

## I Introduction

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### THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA AS CONSPIRACY

A little over an hour into Ron Howard's cinematic adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code*, for the first time in a major Hollywood film we see a portrayal of the Council of Nicaea. The brief scene takes place in an expansive, ornately decorated basilica, ending in an apse whose vault is decorated with an anachronistic image of an enthroned Christ, who presides over the proceedings (figure 1.1).

The great hall is filled with scribes sitting at a long table and taking notes, as a motley crew of attendants, clerics, and bishops, garbed in decorative robes and capped with lofty miters, gesture wildly at one another, yelling across the aisle and apparently debating the particulars of the future of Christianity. As the camera pans across the basilica to the center of the nave, we see Roman soldiers, equipped with spears, shields, and helmets with fancy feather plumes and stationed on elevated platforms along the colonnades of the venue, ominously standing guard over the proceedings. It appears (as far as I can tell) that Constantine is standing in the center of the basilica, next to the notary's table, somewhat bewildered at the ferocity of the debate surrounding him.<sup>1</sup>

The character Leigh Teabing, portrayed in the movie by Sir Ian McKellen – with a smoky, grandfatherly, and rather pedantic voice – has just explained how the lifelong pagan emperor Constantine decided to unify his disintegrating empire by imposing a single religion. In Brown's novel, Teabing describes Constantine as a shrewd businessman, placing his bets on the “winning horse” that was Christianity. He elucidates the rationale for the Council in this way:

<sup>1</sup> In cinematic history, Constantine does appear in a few films, for example, *In hoc signo vinces* (1913) and *Constantine and the Cross* (1961), originally titled *Constantino il grande*. List in Solomon 2001, 329. As the titles indicate, the thematic concern in these films was Constantine's conversion to Christianity. See Carlà-Uhink 2017. On Constantine in additional modern media, see Goltz 2008.



FIGURE I.I From *The Da Vinci Code* (© 2006 Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.). All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

“Indeed,” Teabing said. “Stay with me. During this fusion of religions, Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea.” [...] “At this gathering,” Teabing said, “many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon – the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of sacraments, and of course, the *divinity* of Jesus.”

Up to this point in history, we read, many of the followers of Jesus viewed him as a “mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal,” and thus the Council of Nicaea was a conspiratorial event, where a majority vote decided that the man Jesus was now the Son of God. Why, we may ask? Teabing explains:

By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a divinity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable. This not only precluded further pagan challenges to Christianity, but now the followers of Christ were able to redeem themselves *only* via the established sacred channel – the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup>

Dan Brown’s fanciful novel (and its cinematic adaptation), of course, is entertaining fiction, but the lines between story and history can be extremely blurry and even a single page can divulge a whole series of outlandish claims, as we have just seen above, and a single scene can be

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Brown 2003, 232–33.

chock-full of anachronisms.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps in an unexpected way *The Da Vinci Code* brought the Council of Nicaea to public awareness, even if only for a brief moment, as readers and moviegoers learned that some kind of debate over the status of Jesus Christ unfolded there. The aftermath of the book's publication witnessed a proliferation of talking-head documentaries on cable television channels, countless online musings for and against Brown's conspiracy theories, and books by a mix of scholars, "experts," pastors, and laypeople. Many of these publications now sit in stacks in discount bookstores, gathering dust after a short-lived boon, particularly for the Christian publishing industry. But still, there is a lingering afterlife to the momentary craze that the novel and film generated. For example, interested professors and students can even reenact the debates in a role-playing game in which members of the "Alexandrian Faction" and the "Arian Faction" try to persuade undecided delegates to vote for their respective theological positions, all the while as the emperor Constantine oversees the gathering.<sup>4</sup> Such is in no small part a reflection of a broader public interest in the history of Christianity that is keen on the developmental, deliberative, and some might say deceptive aspects of the faith, with a dash of conspiracy, secret societies, and an all-powerful Magisterium for added intrigue.

#### THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA AS CONFIRMATION

But for many, many Christians all over the world, the story of the Council of Nicaea was and is something entirely different. While most have only vague notions of the historical event and its specific circumstances, they are certainly familiar with its eponymous creed, which many recite on a weekly basis. In doing so, they knowingly (or not) proclaim Nicaea as part of the heritage of their faith and church communities.<sup>5</sup> In describing the creed, the *Catechism of the Catholic*

<sup>3</sup> See Ehrman 2004. Ine Jacobs's chapter in this volume discusses the venue in which the council took place, below 82–86.

