

## Why Do We Still Recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist?

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*The Anglican Communion appears to be seeking to rule some in and some out on the grounds of “orthodoxy.” In that context, a discussion of the creed in worship may help to illustrate the relationships between doctrine, performance, and practice. This article suggests that F. D. Maurice’s understanding of the use of the creed offers a way forward for Anglicans: the “performance” of the creed as a focus for the name of God becomes far more important than assent to propositions. This understanding might help Anglicans in living with diversity while acknowledging an underlying baptismal unity. Reading the creed as a corporate hymn of praise to triune Love might encourage God-fearing people to live in humble adoration of the One who loves them—without growing anxious about precisely what, or even whether, the other people who are singing God’s praise “believe.”*

It is hard to know what people make of creeds today. My hunch is that most people, and even most Christians, however pious, do not spend much time reading creeds of any sort, let alone the Nicene Creed. Popular apologetic programs like the Alpha Course are, perhaps rather surprisingly, distant from the creeds, and instead focus on a few selected articles and a few things (like particular models of the atonement and charismatic experience) which are not in the creeds at all. In fact, the most likely place to encounter creeds is not in any teaching situation at all, but instead at a service in a church which uses a formal liturgy. And here, especially since the demise of Matins and Evensong as regular congregational services in most English churches, with their use of the Apostles’ Creed,<sup>1</sup> it will be the so-

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<sup>1</sup> The other “creed” of the Book of Common Prayer, the so-called Athanasian Creed (or *Quicumque Vult*), was to be said or sung after Morning Prayer on thirteen

called Nicene Creed<sup>2</sup> that will be most frequently encountered in the Church of England and in many other parts of the Anglican Communion. This is something still said, and occasionally even sung, at celebrations of the eucharist, at least on Sundays and holy days.

I will begin this essay by taking this liturgical context seriously and start by thinking in some detail about reading the creed in the setting of worship. Trying to work out why it is there and what it is for is important and might say something about the nature of the Nicene Creed more generally, about what form it has and precisely what sort of thing “I believe” or “we believe” might mean for Christians. Consequently I will be asking through the course of this paper: what are we doing when we read the Nicene Creed in worship?<sup>3</sup> In the context of an Anglican Communion that appears to be seeking to define its boundaries more clearly and to rule some in and some out on the grounds of “orthodoxy,”<sup>3</sup> it seems pertinent to look again at the role of the creed in worship. While I am not primarily attempting an essay in ritual or liturgical studies, a discussion of the creed as used at the eucharist can serve as an illustration of the relationship between doctrine, performance, and practice—and it can also be of some use for the contemporary church. What I will suggest is that the sort of understanding of the use of the Nicene Creed outlined by F. D. Maurice in the mid-nineteenth century offers a way forward for Anglicans, whereby the performance and affirmation of the creed primarily as a focus for the name of God becomes far more important than assent to propositions.<sup>4</sup> Such a performative understanding of the creed

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holy days through the course of the year. With its many mistranslations and damnatory clauses, it has been quietly dropped from all recent liturgical revisions of the Church of England, and of most other provinces of the Anglican Communion. It is hard to imagine that it is used in more than a handful of contemporary churches.

<sup>2</sup> The so-called “Nicene Creed” (or more properly the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed [often called “C”]) as used today is basically identical to that adopted in the acts of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and was attributed to the “150 holy fathers” who were assembled at the Council of Constantinople of 381. There is a substantial amount of evidence, which, while not conclusive, suggests that it pre-dates Constantinople and consequently cannot have been drawn up by the Council. On this, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman [3d ed.], 1972), 205-262, 296-367 and W.-D. Hauschild, “Niceno-Konstantinopolitanisches Glaubensbekenntnis,” *Theologische Realencyclopädie* 24 (1995): 444-456. I have used “Nicene Creed” to refer to this creed throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed this at length in my recent introduction to Mark D. Chapman (ed.), *Celebrating Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), 1-14, esp. 6.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), 1997.

might be a model for Anglicans as they seek to live with diversity while acknowledging an underlying baptismal unity.

