in his case the announcement «thou art my Son; this day I have begotten thee» was not taken to imply that he differed from other humans in his mode of birth<sup>20</sup>. When the same words were applied to Christ, however, they signified to most Christians that he was the only-begotten Son of God, perhaps his equal, certainly the instrument and interpreter of his will and the dispenser of his judgments<sup>21</sup>. Through him alone the Father was revealed<sup>22</sup>, and it was by baptism in his name – or rather in that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – that believers obtained *huiiothesia*, adoption as sons and heirs, which gave them the right to approach their Father with the intimate supplication «Abba, Father» and the duty of proclaiming him to others<sup>23</sup>. Until all humankind is converted (if such a thing is possible) the God of the New Testament is not Father of the world, although he is Father of the Son through whom he created the works, and once receives the curious designation «Father of lights»<sup>24</sup>.

Christian theologians before Nicaea, when they write for their fellow-believers, commonly observe the same restrictions in their use of the title Father: the passage in which Origen says that the Father's power extends to all beings, rational and irrational<sup>25</sup>, is no more characteristic of him than of Irenaeus or Clement of Alexandria. For their Gnostic adversaries, the Demiurge is father only of those who are not elect, having brought the material cosmos into being without the approval of the unknowable and ineffable source of existence who fathers the realm of spirit<sup>26</sup>. In the apologists, on the other hand, Plato's dictum regarding the Father and Maker of all is freely quoted, sometimes with the proviso that it would be not merely difficult but impossible to discover the Father without his own self-disclosure in the Son<sup>27</sup>. The *First Epistle*

<sup>20</sup> *Psalm* 2.7; see: *Hebrews* 1.5 and *Mark* 1.15. On begetting as enthronement see: S. MOWINCKEL, *He that Cometh*, Abingdon, New York 1956, pp. 23-55.

<sup>21</sup> *John* 1.14, 1.18, 5.18, 5.27.

<sup>22</sup> *Matthew* 11.25-27; *John* 1.18, 14.6.

<sup>23</sup> *Mark* 14.36; *Romans* 8.15-17; *Matthew* 28.19.

<sup>24</sup> *James* 1.17.

<sup>25</sup> See: ORIGEN, *First Principles* 1.3.5, with J. DILLON, «Origen's Doctrine of the Trinity and Some Later Neoplatonic Theories», in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought*, ed. D.J. O'MEARA, International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Norfolk 1982, pp. 19-23.

<sup>26</sup> See: IRENAEUS, *Against Heresies*, book I; PLOTINUS, *Enneads* 2.9. For comparison with the philosophers see: C.S. O'BRIEN, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought. Secondary Gods and Mediators*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 205-243.

<sup>27</sup> J. DANIELOU, *Message Évangélique et Culture Hellénistique*, Desclée, Paris 1961, pp. 80-123.

of *Clement*, one of the earliest Christian texts outside the New Testament, substitutes *ktistês*, «creator», for *poiêtês*, «maker»<sup>28</sup>. The latter term would usually have been thought to imply, as «Demiurge» invariably does, that the deity fashioned the cosmos from a substrate that was already in existence: while Plato himself speaks only of a receptacle or space, the majority of his followers concurred with Aristotle in identifying this with primordial matter<sup>29</sup>. After the second century, most Platonists also accepted another of Aristotle's objections to the literal understanding of the *Timaeus*, namely that if it was ever good to produce a world, it must be eternally good to do so, and the Demiurge could have had no reason to act at one time rather than another<sup>30</sup>. The Neoplatonists therefore maintained the eternity of the world as a corollary of the eternal superabundance of the One, admitting neither contingency nor volition in the agency of the demiurgic *nous*<sup>31</sup>.

Christians, by contrast, affirmed on the authority of Moses that the world has a finite history. This they believed to be also the view of Plato, but by the end of the second century it was usual to contrast his belief that the Demiurge fashioned the cosmos from a substrate with the biblical doctrine of creation from nothing<sup>32</sup>. In fact, there is little biblical warrant for this, as modern scholars have frequently noted, for the earth without form and void at *Genesis* 1.2 could be understood as a pre-existent chaos, and even the allusion at *2 Maccabees* 7.28 to creation from «things that are not» could be taken to mean from things without any definite existence rather than from absolutely nothing<sup>33</sup>. From Tatian onwards – some would nominate Philo and Basilides as his precursors – divine omnipotence was held to preclude the necessity of any substrate, however tenuous<sup>34</sup>: Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian expressly assert creation out of nothing,

<sup>28</sup> 1 *Clement* 19.2.

<sup>29</sup> See: R. SORABJI, *Matter, Space and Motion: Theories in Antiquity and their Sequel*, Duckworth, London 1988, pp. 32-34.

<sup>30</sup> See: Id., *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, Duckworth, London 1983, pp. 193-200.

<sup>31</sup> In *Enneads* 6.8 the will of the One (or Unity) is reflexive, as its *energeia*; it has neither love nor providential solicitude for the material order.

<sup>32</sup> See: G. MAY, *Creatio ex Nihilo. The Doctrine of «Creation out of Nothing» in Early Christian Thought*, T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh 1994.

<sup>33</sup> Although the Latin equivalent was always *ex nihilo*, as is observed by M.J. EDWARDS, «Christians against Matter: A Bouquet for Bishop Berkeley», in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World. Essays in Honour of John D. Turner*, eds. K. CORRIGAN – T. RASIMUS, Brill, Leiden 2013, pp. 569-580, in particular p. 573.

<sup>34</sup> TATIAN, *Oration to the Greeks* 5.3; BASILIDES at [HIPPLYTUS], *Refutation of all Heresies* 7.21.1.

while Origen doubts even the necessity of a prior creation of matter<sup>35</sup>. The Nicene locution «maker of heaven and earth» therefore implies creation from nothing and at some finite temporal distance from the present. The title *poiêtês* may have been chosen in preference to *ktistês* because it appeared to sit better with the use of Father in the Platonic sense which defined the relation of the First Person to the cosmos and not merely to the elect.