<sup>4</sup> Henderson and Kirkpatrick 2016, which is part of the "Reacting to the Past" game series developed at Barnard College. For a very interesting review of the game in practice, see [www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2015/3/18/re-enacting-nicaea](http://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2015/3/18/re-enacting-nicaea) [accessed April 28, 2018].

<sup>5</sup> For example, on the website of the Episcopal Church describes the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed in this way: "We will always have questions, but in the two foundational statements of faith – the Apostles' Creed used at baptism, and the Nicene Creed used at communion – we join Christians throughout the ages in affirming our faith in the one God who created us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us" ([www.episcopalchurch.org/page/creeds](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/creeds) [accessed April 28, 2018]). The (translated) text of the Nicene Creed as found on the website and in most other citations of the creed is

*Church* says, “195: The Niceno-Constantinopolitan or Nicene Creed draws its great authority from the fact that it stems from the first two ecumenical councils (in 325 and 381). It remains common to all the great Churches of both East and West to this day.”<sup>6</sup> This catechetical instruction offers a hopeful lesson on how the creed is shared and held in common by Christians, as it conveys a sense of continuity from antiquity to the present, rooted in councils that were *ecumenical*.<sup>7</sup> The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria identifies the creed as one of the pillars of faith.<sup>8</sup> And even for a decidedly non-creedal tradition, as expressed by the United Methodist Church, the perspective of the Nicene Creed is still positive: “The Nicene Creed set forth the key affirmations concerning the Christian faith and served as a guide in combating heretical or false teaching.”<sup>9</sup>

Those with a bit more knowledge about the history of Christianity understand that the Council of Nicaea was a crucial moment when the leaders of the church, contesting the teaching of Arius, “resolved” the theological debate about the Son in relation to God the Father. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) teaches:

The new emperor [Constantine] soon discovered that “one faith and one church” were fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicting understandings of the nature of Christ, long a point of controversy. Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, asserted that the divine Christ, the Word through whom all things have their existence, was *created* by God before the beginning of time. Therefore, the divinity of Christ was similar to the divinity of God, but not of the same essence. Arius was opposed by the bishop,

not the original Nicene Creed, but the so-called Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which combines content connected to the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, a topic that is discussed in several chapters in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Catholic Church 1994, 53.

<sup>7</sup> There is no comment, however, on the procession of the Holy Spirit “from the Father and the Son,” the latter of which is a source of contention with the eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and other churches. This is an old dispute over the Latin phrase *Filioque*, which is addressed in this volume by Paul Gavrilyuk and Geoffrey Dunn.

<sup>8</sup> <http://lacopts.org/orthodoxy/coptic-orthodox-church/> [accessed May 10, 2018].

<sup>9</sup> [www.umc.org/what-we-believe/glossary-nicene-creed](http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/glossary-nicene-creed), accessed May 10, 2018. An interesting contrast is offered by the teaching of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: “Mormons do not believe in the Trinity concept because it is not supported by scripture. It was not until the councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Chalcedon (AD 451) that the doctrine of the Trinity was defined. The formal doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the New Testament because *the idea was only introduced hundreds of years later*” (emphasis mine); see [www.mormon.org/blog/do-mormons-believe-in-the-trinity](http://www.mormon.org/blog/do-mormons-believe-in-the-trinity) [accessed May 11, 2018].

Alexander, together with his associate and successor Athanasius. They affirmed that the divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the divinity of God, the Father. To hold otherwise, they said, was open to the possibility of polytheism, and to imply that knowledge of God in Christ was not final knowledge of God.