### *The Creed in the Liturgy*

As with most things to do with liturgy, the origins of the use of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed at the eucharist are shrouded in mystery: however, there is good evidence to suggest that it was regularized by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Timotheus (511-517), during the reign of Anastasius (491-518) in 511.<sup>5</sup> It may have been first adopted in Antioch in 471 by the bishop, Peter the Fuller (476-488), although this may be a later interpolation into the historian's text.<sup>6</sup> Precisely why is not clear: the most obvious reason was that it was inserted to remind the congregation of the church's opposition to Arianism, although it might also have served as something of a polemic to prevent the church from adopting any creedal formularies later than 381. It should be noted that both protagonists were vigorous opponents of Chalcedon. That meant that the recitation of the creed could be very useful as an act of corporate reminding, which presumably explains its retention in virtually all later Eastern liturgies.

In the Western church the use of the creed at the liturgy seems to have begun after the Third Council of Toledo in 589; after King Reccared and the Visigoths had been converted to orthodox Christianity from Arianism it was presumably important to remind them regularly of precisely what that orthodoxy consisted: the creed was ordered to be said immediately after the Our Father and thus shortly before reception of communion.<sup>7</sup> And it should also be noted that

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<sup>5</sup> Theodorus Lector, *Ecclesiasticae Historiae, Patrologia Graeca* 86 (1865), vol. II §32, col. 201; see A. Jungmann, S.J., *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (New York: Benziger, 1951-1955 [2 vols.]), I, 468.

<sup>6</sup> Jungmann (in *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 468) notes that the creed was mentioned in Pseudo-Dionysius and must therefore have been in use in Syria by 515. On the introduction of the Nicene Creed into the Roman Rite, see Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 461-474; Bernard Capelle, O.S.B., "L'Introduction du symbole à la Messe" in *Travaux Liturgiques de doctrine et d'histoire* (Louvain: Abbaye de Mont César, 1955-1967 [3 vols.], vol. 3, 1967), 60-81; Louis Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its History and Evolution* (London: SPCK, 1912), 84; J. Neil Alexander, "Creeds in Liturgy" in Paul Bradshaw (ed.), *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM, 2002), 138-139.

<sup>7</sup> Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 469. This position had been unsuccessfully attempted by the Emperor Justinian in 565-566. See Edgar Gibson, *The Three Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1908), 166.

this version of the Western creed inserted the little *filioque* (“and the son”) clause into the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. There is a certain irony here: the creed might have reminded the Visigoths of their orthodoxy but it would later serve to remind the Eastern Orthodox of Western heresy; whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from Father and Son or from the Father alone quickly became a matter of some controversy between the two halves of Christendom.

At least initially the Nicene Creed does not seem to have been widely adopted in Western liturgies except in parts of Gaul and later in the court of Charlemagne at Aachen after 792, perhaps under the influence of Alcuin and aimed primarily against the heresy of adoptionism which was then prevalent.<sup>8</sup> The creed was to be said after the gospel. Efforts by Charlemagne to compel its use in the whole of the Western church were probably resisted by Pope Leo III, who felt that the creed should be restricted to teaching purposes.<sup>9</sup> Charlemagne’s point in trying to ensure the use of the creed stems perhaps from the political importance of unity and conformity: it was much easier to rule over a large area if everybody publicly declared faith in the same things—which, after all, is why Constantine summoned his council at Nicaea in 325 in the first place, and presumably why Charlemagne wanted people to affirm identical beliefs in the ninth century. Reciting the creed at mass was an effective way of ensuring conformity. Although Charlemagne might initially have lost his battle, by the eleventh century the civil authorities were again requiring its use, and eventually Benedict VIII acquiesced to the request from the Emperor, Henry II, who had expressed surprise that the creed was not in use in Rome when he arrived there in 1014.<sup>10</sup> After this time the Nicene Creed was said or sung after the gospel every Sunday and at feasts mentioned in the creed (like the Ascension and feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary), but not at every celebration. It thereby became, according to Jungmann, a “means of enhancing the festivity.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On this, see Bernard Capelle, O.S.B., “L’origine antiadoptioniste de notre texte du symbole de la messe,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 1 (1929): 7-20.

<sup>9</sup> Duchesne, *Christian Worship*, 84. There is some doubt about this. Jungmann suggests that Charlemagne was successful in persuading Leo to accept it, but that it took two centuries to become widely adopted (*The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 469).

<sup>10</sup> Duchesne, *Christian Worship*, 172; Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 469. This is mentioned in Berno of Reichenau, “De quibusdam rebus ad missae officium spectantibus” in *Patrologia Latina*, 142, cols. 1060-1061.

<sup>11</sup> Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 470.