The choice of *poiêtês* rather than *ktistês* may also have prompted by the coupling of the words *patêr* and *pantokratôr*, for the formula *pantokratôr kai poiêtês* is as early as Justin Martyr. He employs it in his *Dialogue with Trypho* as a title of the Creator that would be familiar to all readers of the Septuagint<sup>36</sup>; it was also one to which 2 *Corinthians* 6.18 and *Revelation* 1.8 had given apostolic sanction, and it appears again, within a few years of Justin's death, in a statement of the rule of faith by Irenaeus against those who deny that the Creator is the true Father. On the other hand, it is not a word known to classical Greek, its nearest cognate being the epithet *pankratês*<sup>37</sup>, applied to Zeus by Cleanthes the Stoic and to time by the dramatist Sophocles. Among Greek-speaking Jews it was adopted by Aristeas but not by Philo<sup>38</sup>. Every occurrence of the title *pantokratôr* in Justin is linked to the mission of Christ as the executor of his Father's omnipotent will; in Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian (in whom we may read *omnipotens* as the equivalent of *pantokratôr*) it also betokens the absolute self-sufficiency of a Creator who needs not even the most tenuous of substrates and not even a bare potentiality other than his own *fiat*<sup>39</sup>. By this asseveration of the Father's transcendence with respect to the cosmos, the Creed throws into relief the properties of God the Son, who did not come into being from a state of non-existence and is not a product of the Father's volition but the sole offspring of his *ousia*. The meaning of this innovatory formula will be more evident when we set it against the Christian and Platonic antecedents that it eschews even as it evokes them.

<sup>35</sup> THEOPHILUS, *To Autolytus* 2.10; TERTULLIAN, *Against Hermogenes* 15.4 and 16.3; ORIGEN, *Philokalia* 24.8 and *First Principles* 4.4.7.

<sup>36</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* 16.4, 38.2, 83.4, 96.3, 139.4, 142.2. I owe these and most other references in this paragraph to J.-P. BATTUT, *Pantocrator*. «Dieu et Père Tout-Puisant» dans la théologie prénicéenne, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris 2009, in particular pp. 52-53.

<sup>37</sup> BATTUT, *Pantocrator*, p. 31, citing *Sophocles at Colonus* 609.

<sup>38</sup> BATTUT, *Pantocrator*, p. 35, citing *Letter of Aristeas* 10.185.

<sup>39</sup> THEOPHILUS, *To Autolytus* 1.4; TERTULLIAN, *Apology* 24.1, *Against Marcion* 1.1.4.

### 3. And in Jesus Christ... *monogenês*, that is, from the *ousia* of the Father

The adjective *monogenês*, on which *ek tês ousias* is a gloss, enters Christian parlance in the Gospel of John, with a debt to the Psalmist perhaps, but none to the ending of the *Timaeus*, where the world is the unique image (*eikôn monogenês*) of the eternal paradigm<sup>40</sup>. Latin authors of the patristic era hesitate between the renderings *unicus* and *unigenitus*, «sole in its kind» and «only-begotten»<sup>41</sup>. The Creed endorses the second, as much by its omission of the term «image» as by its two affirmations of consubstantiality, of which *ek tês ousias* is the first.

*Ousia* is the Greek noun corresponding to the verb *einai*, «to be». For all that, in its earliest occurrence in Greek literature, as in its sole occurrence in the New Testament, it has the restricted sense of household property. It has been suggested that the invention of money, by fostering an abstract notion of property, enabled the Greeks to form a metaphysical conceit of being<sup>42</sup>. Be that as it may, *ousia* at *Phaedo* 65 denotes the essence, «that which it is», where the subject of inquiry is not a concrete thing in the physical real, but virtue. It is by knowledge of the essence that we are able to recognise instances of the same thing in a variety of circumstances; none of these instantiations will be identical with the essence if we follow the *Timaeus* in contrasting the immutable realm of being with the undulant realm of becoming or generation in which our souls are presently detained<sup>43</sup>. It appears, however, that Plato never entertained the concept of pure being which French and English following Latin, can express by the differentiation of existence from essence. To be, as the Eleatic stranger argues in the *Sophist*, is to be some particular thing, to have certain predicates which exclude others, and therefore is also not to be<sup>44</sup>; *ousia* in the systematic exegesis of Plato that we know as Neoplatonism therefore designates the realm of Forms, in which every object is identical with its own essence. Whether the One of Plotinus and his successors is beyond being (*epekeina tês ousias* at *Repub-*

<sup>40</sup> *John* 1.14, 1.18, 3.16; *1 John* 4.9; *Hebrews* 11.17; *Psalms* 25.16 and 35.17; PLATO, *Timaeus* 92c.

<sup>41</sup> Thus Tertullian writes *unigenitus* at *Against Praxeas* 7.1 and *unicus* at *Against Praxeas* 21.4.

<sup>42</sup> *Luke* 15.11; MARIUS VICTORINUS, *Against the Arians* 3.5 (p. 126.23, ed. LOCHER) quotes this in Latin, wrongly stating that the Greek underlying *substantia* is *hypostasis*. At p. 96.26-27 he collates this passage with others in which *hypostasis* is indeed the Greek original.

<sup>43</sup> *Timaeus* 27d-28a, cited by EUSEBIUS, *Preparation for the Gospel* 11.9.4.

<sup>44</sup> See: P. CRIVELLI, *Plato on Falsehood: A Study of the Sophist*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.

lic 609b) in the sense of transcending all existence or rather in the sense of having no essence but to exist is still a question in debate<sup>45</sup>.

We could say that in Plato the verb «to be» is always employed in a copulative rather than in an absolute or existential sense. But even the copula hides an ambiguity, which was perhaps first clearly acknowledged by Aristotle when he distinguishes the primary *ousia*, which we predicate of a thing when we give it a name, from the secondary *ousia* which we predicate by assigning it to a species. Those who read the *Categories* as an essay in ontology would say that a thing is its primary *ousia*, but possesses its secondary *ousia* as its essence, or at least as part of its essence<sup>46</sup>. Aristotle's own usage is ramified, however, in the *Metaphysics*, where we are told that *ousia* may signify either the form of a thing, its matter or the composite of the two; whether the form and the matter in this taxonomy are to be understood generically or with reference to the individual subject is, once again, a question in debate<sup>47</sup>.

