

AKSUM

THYATEIRA

A Festschrift

For

Archbishop Methodios
of Thyateira and Great Britain

General Editor

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1985

THYATEIRA HOUSE

London W. 2

A Festschrift

In Honour of Archbishop METHODIOS of Thyateira and Great Britain, (1985).

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THE OPEN TEXTURE OF 'FAITH' AND 'GODLINESS' IN THE CHURCH'S CONFESSION

By

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Under the rubric *We believe* the Catholic Church, meeting for the first time in Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325 A.D., made it clear that they were concerned to confess the fundamental truths of the Gospel calling for the commitment of faith, rather than laying down decrees (*dogmata*) requiring compliance either like Apostolic decisions (cf. *Acts*, 15:28f, 16:4) or like imperial edicts (cf. *Luke* 2:1; *Acts* 17:7). The Fathers certainly offered some indication of how the terms they used were to be understood by indicating the 'boundaries' (*oristhenta*) of their Confession of Faith which could not be transgressed without lapses into heretical perversity or serious contradiction.¹ They also drew up a number of 'canons' or rules to be observed in maintaining unity throughout the Church in its regular instruction and ministerial order.² However, these negative delimitations and formal rules were only appended to the credal statement and were not incorporated into the expression of the substance of the Faith itself. Thus care was taken to preserve the character of the Nicene Creed as an evangelical declaration of saving Faith which the Church found itself obliged to make under the constraint of divine Truth mediated to it through the Holy Scriptures.

The primacy which the Nicene Council accorded to faith in this way is of immense significance. It represents the radical shift in people's understanding in the Church as they were grasped by the enlightening reality of the living God and were freed from imprisonment in the darkness of their own prejudices, baseless conjectures and fantasies, that is, a shift away from a centre of thinking in the in-turned hu-

man reason (*epinoia*) alienated from its intelligible ground in God, to a centre in God's revealing and reconciling activity in the incarnation of his Mind and Word (*Logos*) in Jesus Christ within the temporal and spatial structures of our creaturely world. That was the reason for the unshakeable confidence of the Church's faith in God, for it was caught up in the unswerving faithfulness and reliability of the love of God, which had laid hold upon it through 'the word of the truth of the Gospel' (Col. 1:5), and was steadfastly undergirded and supported by God himself. This primacy accorded to faith in the Nicene Creed reflects the settled patristic view of faith, not as a subjectively grounded but as an objectively grounded persuasion of the mind, supported beyond itself by the objective reality or *hypostasis* of God's own Being as he has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ. As Hilary expressed it, 'in faith a person takes his stand on the ground of God's own Being' (*in substantia Dei*, evidently with reference to the *en hypostasei* of LXX Jeremiah 23:22; cf. 23:18)³. That is exactly how the Greek Fathers regularly thought of scientific knowledge (*episteme*), as the standing or establishment of the mind (*dianoia*) upon objective reality and as certain or assured understanding. In biblical justification for this view they frequently cited the Greek version of Isaiah 7:9: 'If you will not believe, you will not understand' or 'be established'⁴. They were thereby making the point that

3. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 1. 18.

4. Irenaeus, *Epideixis*, 3; 'And faith is produced by the truth; for faith rests on things that truly are. For in things that are, as they are, we believe, and believing in things that are, and as they are, we keep firm confidence in them.' Tr. by J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Irenaeus. The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 1920, p. 72. Cf. also Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 1.1; 2.2, 4:4:21; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 5.4, etc. The interpretation of Is. 7:9 in Greek plays upon the connection between *episteme* = standing on, and *hypostasis* = lying under, i.e. what is stood upon. See the explanation by Clement, *Stromateis*, 4.21, and my discussion in, *Oikonomia*, edit. by F. Christ, 1967, p. 224.

1. Athanasius, *De decretis*—the traditional Latin title is a mistaken translation of *oristhenta*. Cf. *De synodis*, 5, and also Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 4, 1-7.