Again, although it is impossible to know, it would seem that the reason for introducing the creed was the need to ensure uniformity of belief across the Empire.

The positioning of the creed in the service says something about how it was seen to function in the liturgy. In the East the creed served as part of the general preparation for communion. It was placed after the Great Entry, thereby making it a foundation for the communion, and after the dismissal of the catechumens. It was usually spoken by the people or a representative and retained its plural form.<sup>12</sup> In the West, however, it was inserted immediately after the readings, presumably intended (if anything in liturgy is ever intended) as a response, “a re-inforced echo . . . a joyous ‘yes,’”<sup>13</sup> to what had just been heard. And in this position it might be appropriately categorized as worship—it was a response of praise to the God revealed in Scripture. It is interesting that many musical settings of the mass,<sup>14</sup> at least until recently, included settings of the creed, which makes the creed function much like the rest of the musical service—a response of worship akin to the Gloria and the Sanctus. Consequently, against the unnamed “purists,” Michael Perham suggests (not unreasonably) that “doctrine in worship needs to turn into doxology. When the creed is sung, it does not lose its doctrinal content, but it does become a great outburst of praise. When it is said, it can seem long and turgid, and to be ploughed through as a duty. The affirmation of the Christian faith should not be like that. Composers should set to work.”<sup>15</sup>

Such an understanding of the creed, particularly when connected with the readings, makes it into a kind of hymn of praise—but in relation to something that looks, at least on the surface, like a list of propositions of things to be believed in, this raises questions. Hymns are very different from articles of faith: while they might contain distinctive theological emphases and might be important for the self-definition of particular churches and denominations—as for Lutherans and Methodists—hymns can hardly be regarded as ecu-

<sup>12</sup> Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 468-469.

<sup>13</sup> Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 461, 470.

<sup>14</sup> Evidence for the singing of the creed can be found as early as 858 (Bishop Herard of Tours) and in 871 from Walter of Orléans (Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, I, 471-473). A number of vernacular and metrical settings dating from before the Reformation also survive. Sometimes the creed became the most elaborate part of the whole service, even overshadowing the eucharistic prayer.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Perham, *Lively Sacrifice* (London: SPCK, 1992), 115.

menical statements of Christian orthodoxy. And it must be said, the idea of the creed as a response of praise was rendered rather pointless when it was often relegated at non-musical celebrations to that part of the mass recited privately by the priest, which perhaps explains why the corporate recitation emphasized by the “we” of the original formula was rendered in the singular “I believe.”

After the Reformation, the creed was retained in the Church of England communion rite (and in those of some other reformed churches) in the same place as in the Roman mass; initially in the 1549 Prayer Book, Cranmer allowed its omission on weekdays,<sup>16</sup> but in 1552 it was ordered to be recited at every celebration.<sup>17</sup> This change might reflect a similar political reasoning to that of Charlemagne in his original attempt to introduce the creed. After all, Cranmer, like his sovereign, was interested in the uniformity of religion: obedience and conformity were at the forefront of the English Reformation. It is even possible to see his translation as emphasizing obedience. He adds “I believe” before the “one catholic and apostolic Church” (omitting “holy,” perhaps for doctrinal reasons) which is in neither the Latin nor Greek text, and omits any preposition before “the Church”: one *believed* the church rather than believed *in* the church.<sup>18</sup>

In more recent years things have not changed significantly in relation to the creed at the eucharist—the translation has obviously been modified in recent years and there is some degree of ecumenical consensus about the wording (even if the Church of England did not in the end adopt the English Language Liturgical Consultation [ELLC] text in *Common Worship*), but otherwise things are much as they were. All that has changed from 1552 is that since 1928 the

<sup>16</sup> The 1549 rubric reads: “When the Holy Communion is celebrate on the work day or in private houses: Then may be omitted the Gloria in Excelsis, the creed, the Homily, and the Exhortation.”

<sup>17</sup> For the history of the use of the Nicene Creed in the Anglican tradition, see J. Spence Johnston, “Nicene Creed” in *Prayer Book Dictionary* (London: Pitman, 1913), 480-483; Paul Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship* (London: SPCK, 2001), 116-118. See also F. E. Bardwell, *Prayer-Book Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1927), 68.