For Christians, as for Hellenised Jews, the biblical warrant for speaking of God is his own declaration, «I am that which I am», in the Septuagintal version of his encounter with Moses at *Exodus* 3.14. The locution «that which I am» implies an essence, while the words «I am», together with the subsequent self-designation of God as «He who is» (*ho ôn*) would seem to preclude any notion of his being absolutely beyond existence<sup>48</sup>. In the gospels, Jesus makes frequent use of the expression *ego eimi*, «I am» without predicate or complement, and once at least, when he proclaims «Before Abraham was, I am» at *John* 8.58, we can hardly deny that he is obliquely claiming to be God on the other hand, when he adds a complement «I am the vine» (15.1); «I am the light of the world» (8.12; 9.4) – he is not defining his essence but adopting a metaphor to express his relation to those who believe. The noun *ousia* is not employed with relation to God by Greek apologists of the second century, and even in Origen's extant works it never denotes what the persons of the Trinity have in common. At times it clearly signifies being of a certain kind, as when the Son is said to differ in substrate and *ousia* from the Father<sup>49</sup>. On the other hand, when those who treat the Son as an epiphenome-

<sup>45</sup> See: BALTES, «Is the Idea of the Good», and J. WHITTAKER, «Ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ οὐσίας», in *Vigiliae Christianae* 23(1969), pp. 91-104.

<sup>46</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Categories* 1b and 2a.

<sup>47</sup> ID., *Metaphysics* 1042b-1043a. See further: W.V. SELLARS, «Substance and Form in Aristotle», in *Journal of Philosophy* 54(1957), pp. 688-699; D. GRAHAM, *Aristotle's Two Systems*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987; M. PERAMATZIS, *Priority in Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

<sup>48</sup> See: PHILO, *On Abraham* 54; *On Change of Names* 11 etc.

<sup>49</sup> *On Prayer* 15, where the term *hupokeimenon* may imply the possession of matter, and hence of a body, by the incarnate Son.

non of the Father are accused of failing to clarify his *ousia*, it might be inferred that *ousia* in itself is a term that does not imply any qualification of being<sup>50</sup>. Again, Origen's assertion that the Son proceeds not from the Father's *ousia* but only from his *dunamis*<sup>51</sup> need not be taken to mean that the Father has a peculiar essence, but only that the Son does not proceed from his very being, from the *autotheos* which is God himself, since (as Origen says elsewhere) his substrate is properly the Father's will. The error that that Origen wishes to forestall is almost certainly the one against which Eusebius warns his readers when he asseverates that the Son is not from the *ousia* of the Father either by fission or by scission or by any other process that would entail a division of the Father's essence.<sup>52</sup> Arius makes the same proviso in his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, but neither he nor Eusebius, in writings whose authenticity is unquestioned, goes so far as to say that there can be no sense in which the Son is from the *ousia* of the Father<sup>53</sup>. This apodictic statement is attributed to Eusebius of Nicomedia, the ecclesiastical patron of Arius, by Theodoret of Cyrus, though both the authenticity and date of his putative letter to Paulinus of Tyre are contested<sup>54</sup>. If *ousia* is used in the sense of essence, all philosophers would have agreed that it cannot be divisible: although Plato used the term «participation», the «sailcloth argument» of his *Parmenides* demonstrates that when things are of the same essence it is because the whole essence is present in each of them, not because each has a discrete part of the essence<sup>55</sup>. For Aristotle, second *ousia* is not a real entity but is predicated of the real entity which we call a first *ousia*, so that to posit or deny its divisibility would be equally meaningless. In the physical realm a first *ousia*, being a composite of form and matter, would be divisible, but a Christian cannot imagine this of God, not only because he is incorporeal but because he is necessarily unique. The three

<sup>50</sup> *Commentary on John* 1.24.151.

<sup>51</sup> *Commentary on John* 13.25.153.

<sup>52</sup> *Demonstration of the Gospel* 4.3.13. L.O. AYRES, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 58, translates «put forth from the being of the Father not by a partaking or division». The implication that he is from the being of the Father is not consistent with the avoidance of this locution elsewhere in Eusebius, and the text is better rendered «not put forth from the being of the Father by partaking or division». By thus leaving open the possibility that the Son is from the *ousia* of the Father in some other sense, Eusebius enabled himself to sign the Nicene Creed without tergiversation.

<sup>53</sup> *Letter to Alexander* at ATHANASIUS, *On the Synods* 16.

<sup>54</sup> THEODORET, *Church History* 1.6.3. See: W. LÖHR, «Arius Reconsidered (Part I)», in *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 9(2005), p. 554, n. 83.

<sup>55</sup> PLATO, *Parmenides* 131b-c. See: S.C. RICKLESS, «How Parmenides Saved the Theory of Forms», in *Philosophical Review* 107(1998), pp. 501-554, in particular pp. 516-518.

persons whatever they are, are not three entities which jointly add up to God; nor can they be three entities in each of whom the essence of God is instantiated, unless we can find some version of this tenet which does not entail the existence of three gods.

Because there is little analysis of their own terms by ecclesiastical writers, even when they appear to be drawing strict distinctions, we cannot be sure that the Nicene Council is purposely or abruptly contradicting Origen. In the *Sophist* of Plato the Eleatic Stranger avers that being (*ousia*) can never be inert but has a vitality which inevitably communicates itself to the realm of becoming<sup>56</sup>. By analogous reasoning, the eponymous speaker at *Timaeus* 29e concludes that, on account of his goodness, the Demiurge cannot fail to convert the turbulent receptacle into an ectype of the eternal paradigm, which Neoplatonists equated with the realm of essential forms. Fusing these two dialogues, the *Chaldaean Oracles* of the second century anatomise the Demiurgic mind as a triad in which *ousia* communicates itself by *dunamis* to intellect<sup>57</sup>: the knower is conditioned by the known, not the known by the knower, as in modern epistemology. The Chaldaean triad seems to have been known to Christian Gnostics of Origen's time<sup>58</sup>, and it is possible that in making the Son a product of the Father's *dunamis* rather than his *ousia* he is merely affirming that if there is any procession from the *ousia* it must be in the sense in which we say that an act proceeds from an agent, not the sense in which (say) water flows from a pot. We shall see that Origen holds the Son to be from the *hypostasis* of the Father, and he certainly holds that the Son is «by nature» the Father's *monogenês*, and that their relation can be likened without impiety to that of Seth and Adam<sup>59</sup>. His statement that the Son is a product of the Father's will<sup>60</sup> is designed primarily to uphold two truths which were equally dear to the Nicene Council: that the Son, in his eternal nature, is as incorporeal as the Father, and that, as the Wisdom he creates the world in accord with the Father's will and not, as the Gnostics thought, in a tragic sally of pride or negligence.