To counter a widening rift within the church, Constantine convened a council in Nicaea in A.D. 325. A creed reflecting the position of Alexander and Athanasius was written and signed by a majority of the bishops. Nevertheless, the two parties continued to battle each other. In 381, a second council met in Constantinople. It adopted a revised and expanded form of the A.D. 325 creed, now known as the Nicene Creed.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s description uses phrases like "of the same substance," it is not entirely clear from the narrative above what this "substance" entails, and perhaps the denomination leaves it to its pastors to clarify, or not, as it were. Christians who have delved even deeper into the subject may know that the Greek word, *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) was the term in the creed that described the "same substance" or "consubstantial" relationship between Father and Son.<sup>11</sup> While they may not be able to explain the finer, sophisticated theological and philosophical meaning and implications of the language of the creed, they trust that the Council *affirmed* what the Church already had received and believed, implicitly or otherwise, about Christ (from the beginning of the faith), and *rejected* the incorrect teachings espoused by those who would ultimately be condemned as heretics. In other words, in this account of the Council and Creed of Nicaea, we also see a deliberative element as we did above, but the difference in this case is that the participants at the Council were defending and defining more precisely what they already understood or believed to be true rather than deciding (for the first time) that Christ was divine.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2016, 2. Furthermore, it also recognizes the ecclesiastical unity of Christian churches based on the council and creed: "The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of creeds. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) joins with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches in affirming it."

<sup>11</sup> *Homoousios* is often translated into English as "consubstantial" or "of the same substance," but of course there is always the risk that something can be "lost in translation."

<sup>12</sup> Although consider in contrast the teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses: "Constantine asked the bishops, who may have numbered in the hundreds, to come to a unanimous accord, but his request was in vain. He then proposed that the council adopt the ambiguous notion that Jesus was 'of one substance' (*homoousios*) with the Father. This unbiblical Greek philosophical term laid the foundation for the Trinity doctrine

Perhaps it is too much a cliché to say so, but there is a certain degree of resonance to the notion that history is written by the powerful. The same applies to the disputes of ancient Christianity. Laying exclusive claim to the moniker “orthodox,” the winners ultimately were able to control the narrative over the manifold arguments and controversies that emerged over the books of scripture, theology, ecclesiastical organization and leadership, and liturgical practice, among other subjects of disagreement. Furthermore, the orthodox at times suppressed the writings and points of view expressed by the losers, branding them “heretics” and imputing upon them all manner of devious and diabolical motivations to deceive their followers with their false teachings.<sup>13</sup> Such is the case with Arius, the polarizing figure who initiated the theological quarrel that ultimately led to the Council of Nicaea. Those who opposed him in antiquity, of course, thoroughly demonized him as a blasphemer who denigrated the divine Christ. For example, a heresiological writer in the late fourth century offered the following description of Arius: “He was very tall in stature and wore a downcast expression – counterfeited like a guileful serpent, he was well able to deceive every innocent heart through his cunning outer display. For he always wore a short cloak and a sleeveless tunic. He was pleasant in speech, and people found him persuasive and flattering.”<sup>14</sup> The mellifluous Arius dressed like a monk, but beneath the seemingly pious outer display was a deceptive snake. The manner of Arius’s death – essentially excreting his guts into a latrine in Constantinople – is even more illustrative of how his ancient opponents vilified him.<sup>15</sup> For them, how he died – like the traitor Judas Iscariot – was proof positive of his depraved character, the falsity of his beliefs, and his condemnation by God. Such a perspective of an ill-intentioned Arius persists to this day, such that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America teaches:

Arius was a protopresbyter of the Church of Alexandria, and in 315, he began to blaspheme against the Son of God saying that He was not the true God, consubstantial with the Father, but rather a work or creation of God and different from the essence and glory of the

as later set forth in the church creeds”; see [www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/g201308/trinity](http://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/g201308/trinity) [accessed May 11, 2018].

<sup>13</sup> This impulse gave rise to the production of anti-heretical writings, collectively identified by modern scholars as “heresiology” or “heresiography.” On this subject, see Le Boulluec 1985; Henderson 1998; Smith 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 69.3.1.

<sup>15</sup> Athanasius, *Epistulae* 54; cf. Epiph., *Pan.* 69.10.3. On this, see Leroy-Molinghen 1968; Brennecke 2010; Muehlberger 2015.

Father [...] Arius continued with his heretical teachings, creating controversy and division in the churches of other cities, which led to a theological and ecclesiastical crisis throughout the Christian church.<sup>16</sup>

While the language of this portrayal is measured, descriptors like “blasphemy” and “heretical teachings” make clear how Arius has been received in this tradition. But is it possible to think of Arius otherwise? Can we question the traditional narrative of him as a blasphemer and one who sought to malign Christ? Could we imagine for a moment that Arius believed he was a true Christian and that he desired to honor and worship the God he believed in? Perhaps not without some difficulty. Old impressions, shaped by the powerful, die hard.