<sup>18</sup> Johnston, “Nicene Creed,” 483. On this see Gibson, *The Three Creeds*, 175-176. Cranmer made the distinction between “credere” and “credere in” in his “Annotations upon the King’s Book.” See Henry Jenkyns (ed.), *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1833, II, 65) where he states, “I believe in the Holy Ghost, and that there is an Holy Catholic Church.” It may be, however, that it would be hard not to believe in the church, since it so obviously existed.

Church of England has returned to the Roman practice of only demanding the creed on Sundays and Holy Days.<sup>19</sup>

What is extraordinary is just how seldom anybody seems to have thought about this liturgical use in any detail—why is the creed still there in the main act of worship of the church, and what function does it perform? Few people offer any answers to these questions. On the one hand, theologians frequently expound the creeds in more or less orthodox ways, and there are several commentaries on creeds which amount to mini-systematic theologies, but what theologians are doing when they expound creeds is very different from what goes on when the Nicene Creed is recited in liturgy.<sup>20</sup> For most theologians, creeds (of all varieties) are useful summaries of the basic doctrines of the faith, but they are not read as a whole, and simply become easy ways of organizing systematic discussion of doctrine. On the other hand, liturgical historians are quite good at saying when something first happened (although they seldom agree with one another), but this does not get us very far in explaining why something happens. In commentaries on the liturgies there is a lot on the when and where of the creed, but very little on why.<sup>21</sup> In his influential annotated commentary on the eucharist, for instance, John Robinson says about the creed: “in the words of the whole catholic Church, we take upon ourselves in affirmation and praise the great truths of the Faith just proclaimed to us.”<sup>22</sup> That may be true, but it does not say very much about what the response of praise and prayer has to do with personal belief in the different propositions of the creed—how far does the reading of the creed in worship require the individual Christian to as-

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<sup>19</sup> Since 1790 the rubrics of the American Prayer Book have allowed for the use of the Nicene Creed at Morning and Evening Prayer. From 1928 either the Nicene or the Apostles' Creed was to be used at celebrations of the eucharist, unless said in Morning Prayer immediately preceding, but the Nicene Creed was ordered on five major feasts; see the Book of Common Prayer (U.S.A. 1928), 70.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Anthony Dyson, *We Believe* (London: Mowbrays, 1977); Hans Küng, *Credo* (London: SCM, 1993); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (London: SCM, 1972); Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (London: SCM, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Jungmann offers a few lines among his mass of historical detail (*The Rite of the Roman Mass*, I, 471-472). See also Bradsahw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship*, 116-118 and Alexander, “Creeds in Liturgy,” 138.

<sup>22</sup> *Liturgy Coming to Life* (London: Mowbray, 1960), 94. Similarly brief discussions are offered by many others. See, for instance, Colin Buchanan et al., *Anglican Worship Today* (London: Collins, 1980), 137; and J. D. Crichton, *Christian Celebration: The Mass* (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971), 79.

sent to every article? And if it does require this, then it might well be that reciting the Nicene Creed serves to exclude rather than include. So again we reach the question—what are we doing when we recite the creed in liturgy?

*F. D. Maurice and the Creed*

To answer this question I will discuss a particular understanding of the use of the creed drawn from early Victorian England which still seems to have some relevance. The theology of F. D. Maurice (1805-1872),<sup>23</sup> who is one of England's greatest theologians (and perhaps the greatest theologian who remained in the Church of England) from the Victorian period, while often opaque and lacking clarity, is nevertheless of contemporary importance. Although his thought is open to many different interpretations, and he has been seen by some as a proto-ecumenist<sup>24</sup> and by others simply as a muddled thinker,<sup>25</sup> my aim is to expound his understanding of the creeds in terms of his broader interest in the shape and contours of the church. He fits in particularly well in this discussion of the Nicene Creed principally because he was interested in the creeds primarily as they were actually *used* by the church. His problem resembles the issues addressed in this paper—how do we use the creeds and what part do they play in the life of the church?