<sup>56</sup> PLATO, *Sophist* 248e-249a. On the Platonic appropriation of this passage see: P. HADOT, «La métaphysique de Porphyre», in *Entretiens Hardt 12: Porphyre*, Fondation Hardt, Vandœuvres-Genève 1966, pp. 25-164.

<sup>57</sup> See: R. MAJERCIK, «Chaldaean Triads in Neoplatonic Exegesis: Some Reconsiderations», in *Classical Quarterly* 51(2001), pp. 265-296.

<sup>58</sup> See: T. RASIMUS, «The Johannine Background of the Being-Life-Mind Triad», in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World*, pp. 369-409.

<sup>59</sup> *First Principles* 1.2.6. The Father and Son are not separated in *ousia* at *Commentary on John* 2.23.149.

<sup>60</sup> *First Principles* 1.2.6. See: WIDDICOMBE, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, pp. 89-90 on the uniqueness of the Son even as a creature.

On the other hand, the Council may have reasoned that if the Son is the Father's *dunamis*, as Paul testifies<sup>61</sup>, he cannot be a product of *dunamis*, just as Athanasius maintained (with much less scriptural authority) that since the Son is the will of the Father he cannot be a product of his will<sup>62</sup>. Since the Creed offers no gloss on either *dunamis* or will, we cannot decide this question; nor can we hope to ascertain whether anyone was conscious of the logical difficulty that arises when we distinguish the Father himself from his *ousia*. In the Aristotelian sense of first *ousia*, the Father is his own *ousia*, as is the Son. It might seem that if the *ousia* is that which the Father shares with the Son, we cannot suppose this to be a second *ousia* in the Aristotelian sense, for this, as we noted above, would be to make the divine an abstraction which is predicable of all the individuals in a class<sup>63</sup>. The number of individuals in any such class is logically indefinite, whereas God, on the Christian view, is necessarily one, and hence coterminous with his own class. To posit an essence of God that is distinct from and logically prior to him, as the essence of humanity is distinct from and prior to every human, was a heresy in the eyes of Athanasius, who attributes it to Paul of Samosata, as we shall see. It is not surprising, therefore, that although he himself is more attached to the formula «from the *ousia*» than to the adjective *homoousios*<sup>64</sup>, it was not retained when the Council of Constantinople amplified the Creed in 381.

#### 4. *Homoousios* with the Father

The *homoousios* is the true shibboleth of the Nicene Creed, the one word (as its advocates well knew) which could not bear a sense acceptable to Arius and his sympathisers. It entered the Greek vocabulary, so far as our evidence goes, with the Valentinians, to whom Irenaeus attributes it on numerous occasions<sup>65</sup>. Among the products said by Valentinians or other Gnostics to be *homoousios* with that which had produced

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<sup>61</sup> 1 *Corinthians* 1.21-24. On the influence of this text see: M.J. EDWARDS, «The Power of God in Some Early Christian Texts», in *Divine Powers in Late Antiquity*, eds. I.-F. VILTANIOTI – A. MARMODORO, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 162-177.

<sup>62</sup> ATHANASIUS, *Orations against the Arians* 2.1. At *On the Decree of Nicaea* 4 he quotes 1 *Corinthians* 1.24.

<sup>63</sup> For an example of the difficulty of determining whether the substance of God is that which God is or that which God has, see: G.C. STEAD, «Divine Substance in Tertullian», in *Journal of Theological Studies* 14(1963), pp. 46-66.

<sup>64</sup> See: ATHANASIUS, *On the Decrees of Nicaea*, chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>65</sup> For references (many of which are deduced from the Latin translation) see: G.C. STEAD, *Divine Substance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977, pp. 192-201.

them were the first Tetrad of emanations, the threefold sonship of the Saviour<sup>66</sup> and the *pneuma* or spirit which set apart the elect from those predestined to salvation. This confusion of creature and Creator did not commend the word to the first heresiologists, who also found it impossible to conceive of an emanation from the impassible and incorporeal Godhead. Origen, on the other hand, adducing *Wisdom* 7.25 in defence of this metaphor, explains it by comparing the Son to a vapour which remains at once distinct from and *homoousios* with the ointment that exhales it<sup>67</sup>. He does not say explicitly, here or elsewhere, that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, and although a number of witnesses ascribe to him the expression *homoousios trias* (consubstantial Trinity)<sup>68</sup>, it was not the practice even of the Nicene fathers, let alone their precursors in the third century, to treat *homoousiotês* as a collective property of all three persons rather than as a relation in which the Second or Third Person stands to the first.

The consubstantiality of the persons was so far from being a dogma, even among the admirers of Origen, that Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria seems to eschew it even when he was protesting, to his namesake Dionysius of Rome, that he had not denied the natural affinity between the Son and the Father. From his previous writings he can cite botanical analogies and a comparison of the Second Person to a ray proceeding from the sun; that is enough to prove that he holds the Father and the Son to be of one kind (*homogenês*)<sup>69</sup>, but the word *homoousios* still seems to elude him. Had he not been too ill to preside at the condemnation of Paul of Samosata at the Council of Antioch in 268, he would have been the first signatory to the Council's interdict on this term, the possible reasons for which are discussed below. The deposition of Paul at Antioch almost coincides with the death of Plotinus, who appears to have been the earliest pagan philosopher to recognise *homoousios* as a Greek word<sup>70</sup>. Chronology would permit him to be indebted to Origen, or to the Ammonius who is widely believed to have been their common master; there is little to suggest, on the other

<sup>66</sup> See: [HIPPLYTUS], *Refutation* 7.22.7 on Basilides.

<sup>67</sup> On the authenticity of the passage quoted by PAMPHILUS, *Apology for Origen* 98-104 for Origen's commentary on *Hebrews*, see: M.J. EDWARDS, «Did Origen Apply the Word *Homoousios* to the Son?», in *Journal of Theological Studies* 49(1998), pp. 658-670.

<sup>68</sup> See: P. TZAMALIKOS, *Anaxagoras, Origen and Neoplatonism*, vol. 2, De Gruyter, Berlin 2016, p. 1532.

<sup>69</sup> ATHANASIUS, *On the Decrees* 6. See further: L. ABRAMOWSKI, «Dionysius of Rome (d. 268) and Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 264/5) in the Arian Controversies of the Fourth Century», in her *Formula and Context*, Variorum, Aldershot 1982, n. XI.