2. After the Council of Nicaea the term 'canon' tended to be used mainly with reference to ecclesiastical enactments or disciplinary decisions. Cf. Athanasius, *Epistola Encyclica*, 1,6; *Apologia con. Arianos*, 25, 29, 31, 32; *Historia Arianorum*, 36, 51, where he refers to 'canons' derived from the Apostles.

it is through faith that our minds are put in direct touch with reality independent of ourselves, for it is through faith that our minds assent to the inherent intelligibility of things, yield to their self-evidencing power, and are adapted to know them in accordance with what they really are in their own nature (*kata physin*).⁵ It is upon that kind of basic contact with reality that all sure knowledge rests and all genuine understanding is established, and upon it that we continue to rely in all further inquiry and all deepening of our understanding. While such a relation between faith and understanding applies to all scientific knowledge, it applies no less but all the more strictly to our knowledge of God who is the ultimate ground and source of all intelligibility and truth.⁶ We do not seek to understand what we believe, St. Augustine used to say, but we believe that we may understand.⁷

It should now be evident that faith was not regarded in Nicene theology as some form of a non-cognitive or non-conceptual relation to God, but was held to involve acts of recognition, apprehension and conception, of a very basic intuitive kind, in the responsible assent of the mind to truth inherent in God's self-revelation to mankind. Faith arises in us under the creative impact of the self-witness and self-interpretation of God in his Word and in response to the claims of his divine Reality upon us which we cannot reasonably or in good conscience resist.⁸ It takes the form of listening obedience (*hypakoe tes pisteos*, Romans, 1:5; 16:26) to the address and call of God's Word, and the specific beliefs that are called forth from us like this, entail at their heart a conceptual or epistemic consent (*ennoetike, epistemonike sykkatathesis*) to divine truth and become interiorly locked into it.⁹ It was indeed in just this way, Hilary pointed out, that faith and understanding were interlocked in the case of the Apostles themselves when 'the truth which they heard for the first time clenched their faith'. 'Confession was wrung from them by the unanticipated presentation of a new truth, which convinced their mind and constrained them to avow their certainty.'¹⁰ While Hilary spoke of the Apostles' confession that Christ is the Son of God as the rock of faith upon which the Church was

built,¹¹ he clearly understood that in an objective sense, for it is upon the truth of God confessed by the Apostles, not upon their confession as such, that the Church is founded and on which it continues to rely in its own faith. It is to be granted, of course, that the Apostolic confession of faith and their understanding of the truth are enshrined in the Holy Scriptures handed down to us from the Apostles, so that in one sense it must be said that 'faith, and every part of it, is impressed on us by the evidence of the Gospels and the teaching of Apostles'¹². In the ultimate analysis, however, we must learn from God himself what we are to think of him, for 'God cannot be apprehended except through himself'.¹³ Thus our faith must repose upon the same truth which evoked the faith and understanding of the original Apostles. This means that in our recourse to biblical statements we need to yield our minds to the direct constraint of the Truth to which the Holy Scriptures bear witness independent of themselves. Biblical statements (*dicta*) are for their part to be interpreted in the light of the matters or realities (*res*) to which they refer and under the control of which they were made, and not the other way round, for they fulfil their divinely intended function when they mediate God's own self-witness and thus enable us to believe in God and think of him in the only way possible, in accordance with the way in which he actually presents himself to us.¹⁴ Thus it becomes apparent that the primacy accorded to faith in our knowledge of God reflects the absolute priority of God over all human thought of him, and even over the human media he has brought into the service of his self-revelation.¹⁵

Faith that arises in cognitive commitment to the compelling claims of God in Jesus Christ and is linked to the absolute priority of God over all our conceiving and speaking of him, is bound to manifest a two-fold aspect. On the one hand, faith appears determinate and bounded, under the control of the precise form God's Truth has taken in the incarnation of his Word, but on the other hand, faith appears indeterminate and unbounded, through its correlation to the unbounded immeasurable Reality of God which transcends all finite comprehension. On the one hand, then, faith is characterised by a certainty of conviction which derives its force from the Truth of God himself thrust upon it, but on the other hand, faith is characterised by an open, ever-expanding semantic focus which answers to the unfathomable mystery

5. See *Theology in Reconciliation*, 1975, pp. 241 f., 247 ff, for an assessment of the use and meaning of *physis* in Alexandrian thought. See also Archbishop Methodios Fouyas, *The Person of Jesus Christ in the Decisions of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1976, pp. 65 ff.