The starting point for Maurice's theology is that the Christian needs to live by a principle of unity which rests beyond any finite and visible manifestation. This principle is found most supremely in the center of the Christian religion, Jesus Christ himself. This provides the basis for Maurice's understanding of the creeds, which he discusses most fully in his series of letters to a member of the Society of Friends written to defend the practices of the Church of England against other denominations (including the Quakers where creedal

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<sup>23</sup> On Maurice see Olive Brose, *F. D. Maurice: Rebellious Conformist* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1972); A. R. Vidler, *Witness to the Light: F. D. Maurice's Message for Today* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948); Michael Ramsey, *F. D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951); W. Merlin Davies, *F. D. Maurice's Theology* (London: SPCK, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> William J. Wolf, "F. D. Maurice" in William J. Wolf (ed.), *The Spirit of Anglicanism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 49-100.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Stephen Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (London: Mowbray, 1978), esp. 19.

formularies were obviously a point at issue).<sup>26</sup> In what became one of his most influential works, Maurice outlines the various marks or “signs” of the church, each of which, he feels, serves to point the believer away from reliance on self and towards reliance on God. Maurice starts with baptism, which he sees as entry into a universal society under Christ whose name is publicly acknowledged at the ceremony. The church is seen, however, not as a sectarian community of the devout, but as existing to point people to their true head, their true center and support: against the self-defining sect with its hard and fast boundaries, the church defines itself with reference to an outside name.<sup>27</sup> Baptism, then, is very much about interpreting our existence under God, and becomes the sign of permanent communion with the Father and the Son. Consequently, Maurice writes, baptism was aimed at drawing a man “continually out of himself, to teach him to disclaim all independent virtue, to bring him into the knowledge and image of the Father and the Son. . . . The sin of a baptized man consists in acting as if he were not in union with Christ, in setting up his own nature and his own will, and in obeying them.”<sup>28</sup> Baptism is about telling ourselves, as he put it in a letter in 1854, “that I am God’s child, and may live as if I were; and that I have that within me which will not be subject to the law of God, which will not own him as a Father, which will not have fellowship with any of my human brethren.”<sup>29</sup> Baptism—and that includes the baptism of infants<sup>30</sup>—is thus a witness or a pledge that we are accepted by God, that we are children of Christ. It is first and foremost a granting of an identity that depends on a name which moves us beyond reliance on our own finite resources. And that in turn forces on us a certain humility.

After outlining his understanding of baptism Maurice moves into his discussion of creeds, which he regards as always having been connected with baptism.<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, he emphasizes similar themes: the confession of creeds he sees primarily as the recitation of

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<sup>26</sup> *The Kingdom of Christ or Hints on the Principles, Ordinances and Constitution of the Catholic Church*. In *Letters to a Member of the Society of Friends* (references are to the new edition, Cambridge: James Clarke, 2 vols., 1958).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, I, 284.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, I, 289.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Miss Gourlay, 1854, cited in Frederick Maurice, *Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (London: Macmillan, 1885, 2 vols., II), 242

<sup>30</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, I, 268-272.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 5. See also II, 282.

that name under which we are all united, and as something which guarantees against identifying the church with any particular interpretation or system or party. By the act of saying the creed, he suggests, “we claim our spiritual position, we assert our union with that Being. The name into which we are adopted there [that is, at baptism] is the name we confess here.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, it is wrong to consider the creed as a digest of doctrines; instead, it is to be seen as something which confers a sense of unity and identity, pointing us away from an identity which is limited to that of the group. We do not believe a “certain scheme of divinity” but a “name” which denotes what a person is as self. In turn, the creed is that to which reformers constantly turn, preventing them from idolizing their own schemes of divinity. While all systems might embrace something of the truth, none could be equated with the whole truth—the name of God always lies beyond any finite manifestation.

This means that what is important is that creeds act as a guarantee against elevating any one theological system or party into the arbiter of truth: they are open and public documents which allow for a diversity of understanding. And, furthermore, public recitation in the liturgy means that they are said by all people regardless of their education and standing in society. This means that, insofar as they are used by all people equally whatever their status, creeds are profoundly democratic. Maurice claims that this explains why, despite all the changes in church and world, the creed has survived largely intact for sixteen centuries: “During that time it has not been lying hid in the closet of some antiquarian. It has been repeated by peasants and children of the different lands into which it has come. It has been given to them as a record of facts with which they had as much to do as any noble.”<sup>33</sup> The creed was not the preserve of the intellectual or the philosopher. Instead, in the “child’s creed [men and women] have found the secret which these philosophers could not give them, and which, by God’s grace, they shall not take from them.”<sup>34</sup> The creed, then, is at its heart “belief in a name, and not in notions,” and what is more, it is open “to every peasant and child” rather than simply to the initiated and the intellectuals.