The other historical figure who is inextricably linked to the Council of Nicaea is of course the emperor Constantine, who also generates equally vexing interpretative questions. As a subject of academic but also public interest, he is never lacking for scholarly attention, and in the last two decades a steady stream of publications has continued to reevaluate the first Christian emperor.<sup>17</sup> His role in convoking and presiding over the Council is well known, but lively debate continues as to his motivations and desired results. He certainly had embraced some form of Christianity and favored it, but scholars wrestle with questions of how deep an understanding he had, how sincere his beliefs were, and how interested he was in promulgating a particular version of the faith over and against others. This last question is also why Constantine’s relationship to the Council of Nicaea is so complicated. Were his motives theological? Political? Pragmatic? Without a doubt, Constantine was one of the “winners” in history, and yet by strictly “Nicene” standards one might hesitate to count him among the orthodox, since he was baptized before his death by Eusebius of Nicomedia, a decidedly non-Nicene bishop. Yet the same Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America that condemns Arius unequivocally recognizes Constantine (and his mother Helena) as a saint “Equal-to-the-Apostles,” who “in 325 gathered the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, which he himself personally addressed.”<sup>18</sup> The Episcopal Church affirms that “Constantine was

<sup>16</sup> [www.goarch.org/en/fathers-first-ecumenical-council](http://www.goarch.org/en/fathers-first-ecumenical-council) [accessed May 1, 2018].

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Lenski 2006; Van Dam 2007; Stephenson 2009; Girardet 2010; Leithart 2010; Barnes 2011; Potter 2013; Lenski 2016.

<sup>18</sup> [www.goarch.org/chapel/saints?contentid=62](http://www.goarch.org/chapel/saints?contentid=62) [accessed May 10, 2018]. It is worth noting, however, that the perspective on Constantine by different Christian traditions is quite varied. For example, the Anabaptists were deeply critical; see Klaassen 1981, for a brief summary. See also Roth 2013.

a strong supporter of Christianity and sought to build a Christian empire."<sup>19</sup>

And so even in this cursory examination of the reception of Nicaea in a variety of Christian traditions, we are left with the impression that the council was one of the most important moments in the history of the church, a point at which its leaders affirmed one of the fundamental beliefs of the faith, the divinity of Jesus. Furthermore, we see that it is appropriate to condemn Arius as one of the “losers,” a “heretic,” but to count Constantine among the righteous. But as much as Dan Brown’s version of the first Christian emperor begs credulity, the same might be said of the easy confirmation of Constantine on the “right side” at Nicaea. These disparate pictures should give us pause, and we ought to consider if we also have received and implicitly accepted the narrative of the winners. These kinds of questions will serve as a starting point for a reflection on the goals of this volume.

#### YET ANOTHER STUDY?

The two perspectives we described above lie at opposite ends of a spectrum – the Council of Nicaea as conspiracy or the Council of Nicaea as confirmation – but much of the interstitial space is where scholars have done their most significant work.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps one could make the argument that different disciplinary frameworks and approaches tend to indicate to some degree where along the spectrum a given scholar’s interpretation might be found. Historians, especially those with interest in the politics of religion, might view the Council as an event driven by the dynamics of power and authority, whereas theologians could see it as the beginnings or a continuation of a sincere effort to define (and protect) the parameters of right belief. Such an endeavor by fourth-century Christians necessarily resulted in the marginalization and condemnation of certain thinkers, such as Arius, as heretics. Scholars of religious studies, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines have offered and continue to develop additional perspectives. In any case, there is a capacious, at times contested, yet consistently revisited, tradition of scholarly inquiry on the Council and its implications in the

<sup>19</sup> [www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/constantine-i](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/constantine-i) [accessed May 10, 2018].

<sup>20</sup> The bibliography is as voluminous as it is varied, and I omit here any discussion of the seminal works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see Williams 2001, 1–25, for a useful survey. Rebecca Lyman also discusses in her chapter some of the major studies on Arius. A good overall starting point is the massive, now classic work, Hanson 1988. For a survey of events before the Council of Nicaea, see Löhr 2006a.



fourth century and beyond.<sup>21</sup> The new millennium has seen the production of even more excellent studies of Nicaea and its aftermath, and we fortunately have no shortage of scholarly investigations and fodder for deep thought and dispute.<sup>22</sup>