<sup>70</sup> *Enneads* 4.7.10. See further: J.-M. NARBONNE, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 56-68.

hand, that he himself set any precedent for Christian usage, for while he could certainly hold that one incorporeal is *homoousios* with another, he could not say this of his first and second principle, notwithstanding his use of «Father» as a cognomen for one and «ray» or «image» as a simile for the other. *Nous* or intellect, as the realm coterminous with the intelligible, is coterminous with *ousia* on its proper sense, while the One is posited as the source of unity as a prerequisite to *ousia*, and hence superior to *ousia* in this (of not in every) sense<sup>71</sup>. In the theosophical *corpus* known as the *Hermetica*, we read of a Logos or creative Word that is *homoousios* with the demiurgic intellect; we cannot assume, however, that Hermetic texts are independent of Christian thought or even that those not cited by Lactantius were composed before Nicaea<sup>72</sup>. Echoes of both the Old Testament and the New have been detected in the *corpus*, which is seldom cited by any but Christian authors either before or after Nicaea. In any case the consubstantiality of Logos and Demiurge is not the doctrine of the Creed, in which the Son is not styled the Logos but is the one «by whom all was made in heaven and earth».

Arius, in his letter of remonstrance to Alexander of Alexandria, asserts that the Son is not, as the Manichaeans believe, a *homoousion meros* (consubstantial part) of the Father<sup>73</sup>. He alludes no doubt to the Manichaean conception of the divine light as a material continuum, which Alexander would have been bound to repudiate even if the sect had not been denounced by a recent predecessor. Alexander's extant letters (two from a *corpus* of seventy, we are told)<sup>74</sup> do not contain the word *homoousios*, but Sozomen reports that when an Alexandrian synod pronounced in its favour he gave his assent. Ambrose and Philostorgius, whose agreement on the fact is of all the more weight because they differ in their theology, attribute his espousal of the term to the discovery that Eusebius of Nicomedia regarded it as an undesirable consequence of his teaching<sup>75</sup>. Philostorgius adds that Alexander and Hosius included the phrase *homoousios* with the Father in a draft of the future Creed which they presented to Constantine. When the story is taken up by Eusebius of Caesarea, there is no reference to this subterfuge,

<sup>71</sup> See the classic article by E.R. DODDS, «The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One», in *Classical Quarterly* 22(1928), pp. 129-142.

<sup>72</sup> See: P.F. BEATRICE, «The Word *Homoousios* from Hellenism to Christianity», in *Church History* 71(2002), pp. 243-272, citing *Poimandres (Corpus Hermeticum 1)* 10 at p. 258, n. 89. For criticism see: M.J. EDWARDS, «Alexander of Alexandria and the *Homoousion*», in *Vigiliae Christianae* 66(2012), pp. 482-502.

<sup>73</sup> ATHANASIUS, *On the Synods* 16.

<sup>74</sup> SOZOMEN, *Church History* 1.15.

<sup>75</sup> AMBROSE, *On the Faith* 3.15.151; PHILOSTORGIUS, *Church History* 1.7.

and Constantine is the one who insists upon the insertion of *homoousios*<sup>76</sup>. It has been surmised that he understood it as the Greek equivalent of *unius substantiae*, «of one substance», a formula inherited by the Latin Church from Tertullian<sup>77</sup>, of which more will be said below in our discussion of hypostasis. Eusebius himself seems not to endorse this interpretation, since he signed the Creed only when he was assured that *homoousios* meant no more than that the Son was the perfect image of the Father, and superior in all respects to the visible creation.

If one thing is certain, it is that most of the opposition to the Creed, both at the Council and in its wake, was provoked by the statement that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. No elucidation of it is found in the Creed, and it admitted of at least four interpretations which were no more palatable to Catholic thinkers than to those whom they decried as Arians:

1. If *ousia* has the sense «primary *ousia*», the term *homoousios* might imply that the Son and the Father are the selfsame entity – a position which the Nicene Bishops certainly rejected. No extant writing uses the word *homoousios* to affirm this position or to impute it to a living adversary; Hilary of Poitiers, however, reports (or more probably surmises) that this was the meaning which Paul of Samosata had given to it, thus obliging the synod which deposed him in 268 to deny that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father<sup>78</sup>. Since this is plainly an improvisation of Hilary's to explain away the denunciation of the Nicene watchword by a council of unimpeachable orthodoxy, we have no evidence that the term *homoousios* was ever understood to mean that the Father and the Son are numerically identical<sup>79</sup>.

2. To judge by subsequent disclaimers, the theory that *homoousios* means «of the same type or class» was widely entertained by interpreters of the creed<sup>80</sup>. This is to import the notion of secondary *ousia*, with its dangerous corollary that the Godhead is a species of more than one, each member of which is a discrete instantiation of divinity, just as each member of the human species is a discrete instantiation of humanity. The recurrent objection to the formula «like in respect of essence»

<sup>76</sup> Appendix to ATHANASIUS, *On the Synods*, and THEODORET, *Church History* 1.11.

<sup>77</sup> *Against Praxeas* 2.4. For *consubstantialis* see: *Against Hermogenes* 44.3; for *consubstantivus*: *Against the Valentinians* 12.5, 18.1 and 37.2.

<sup>78</sup> HILARY OF POITIERS, *On Synods* 81.

<sup>79</sup> Note, however, the allegation recorded by at SOCRATES, *Church History* 1.23 that the term *homoousios* favoured Sabellius, who was generally supposed to have denied a distinct hypostasis to the Son.

<sup>80</sup> See e.g.: BASIL OF CAESAREA, *Letter 361*, with the reply of APOLLINARIUS, *Letter 362*.

(*homoios kat'ousian*) was not so much that it fails to say unequivocally that the essence is the same as that it fails to assert the dependence of the Second and the Third Person on the First. The catholic Marius Victorinus complains that the homoiousians make the Son and the Father symmetrical, the heterodox Eunomius that they make them perfectly equal<sup>81</sup>. The positing of an essence anterior to all three Persons was another of the heresies attributed to Paul of Samosata, this time in Athanasius' attempt to dispel the appearance of contradiction between Nicaea and the Council of Antioch in 268<sup>82</sup>. His own fondness for the locution *ek tês ousias tou patros* suggests that he had not pondered the implication that the Father and his *ousia* are distinct: to him it signified only what the Creed itself seems tacitly to convey by juxtaposing the *homoousion* with the phrases God from God and light, which clearly indicate the ontological dependence of the Son. Thus they are united not only by a common form and a common array of properties, as would be the case if they merely shared a secondary *ousia*, but by an eternal and necessary relation which defines the concrete identity of each.