6. Cf. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, especially books 1-4, for a remarkably perceptive account of theological epistemology.

7. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.5; *In Ioannis Evangelium*, 27.9; 29.6; 40.9; *Epistolae*, 120. 1,3, etc.

8. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 1.18; 2.6f; 3.9f, 23; 4.14, 36; 5.20f; 6.13-16; 8.52.

9. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 2.2-4, 6,11-12; 8.3.

10. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 6.34. See also 4.6, 14.

11. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 6.36 f. Cf. 2.22-23; 6.20 f. Cf. *The Liturgy of St. James*, F.E. Brightman, *Liturgies of Eastern and Western Churches*, 1896, p. 54, where 'the Catholic and Apostolic Church' is likewise said to be founded upon 'the rock of faith'.

12. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 2.22.

13. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 5.20 f.

14. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 4.14; 5.4,7; 8.52.

15. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 1.6,16; 2.2 ff., 12,24ff, 52ff.

and inexhaustible Nature of God.¹⁶ That is evidently the double force of the *We believe (pisteuomen)* of the Nicene confession of faith in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which governs the way in which all its clauses are to be understood, namely, the *exclusiveness* and *open range* of belief.

In its commitment to the one God the Father Almighty, the Nicene Creed is necessarily exclusive of belief in any other god than God the Father and of belief in any other revelation of this one God than in his only-begotten Son. This gives clear expression to the fundamental biblical asseveration that faith in the one God rules out the possibility of having other gods and the faith in Jesus Christ as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' excludes access to the Father by any other way than that provided by God himself in the incarnation of his Word in Jesus Christ, that is, in what Jesus Christ is in his own personal Being. This would hardly be the case if faith were only subjectively grounded in some inner persuasion of the human mind, and not objectively grounded, as it is, in the universally binding Reality of God embodied in Christ as his unique *self-giving* and *self-communication* to mankind as Lord and Saviour. In unconditional obedience to that normative divine Revelation, Christian faith adopts an approach to God which sets aside any alternative approach, entails a judgment which excludes divergent belief, and endorses an affirmation of truth which thereby rejects other affirmations as false. Since the objective pole of the Church's faith is the Truth of God which has seized hold of it in Christ and his Gospel and will not let it go, Truth over which it has no control but Truth which makes it free and establishes it in the Love of God, the Church cannot but confess its faith in God, before God, with an unreserved endorsement of belief in the Truth of Christ and his Gospel, as the Truth with which its very existence is bound up as the Church, the Body of Christ, and as the saving Grace of God which constitutes the very essence of its message and mission. That is surely what took place at the Council of Nicaea in the Ecumenical Confession of Faith promulgated by the Fathers in the face of heretical denial of any ultimate oneness between God and his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The Nicene Creed was a solemn corporate act of the Church in the presence of God, made with passionate commitment to Truth of divine revelation from the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, in the realisation that the very existence of the Christian Church and the validity of its evangelical message of divine salvation were at stake.

If there is no relation of oneness in being and agency between what God the Father is in himself

16. Cf. Clement, *Strom.*, 7.16: 'Knowledge of truth found among us Christians supplies, from what we already believe, faith for what has not yet been believed, faith which is, as it were, the substance of proof.'

and what he is toward us in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ his Son, then the *kerygma* of the Gospel is empty of saving content and the *didascalia* of the Apostles has no divine validity. But if the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is the very grace of God himself, then the Church has no option in fidelity to the Gospel but to commit itself to a positive affirmation of that grace which excludes any other possibility.¹⁷ That was the critical situation which St. Paul had summoned the Galatian Church to square up to in the first century under the threat to pervert the Gospel of Christ into 'another gospel' which was not a gospel, when he wrote: 'If anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be anathema' (Gal. 1:19). That was the Apostolic example which the Nicene Fathers followed in their own critical situation when they appended a sentence to their Confession anathematising those who taught that the Son of God was not eternally one with the Father but of 'a different hypostasis or being' from him, for the very substance of the Catholic faith in God was thereby being denied.¹⁸ Thus it came about that the Nicene Council expressed the fundamental beliefs which they found to be evangelically compelling in a Creed which has subsequently been universally acknowledged in the Church, and which by its intrinsic structure excludes alternative doctrine as arbitrary innovation in face of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, i.e., as heretical deviation from the Truth.¹⁹