In another set of lectures published in 1852 on the different parts of the Book of Common Prayer, including the communion ser-

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<sup>32</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 4.

vice, Maurice reemphasized his understanding of the creed in terms of trust in the name of God, a name which is the same for all people, regardless of status or learning; it has thereby, he claims, “become a Christendom possession, which all beggars and nobles, old men and children, have a share and a right in.” It also functions as a recitation of *the* tradition as a means of “protection against traditions, that when they try to force themselves upon us, we can always put this forward as a declaration that what we believe and trust in is not this or that notion, or theory, or scheme, or document; but that it is the eternal name into which we have been baptized, and in which the whole Church and each member of the Church stands.”<sup>35</sup> The creed thus served not primarily as a digest of dogma but to unite all believers across space and time with the living God. It thereby delivered “us from Romish dogmatism, and all other dogmatism,”<sup>36</sup> pointing us instead to our own helplessness and absolute need to trust in God.

Later in his life Maurice wrote to his friend and fellow Christian Socialist, Thomas Hughes, about the importance of such an understanding of the creed, which he saw as liberating the Christian from the confines of dogmatism—in this case, popular evangelicalism. This was a form of religion he regarded as “a mere religious system constructed by human speculation, made up of crude philosophical notions and popular superstitions, and alien from the revelation of the living and true God which I find set forth in Scripture.” Instead, he felt, all that really mattered was a simple and sincere allegiance to the creed. Indeed, he claimed, “I hold that for the reformation of the age, most especially for the elevation of the working classes, we want a firmer, fuller, more loving theology, such a theology as I find in the creeds of the Church.”<sup>37</sup> The creeds liberated all Christians, from whatever class, from the exclusive systems of church parties or theologians.

Maurice thus stresses the importance of the creeds in moving us away from our reliance on finite systems and partial understandings of the truth. Indeed, he asks: how may we be delivered from “opinions and notions”?<sup>38</sup> The creed gained its meaning from that living name to which it pointed and not from the rigidity of any particular

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<sup>35</sup> F. D. Maurice, *The Prayer Book* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1966 [reprint 2002]), 105.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice, *The Prayer Book*, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Letter of 1861 in *Life*, II, 380.

<sup>38</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 6-7.

system of interpretation which ultimately would only serve to distort that universal name. In a fascinating letter of March 14, 1849 to Richard William Jelf, principal of King's College, London, written during the period when he was being investigated for supposed doctrinal unorthodoxy, Maurice noted: "I have declared that I hold [the] creeds, and I do hold them. . . . I was called upon by a newspaper a few days ago to say whether I used it [the creed] in the sense of that newspaper. I gave no answer, first because I do not know what its sense is." All that mattered, Maurice went on, was that he was prepared to say the creeds with integrity and as affirming the name of God—anything beyond this was nobody else's business: "I have declared solemnly . . . that I never in my life felt I was judging any one when I pronounced it, but only myself. I cannot be sure that the newspaper writer does and could say the same, therefore I cannot assert I speak it in his sense."<sup>39</sup> Sincerity and integrity were matters for the individual's conscience in his desire to reaffirm his commitment to the name of God as the fundamental content of the creed and the heart of the tradition of the church. The terms of that recitation were not for any outsider to impose.

For Maurice, then, the creeds helped steer Christians away from philosophy and strange systems with their incomplete truths. What is not clear, however, is precisely where they were to turn instead. Were people simply to acknowledge all the propositions as historical truths and swallow the whole creed intact? Was the individual required to assent to absolutely everything? For Maurice, the answer was a clear (even if rather complex) negative:

[The creed] differs from all the digests of doctrines, whether religious or philosophical, which he has ever seen. A man is speaking in it. The form of it is, I believe. That which is believed in is not a certain scheme of divinity, but a name—a Father, who has made heaven and earth: His Son, Our Lord, who has been conceived, born, and died . . . a Holy Spirit who has established a holy universal church.<sup>40</sup>

And what this means is that the creed is not primarily assent to "a collection of dogmas,"<sup>41</sup> but is what Maurice calls an "act of allegiance

<sup>39</sup> *Life*, I, 525.

<sup>40</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 4. See also Maurice, *The Prayer Book*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 282

or affiance.”<sup>42</sup> The name adopted at baptism is the one confessed in the creed. The creed thus acts as a pledge, a sign of commitment, to a spiritual identity located in God, which in turn confers a new identity on the Christian. When we confess the creed we commit ourselves to a name, and more specifically to the name of the triune God. It is a performance of religious affinity. Unlike the confessions and doctrinal statements produced by different churches which are propositions demanding assent, the creeds are concerned first and foremost with the acknowledgement and performance of the identity conferred by the life-giving God.