3. In many quarters, however, as Socrates the historian informs us<sup>83</sup>, the combination of the *homoousion* with «God from God» suggested a material emanation. It was certainly true that the word was most often applied to material substances, and equally true that it beggars the human imagination to think of the procession of one entity from another in any but corporeal terms, even if we are assured that both entities are incorporeal. Valentinians and Manichaeans were widely suspected of teaching that the Godhead is corporeal, and therefore neither immutable nor impassible. Origen was accordingly charged with Valentinian sympathies when he likened the relation between the Father and his Wisdom to that between an ointment and the vapour which is *homoousios* with it; and Arius, as we have seen above, insinuates that to make the Son *homoousios* with the Father is to fall into the Manichaean error of imagining God to have parts.

4. Rowan Williams observes that in Iamblichus an amalgam is said to be *homoousios* when it is so complete that all distinctive traits of the original components are obscured<sup>84</sup>. This use of the term to designate a supervenient quality would hardly fit any doctrine of the Trin-

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<sup>81</sup> MARIUS VICTORINUS, *Against the Arians* 1.29-30; EUNOMIUS, *Apology* 18 (edited by R. VAGGIONE: *Eunomius: the Extant Works*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983).

<sup>82</sup> ATHANASIUS, *On the Synods* 45.

<sup>83</sup> SOCRATES, *Church History* 1.8 on the protest of Eusebius of Nicomedia and his allies.

<sup>84</sup> R.D. WILLIAMS, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Longman, Dartman and Todd, London 2001, pp. 222-225, citing IAMBlichus, *On the Mysteries* 3.21; see also pp. 261-262.

ity, but we learn from Athanasius that Nicene theologians were accused of holding a man to be *homoousios* with the Father<sup>85</sup>. One purpose of his *Letter to Epictetus* is to show that when the Son who is *homoousios* with the Father assumes a body his divinity did not become *homoousios* with the flesh.

What then, if it meant none of the above, did the Council mean by *homoousios*? Even Eusebius accepts that it wished to accord to the Son every attribute, apart from his aseity, that is accorded to the Father. All subsequent controversy reveals that the Nicene position was thought to entail that the Son should receive the same honour as the Father, although the status of the Spirit was still unresolved in liturgical practice and metaphysical debate. The means to its resolution were sought in Scripture and ecclesial tradition, though not without the tacit co-option of tools and concepts from the Greek schools by churchmen of higher intellectual culture. But that is a phase of Christian thought which lies outside the scope of the present study: Gregory of Nyssa and Marius Victorinus are witnesses only to their own reasonings, not to the tacit philosophy of those who framed the Creed.

## 5. From any other *ousia* or *hypostasis*

The anathema against those who derive the Son from another *ousia* or *hypostasis* is evidently designed to exclude his origin from matter, or in the words which are quoted from Arius in a subsequent anathema, *ex ouk ontôn*, «from things that are not». It is not clear that generation out of nothing is strictly excluded; nor does the juxtaposition of *hypostasis* and *ousia* prove these words to be synonymous, as most Anglophone scholars assume. The framers of the anathema were evidently using a pleonasm, as lawgivers commonly do, to ensure that a transgressor would not escape punishment by pleading that he had used other terms than those that had been proscribed. We may deduce that for the Bishops at Nicaea the nouns *hypostasis* and *ousia* were related in meaning, but not that they were exactly coextensive. In classical Greek *hypostasis* has a different etymology, combining as it does the root of the suffix meaning «under» with the verb that means to stand<sup>86</sup>. Hence it may signify the cause or agent of an event, the foundation of a building, and the origin of an entity or phenomenon. From signifying that which confers duration and solidity on an existent, *hypostasis* came to signify the dura-

<sup>85</sup> ATHANASIUS, *Letter 59*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> J.L. AUSTIN, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962, pp. 63-77.

tion and solidity of its existence, and hence the existent itself and at last the mode, or at times the mere fact, of its existing. To be hypostatic, we might say in a nutshell, is to be real, but if «real», as the philosopher J.L. Austin quipped, is a «trouser-word» in English, hypostasis can accommodate a whole wardrobe of meaning and nuance. It seems not to have been a word of much import in philosophy before the Christian era, but its versatility is illustrated by two notable occurrences in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. At *Hebrews* 1.3 the Son is the *kharaktêr* or impression of the Father's hypostasis, the Father being, as it were, the underlying reality of which the incarnate Son is the visible surrogate, as the image on a wax seal is the visible surrogate of the King. On its second occurrence faith is the *hypostasis*, the apprehension here and now, of things unseen because they are not yet present. In the first case, the hypostasis, the reality, is that which is represented by the phenomenon, while in the second it is the phenomenon itself.

In Tatian the hypostasis or state of materiality is that which is shared by all created things in contradistinction to God, who is the *hypostasis* or ground of the whole creation<sup>87</sup>. When Athenagoras upbraids the demons for their revolt against the *hypostasis* and *arkhê* of being (*ousia*), the function of *arkhê* seems to be exegetic, so that hypostasis once again means «ground» or «beginning»<sup>88</sup>. Latin has no equivalent to hypostasis but *substantia*, a fact that should be remembered when we encounter this term in Latin translations from the lost Greek originals of Irenaeus and Origen. When the Greek *hypostasis* is preserved in Irenaeus, it seems to mean origin or foundation, but *substantia* sometimes appears to be closer in meaning to English «substance» or concrete reality. It does not occur in Irenaeus with reference to the Trinity; in a text that may be by one of his Gnostic contemporaries, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, the Greek word which is transliterated in Coptic may denote either the reality or the origin of the powers that enslave the cosmos<sup>89</sup>. Origen's *Commentary on John* contains the first known designation of the persons of the Trinity as three hypostases<sup>90</sup>; we have also noted above an implicit contrast between *ousia* and *hypostasis* in his *Commentary on John*<sup>91</sup>. The *Apology for Origen* by Rufinus, which was

<sup>87</sup> TATIAN, *Oration to the Greeks* 18.1; 21.3; 5.1.