So perhaps it is worth asking why yet another volume, no less a *Cambridge Companion*, on a subject that has received so much attention over the past two centuries? But as we approach a milestone anniversary (1,700 years), we can hope that the council and creed will return again to the public sphere and that the chapters in this volume together will offer a reassessment of the Council of Nicaea on its own (potentially unstable) terms.<sup>23</sup> We know well the degree to which the council and its creed did *not* resolve the theological (and political) issues raised initially by and associated with Arius, but rather initiated several different and often competing theological and ecclesiological trajectories that led to a proliferation of councils and synods, many of which produced additional creeds and confessional statements. Perhaps lost amid the many detailed studies of the fourth-century debates over the Trinity is the Council of Nicaea itself, and we have taken for granted our understanding of the event, its historical and ecclesiastical context, its purpose and intended outcomes, its initial uncertain future implications and impact, and of course its main players. Therefore a fresh examination can prove to be very beneficial.

The deep theological interest characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship on the council and the creed, and for these earlier writers (many of them theologians) their status as markers of orthodoxy, exposes a set of historiographic challenges that necessarily come with any interpretation of Nicaea. First, when we examine in hindsight the council and what unfolded in the ensuing decades, we can fall into the trap of reading back into the beginning the end result, that the correlative divinity of the Son (and eventually, the Holy Spirit) in relation to the Father and to the Godhead was a foregone conclusion and the inevitable outcome of the theological debates of the fourth century. As we noted earlier, we simply cannot conceive of a Saint Arius of Alexandria, let alone the heresiarch Alexander or Athanasius the heretic.

<sup>21</sup> Several influential monographs and edited volumes that were published at the end of the last millennium: Simonetti 1975; Kopecek 1979; Brennecke 1988; Barnes and Williams 1993; Lienhard 1999; Vaggione 2000.

<sup>22</sup> See Ayres 2004; Behr 2004; Parvis 2006; Gwynn 2007; Anatolios 2011; Galvão-Sobrinho 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly, there are few studies that concentrate on just the council itself and its circumstances. See for example, Luibhéid 1982. A more recent examination is offered by Pietras 2016, albeit with a very pessimistic perspective.

We are also compelled to make the logic of the seemingly illogical Trinity work and to ascertain the reasons why the subordinating perspective(s) that were held by almost all Christians in one form or another before the fourth century “lost” in the end.<sup>24</sup> In other words, how did the initially minority view become the majority?

Second, the notion of “ecumenical council” retroactively imagines a sequence of conciliar gatherings whose results were decided by a fairly unified group of leaders and thinkers and ratified by all of Christendom. But again, recent scholarship has demonstrated just how muddy the picture was, especially in the years between the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in 381, the first two so-called ecumenical councils.<sup>25</sup> We recognize our almost complete dependence on the Athanasian narrative, and for better or for worse, how difficult it is to imagine those he vilified as anything other than conspirators with malicious intentions and deceptive tactics.<sup>26</sup> The perspective of Athanasius was taken up by later writers, including Epiphanius, Theodoret, Socrates, and Sozomen, and so the available sources function as a sort of feedback loop, mutually reinforcing the original Athanasian account.<sup>27</sup> What we can reconstruct of the ecclesiastical history of the non-Nicene Philostorgius provides some counterbalance, but with limitations due to the fragmentary survival of his work.<sup>28</sup> We are also well informed to what extent Athanasius himself, a young attendee, did not appeal to the council and creed as the standards of orthodoxy until over a decade (or more) *after* 325. Therefore a reexamination of the context and outcomes of the events in 325, looking forward, will allow us to view subsequent developments from the vantage point of the “starting line” (with its uncertain future) of the debates to ascertain first the possible intentions of the council itself and second to explore the question of why the council was not from the beginning the universally accepted (and ecclesiastically binding) moment that it became in subsequent centuries. All of these circumstances and developments take us to the events of 325, which will serve as the pivot point in this volume.

#### WHAT THIS VOLUME IS . . . AND IS NOT

First, let me begin by reflecting on what this *Cambridge Companion* is not. It is not designed or intended to provide the reader with

<sup>24</sup> Although Behr 2001 offers a thoughtful narrative of the ante-Nicene tradition.

<sup>25</sup> A concise summary can be found in Smith 2018, 7–34.

<sup>26</sup> Gwynn 2007. Also see Barnes 1993.

<sup>27</sup> On these receptions and others, see Lim 1995, 182–216.

<sup>28</sup> Amidon 2007.