So at its heart, Maurice’s understanding of the creeds is simple: they function to declare the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom we are invited to pledge our allegiance. In public worship we perform this act together, not to exclude, but to remind ourselves of our identity and to ensure that nothing else can claim for itself the finality expressed solely in the triune God. Importantly, no system, no church party or sect, can ever become a substitute for the living name recited in the creed—the creed becomes a badge of identity but also a check on everything else. It thereby functions as a rule of faith to ensure the proper place of everything else in the church.

Without going into too much detail about the function of the other signs of the church in Maurice’s system, it is important to note that he constantly emphasized the need to point towards a living name which lay beyond any full expression in a finite system. For instance, shared liturgies functioned to ensure that there was no selfishness in prayer:

If the meaning of baptism be that we are brought into God’s family, and that we become therefore capable, with one mind and one mouth, of glorifying his name; if the creed be teaching us, as children of that one family, severally and unitedly to acknowledge that name, and how it is related to us; we must feel that acts of worship should be, of all acts, those which most belong to our position, and in which our fellowship is most entirely realised.<sup>43</sup>

What was important was that prayer should be *common*, and that was primarily because shared forms of worship “draw us out of the indi-

<sup>42</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*, II, 20-21.

viduality which is our curse and ruin,” leading us, “one and all, to take up our position on the same ground of being justified and redeemed in Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

For Maurice, the creed, like the other signs of the church, served to point away from pride, towards a proper sense of humility in the face of the divine name before whom all knees were enjoined to bow. The creeds were thus seen to be marks of inclusion against anything else that might set itself up as a doctrinal norm, which, given the history of creedal exclusion, was evidently something of a novel idea. Creeds were the democratic means of liberating the church from the partiality of the theologians and party men. And that was primarily because they pointed towards a living being—the triune God—rather than a list of propositions about a living being. Its corporate recitation bestowed on all Christians the humility that came from this acknowledgement of a center beyond the finite resourcefulness of the human being. In short, for Maurice, all our systems are judged by the God acknowledged in the creed. And yet, many of Maurice’s detractors have sought far more from the creeds and from the systems they should guard against. Instead of being understood as a badge or a standard of allegiance to the living God, who exists in three ways, and in whom one finds one’s identity, it is all too easy for the creed to become a digest of propositions, in each of which one is compelled to believe.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion*

For many who did not share Maurice’s ideas, the creed could easily become a means of exclusion rather than inclusion: the history of the past one hundred and fifty years is of frequent conflict over the status of the creeds and attempts at compelling literal adherence to their formularies. For instance, in the early years of the twentieth century, Charles Gore, bishop successively of Worcester, Birmingham, and Oxford, was often in dispute with members of the clergy over the sincerity of their allegiance to the articles of the creed.<sup>45</sup> For

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<sup>44</sup> Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ* (first edition, 3 vols., 1838), II, 231, cited in Vidler, *Witness to the Light*, 126-127.

<sup>45</sup> See Thomas A. Langford, *In Search of Foundations* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1969), 114-142; James Carpenter, *Gore: A Study in Liberal Anglican Thought* (London: Faith Press, 1960), 105-109. See also Mark D. Chapman, “The Socratic Subversion of Tradition: William Sanday and Theology, 1900-1920,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 94-116.

Gore, symbolic interpretations of the creeds, or those which sought for the spirit rather than the letter, were regarded as quite inadequate: a literal belief in the resurrection, ascension, birth to a virgin, and other apparently supernatural statements became a badge of identity of the catholic faith of the past, present, and future, with which Christianity stood or fell. For Maurice, however, all that was required was a simple liturgical assent to the creed—the God whose name was recited could not be pinned down in propositions, but guarded against such limiting definitions. There was no defining of doctrine in this or that direction—and nothing else could be regarded as a doctrinal norm of the same kind. To say the creed was to stress the beyondness of God and to long for a truth which could not be contained by any system. Assent to the creed was an expression of this striving after a catholic truth which existed in its fullness with the living God, rather than an acknowledgement that this truth had been fixed and finalized once and for all in any ecclesiastical system.