<sup>88</sup> ATHENAGORAS, *Embassy* 24. See: I. RAMELLI, «Origen, Greek Philosophy and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of *Hypostasis*», in *Harvard Theological Review* 105(2012), pp. 302-350, in particular p. 309.

<sup>89</sup> See: B. LAYTON, «The Hypostasis of the Archons or The Reality of the Rulers», in *Harvard Theological Review* 67(1974), pp. 351-424.

<sup>90</sup> *Commentary on John* 2.10.75; see: *Against Celsus* 8.12.

<sup>91</sup> *Commentary on John* 1.24.151, as above.

quoted above to illustrate his use of the term *homoousios*, also credits him with the belief that the Son is *ex substantia patris*<sup>92</sup>. It is evident that *substantia* represents hypostasis here, not only because the biblical verse that is under discussion contains this term, but because it is expressly denied in the *Commentary on John* that the Son proceeds from the *ousia* of the Father<sup>93</sup>. The Son was described as the image of the hypostasis of the Father in the statement of belief produced by the synod which was held in Antioch, as a preliminary to the Nicene Council, at the end of 324 or the spring of 325 A.D.<sup>94</sup>.

At the time of Nicaea «hypostasis» had also become a salient term in Neoplatonic thought, but with a contrary principle of application, since it is never used expressly of the One which communicates unity, and therefore hypostatic existence, to Intellect and Soul. These are named at *Enneads* 3.2.15 as the two divine hypostases; in *Enneads* 5.1, which is commonly known by Porphyry's title *On the Three Hypostases*, Plotinus entertains but does not endorse the position that movement is a second hypostasis between the origin (that is, the One) and the third hypostasis, which is being<sup>95</sup>. This would imply that the One is the first hypostasis, but it is merely a rejected speculation, and does not coincide with Porphyry's own nomenclature, in which the three hypostases are the One, Intellect and Soul. Neither of these triads, as has often been shown, corresponds to the Christian Trinity<sup>96</sup>, not only because the One transcends *ousia* and thus admits of no *homoousiotês*, but because the Holy Spirit, which works only in the elect, is no true counterpart to Soul, which in Neoplatonic thought informs the whole cosmos through the

<sup>92</sup> PAMPHILUS/RUFINUS, *Apology for Origen* 100 (*Patrologia Graeca*, vol. XVII, col. 581). Compare the locution *ex ipsius substantia* in TERTULLIAN, *Against Praxeas* 7.9, where again the Greek prototype is surely hypostasis at *Hebrews* 1.3.

<sup>93</sup> *Commentary on John* 20.157; see: 13.25.153, as above.

<sup>94</sup> E. SCHWARZ, «Zur Geschichte des Athanasius», in *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, Horstmann, Göttingen 1905, pp. 27-279; R.P.C. HANSON, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, A. and C. Black, London 2005, p. 149.

<sup>95</sup> A.N. DECK, *Nature Contemplation and the One*, University of Toronto, Toronto 1967, p. 9, n. 5, observes that, while a first hypostasis is referred to at *Enneads* 6.8.15.30, we read at 6.6.3.11 that the One has a *hypostasis*, at 6.8.13.43-44 of a hypostasis of the Good and at 6.8.7.47 of a kind of hypostasis. At 6.8.10.37 the One is before hypostasis. J.P. ANTON, «Some Logical Aspects of the Concept of *Hypostasis* in Plotinus», in *Review of Metaphysics* 31(1977), pp. 258-271, quotes 6.8.13.50-52 at p. 270, where the hypostasis and the will of the One are equated, and 6.8.20.11-15, where we are admonished not to ascribe hypostasis to it without *energeia*. These citations do not determine whether the hypostasis is that which it is or that which it has.

<sup>96</sup> H. ZIEBRITZKI, *Heiliger Geist und Weltseele. Das Problem der dritten Hypostase bei Origenes, Plotinus und ihren Vorläufern*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1994.

action of Nature, which some scholars have styled a fourth hypostasis<sup>97</sup>. Porphyry's locution three hypostases is best understood in conjunction with his use of «God above all» as an appellation: both are plagiarism from Origen, with the aim of setting up a Platonic rival to Christianity<sup>98</sup>. Plotinus – a man of no religion, in the common sense – may not have been acquainted with Origen's usage; in his treatise *Against the Gnostics* (and again this is Porphyry's title) he does not so much as hint at the Christianity of his opponents, even when he deplores their needless «multiplication of hypostases»<sup>99</sup>.

Porphyry himself makes frequent use of the term *hypostasis* in a collection of aphorisms commonly known as the *Sententiae*<sup>100</sup>. While he can speak of immaterial hypostases (20) and of hypostases which, being whole and perfect, never incline to the inferior plane of being (30), he stipulates at the outset that the incorporeal, properly speaking, has neither *ousia* nor hypostasis (4). These nouns are not clearly differentiated, but it is by the hypostasis of its downward tendency (*rhopê*, «weight») that the incorporeal can affect the bodily realm, without suffering any reciprocal impact from the hypostasis of the corporeal. It can none the less be said of incorporeal hypostases that when they undergo division and dispersion (11). That which is greater in bulk is weak and diminished in its hypostasis (20), and it is by the simplicity of its hypostasis that a simple soul that when a soul enters Hades with the shadow or eidolon of its past life, this eidolon has but a shadowy hypostasis, so long as it is still bound by its nature to a spatial existence (29). All concrete beings partake simultaneously of sameness and difference, the one by nature at rest, the other for ever seeking its hypostasis in the external (34). The goal of philosophical endeavour is a hypostasis of the soul which is unailing and free of all deficit. In most of these instances, «constitution» appears to be the most acceptable rendering. It appears that a hypostasis is never a state that has nothing superior to it, and *ousia* is a word of more frequent occurrence when Porphyry speaks of the intelligible and intellectual spheres.

Could it be in deference to this Neoplatonic convention that the Nicene Bishops chose to say «from the *ousia* of the Father» when all Christian precedent favoured «from the hypostasis»? Whatever their

<sup>97</sup> For bibliography see: ANTON, «Some Logical Aspects of the Concept of *Hypostasis* in Plotinus», p. 259, n.1.

<sup>98</sup> See: PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus* 23

<sup>99</sup> See: N. SPANU, *Plotinus, Enneads II.9: A Commentary*, Peeters, Leuven 2012, pp. 54-62.

<sup>100</sup> PORPHYRY, *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes*, ed. E. LAMBERZ, Teubner, Leipzig 1975.

motives, «from the *ousia*» proved to be a less durable neologism than «*homoousios* with the Father». If there was no return to «from the hypostasis of Father», this may be because the notion of hypostasis distinct from the Father himself was even less tolerable to the church than that of an uncircumscribed *ousia*; the question whether *substantia* in Tertullian is that which God is or that which God has was not resolved until Augustine pronounced, as a logical truism, that to be *deus* is to be *ipsa deitas*<sup>101</sup>.

## 6. Remaining Anathemas: «There was when he was not» and «out of nothing/things which are not»

While the proposition that «there was when he was not» is unattested in our meagre remains of his writings, it is consonant with the doctrines that are reliably attributed to Arius. That it says only «when he was not» and not «a time when he was not» may be an index of authenticity, for Arius had pronounced the Son to be timelessly generated (*akchronôs*), though not eternal<sup>102</sup>. The Creed refrains from asserting his eternity, though it might have borrowed the concept of eternal generation from Plotinus: its authors may have been mindful that they lacked scriptural authority for this predicate, or they may have shrunk from starting a controversy as to whether eternity means everlasting duration or a state exempt from time.

The anathema on *ex ouk ontôn*, «from things that are not», reproduces a phrase that Arius had defended in his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia<sup>103</sup>, maintaining that his aim had been to exclude the two unacceptable tenets that the Son is from matter or that his birth took away some part of the Father's *ousia*. The Creed, of course, upholds the first of these rejected positions; we need not suppose that «from nothing» and «from things which are not» were distinguishable expressions for a Christian of this period, for if one held the world to have been created from nothing, one was bound to hold that this was also the meaning of creation from things which are not at 2 *Maccabees* 7.28<sup>104</sup>. It would thus

<sup>101</sup> See: STEAD, «Divine Substance in Tertullian»; AUGUSTINE, *On the Trinity* 5.11.12.

<sup>102</sup> ATHANASIUS, *On the Synods* 16. At *Synods* 27.2 he notes that Origen had rejected the tenet that «there was when the Son was not»; see: ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (p. 449, ed. HAYDUCK).

<sup>103</sup> THEODORET, *Church History* 1.5.

<sup>104</sup> See further: G.C. STEAD, «The Platonism of Arius», in *Journal of Theological Studies* 15(1964), pp. 16-31; ID., «The Word "From Nothing"», in *Journal of Theological Studies* 49(1998), pp. 671-684.

have appeared to the Council that, for all his protestations that the Son is «a creature but not as one of the creatures», Arius thought him as labile and contingent as any other product of the Father's will<sup>105</sup>.

## 7. Afterword

Although, then, it makes little use of the idiom of philosophy – the words *ousia* and *homoousios* being the only ones that lack a clear biblical antecedent – the Nicene Creed gives formulaic clarity to doctrines which its authors believed to be scriptural, and which had indeed for the most part been expressed in similar terms by previous creeds. Of those who signed it, only Eusebius of Caesarea can now be cited as a witness to Christian knowledge of the Greek schools, and his repeated judgment is that no authority can be granted to them except where they confirm or are rather confirmed by revelation. For him they seldom have even the supplementary or elucidatory function that was recognised by Origen, since in his view it was not for the church to pronounce on matters that God had left obscure. It has often been thought, however, that in appropriating the language of the Platonists and aligning their transcendent principles with the three persons of the Christian Trinity, he unconsciously allows his faith to be shaped by the pagan systems which he pretends to bring under the judgment of the gospel<sup>106</sup>. The same has been said of Arius, although many would retort that even his tenet that the Son is from that which is not has more biblical warrant than the Nicene *homoousion*; it is also widely held that there is no such thing as naked revelation, unconditioned by the time and circumstances of reception. Early Christian writers were never simply Aristotelians, Stoics or Platonists: they were bound to transform, or as some complain, to pervert, what they took from philosophy, since they looked to it only to teach them what must be true of God if all that he has promised and prophesied is to be fulfilled.

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<sup>105</sup> See: ALEXANDER OF ALEXANDRIA in SOCRATES, *Church History* 1.6; ATHANASIUS, *Orations against the Arians* 1.5.

<sup>106</sup> For discussion see: H. STRUTWOLF, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1999, pp. 187-194.



*Questo articolo si occupa principalmente delle implicazioni filosofiche dei termini del Credo niceno del 325 che fanno riferimento all'ousia o all'essere di Dio. Si sofferma, in particolare, sulla sostituzione di «dall'ousia del Padre» con il più antico «dall'ypostasis del Padre» e nota il pericolo del corollario implicito che l'ousia possa essere una cosa distinta dal Padre. Il testo passa poi in rassegna i vari significati che nella tradizione cristiana sono stati attribuiti alla parola homoousios e le ragioni della diffidenza con cui i cristiani cattolici prima di Nicea la consideravano. Le sezioni conclusive si chiedono se ousia e ipostasi siano sinonimi negli anatemi e se «da cose che non sono» significhi lo stesso che «da cosa prossima». Nel corso dell'argomentazione viene richiamata l'attenzione su altre caratteristiche enigmatiche del Credo, ad esempio l'accostamento del neologismo cristiano pantokrator con poietes, che sembra essere un ritorno all'uso filosofico greco dal più biblico ktistes.*



*This paper is primarily concerned with the philosophical implications of terms in the Nicene Creed of 325 which makes reference to the ousia or being of God. It discusses the substitution of «from the ousia of the Father» for the older «from the hypostasis of the Father» and notes the danger of the implied corollary that the ousia may be a thing distinct from the Father. The paper goes on to review the various meanings which had been attached in Christian tradition to the word homoousios, and the reasons for the wariness with which catholic Christians before Nicaea regarded it. The closing sections ask whether ousia and hypostasis are synonymous in the anathemas and whether «from things which are not» means the same as «from next thing». In the course of the argument attention is drawn to other puzzling features of the Creed – for example the juxtaposition of the Christian neologism pantokrator with poietes, which is apparently a reversion to Greek philosophical usage from the more biblical ktistes.*

**NICAEA – CREED – PHILOSOPHY – REVELATION – HOMOOUSION**