For Gore, however, assent to the creed through liturgical recitation was not enough—literal assent had also to be reflected in the whole of one's academic teaching and preaching about each of the propositions of the creeds. Sincerity was not a matter for the individual conscience in the act of liturgical allegiance, but for the external observer to behold in every ecclesiastical and academic context.<sup>46</sup> On this understanding, creeds are regarded as statements of historical truth, to which absolute propositional assent has to be given. And in this method, it should be noted, there is very little difference between literal adherence to the creeds and literal adherence to the Bible.

Whether there is a way beyond this impasse is not clear. The question that emerges is simple: is truth contained in the propositions of the creeds and Scripture, or do the creeds and Scripture bear narrative witness to the God who stands beyond any final statement, formulation or symbol? Is it enough for us simply to share with all those who are happy to perform their allegiance to the name of God, or are we to test the manner in which they believe and their wider understanding of the Christian life? For Maurice the creed expresses a God who cannot be contained by the church and who draws the believer beyond to a center outside him- or herself; for others, however, it is

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<sup>46</sup> See the letter from Gore to Sanday, May 7, 1914, cited in Chapman, "The Socratic Subversion of Tradition," 109.

quite the opposite: the church interprets, preserves, and demands assent to the propositions of the creed and Scripture granted to it through the good providence of the Holy Spirit. There seems to be little possibility of unity between those understandings of the creed and Scripture in regulating doctrine.

Nevertheless, I will hazard one brief suggestion. And this is something that requires some thought about the style and genre of the creed, at least as used in liturgy. For Maurice, creeds are fundamentally performative expressions of the nature of the Christian God; they express a God who relates to us as Trinity; and in whom the Christian gains an identity through baptism which is repeated through the liturgical act of “allegiance or affiance.” And this is undoubtedly reminiscent of the practical function of the Nicene Creed in Western liturgy: it becomes a song of praise to the living God. To see the creed in this light will allow for diversity and latitude, as the believer pledges him- or herself in praise to God in whom human identity is rooted. Indeed, for some, the music of Marbeck’s great setting is better remembered than the words of the Prayer Book.

If the creed does not function primarily as a list of propositions but as a pledge to faith in God this might allow sincere recitation without a sacrifice of the intellect (or alternatively a submission to insincerity and irrationality). Seeing the creed as a hymn of praise to our identity in God makes it part of a simple act of worship—we do not ask whether our worship is true or false; instead, we just do it. The creed thereby becomes a narrative performed in grateful acknowledgement of the God who confers on us our identity. And here there may even be a chance of reconciliation even with the most intransigent of opponents. Indeed, what unites Maurice and Gore is that the assent to the truth, whether in or beyond the church, should issue in loving action. *Living* the good news for both of them was infinitely more important than mere assent. And ultimately this was living life in the full and grateful acknowledgement of the loving God. As Gore explained towards the end of his career: “All my life has been a struggle to believe that God—the only God—is love. That is to me, as to many others, not only the governing dogma of the Christian religion, but the only difficult dogma.”<sup>47</sup> After acknowledging that, everything else (like the virgin birth or the resurrection) was utterly simple. It

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief* (London: John Murray, 1926), 942.

was the difficulty of acknowledging a loving God that made reciting the rest of the creed so utterly straightforward in comparison.

And this is perhaps not too distant from what lies at the heart of that triune name at the center of Maurice's theology. As he said in his essay "On Charity": "It seems to me that, if we start from the belief—'Charity is the ground and center of the Universe, God is charity'—we restore that distinctness which our theology is said to have lost, we reconcile it with the comprehension which we are all in search of."<sup>48</sup> Reading the creed in that light, as a corporate hymn of praise to that triune love at the heart of the universe, might justify its retention in the liturgy of the church. And it might even encourage God-fearing people to live in humble adoration of the one who loves them, but without growing overly anxious about what precisely the other people who are singing God's praise "believe" or even whether they believe at all. If the sincerity of the performance of all those in the Anglican Communion who are prepared to pledge affinity to creed and Scripture were acknowledged, even when there might be vehement disagreement over the ethical implications of the Christian life, there might begin to be an acknowledgement that all of us are involved in the same truth—but also, and in all humility, that none of us has quite got there yet. God is bigger than our systems, even when we are passionately convinced they are true. And if the Nicene Creed can remind us of that, it still has some use.

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<sup>48</sup> F. D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (1853; London: James Clarke, 1957), 24.