There is another side to this picture, however, for while the Nicene Creed expresses what we are obliged to acknowledge within the general framework of the Church's commitment to the reality of God's unique self-revelation in Jesus Christ, it is all prefaced by *Credimus, We believe*. That is to say, everything that is affirmed here falls within the compass of faith pivoting upon the objective Reality of God who infinitely transcends all that we can think or say about him. Precisely because faith derives from and is grounded in a revelation of God in Jesus Christ which is identical with what God is eternally in his own Being, it is open to whatever may yet be made known through the Spirit of Christ who is sent by the Father through the Son to lead us into ever deeper understanding of the Truth. By its very nature, then, Christian faith is locked into an inexhaustible depth of truth in God which always exceeds what we may grasp of its revelation to us; but faith that is stretched out in this way indefinitely beyond itself, is necessarily characterised by an open range in its focus which cannot be

17. Athanasius, *Con. Arianos*, 4.12: 'Through the Son is given what is given; and there is nothing but the Father operates it through the Son; for thus is grace secure to him who receives it'.

18. Athanasius, *Apol. con. Arianos*, 49; *De decretis*, 2.5; *Ad. Episcopos Aegypti*, 2; *Epistolae*, 2.6; Theodoret, *Eccl. Hist.*, 1.3; 2.6; 5.10.

19. Hilary, *De synodis*, 61-64.

foreshortened without being turned into something quite different.

The open range of faith was stressed by Athanasius and Hilary, as well as by other leading exponents of Nicene theology. Athanasius claimed that the more he pressed forward in seeking to apprehend God, the more he found knowledge of him outreaching his apprehension. He was unable to express in writing what he seemed to understand and what he wrote fell far short even of the fleeting shadow of the truth in his mind.²⁰ The one definite point or 'scope' of faith, or, correspondingly, of Holy Scripture, or the truth in which we believe, is Jesus Christ himself, and it is in and through God's self-revelation in him that faith is firmly grounded in the Truth of God's own Being and provided with the normative control it needs in its correlation with what transcends the capacity of human comprehension.²¹ It is faith of this kind that precedes and guides all theological inquiry and explanation, for it constitutes the sound cognitive base which gives force to all right argument.²² Hilary was no less emphatic about the fact that in faith we have to do with a way of apprehending God which does not confine him within the narrow limits of what we can conceive or express but is constantly being expanded under the power of God to make himself known.²³ By its very nature, then, faith in God is characterised by a kind of 'infinity' for, while God as a 'whole' eludes our comprehension, what he does allow us to apprehend of himself is inseparable from what he is as a 'whole' so that it breaks through the narrow confines of our grasp. This explains why in the very act of apprehending something of God faith is bound to confess the truth that it is incapable of comprehending him. Thus while God infinitely transcends the human mind he may nevertheless be known through a movement of faith in which it is opened toward the infinity and ineffability of God.²⁴ This means that through faith we are brought into contact with God in such a way, that we are enabled to know more than can bring to expression in explicit forms of thought or speech and that in and through faith theology is engaged in a fathomless inquiry, for the truth into which we inquire is so deep that we can never probe it to its bottom, let alone bring it to adequate formulation.²⁵

The epistemological implications of this open boundless range of faith were not lost to the Nicene theologians in their realisation that through faith theological inquiry is carried beyond the narrow

scope of the ordinary reason defined by visible, tangible objects in created reality, and even beyond the explicit statements of Holy Scripture to the truth of God which they indicate independent of themselves. Thus the open range of faith gave rise to a perilous state of affairs in which the door appeared to be open to all manner of irrational and irreverent theorising.²⁶ For that very reason, however, the theologians of the Church cannot keep silence, but with fear and trembling and in prayer to God, they must seek to express as far as the slender resources of human language allow the truth of God to which they are directed by Holy Scripture, if only to counter the damaging effect of an arbitrary and irreligious intrusion of creaturely modes of thought into the knowledge of God. That was precisely the situation in which the Fathers of Nicaea found themselves when they felt forced to use the non-biblical term *homoousios* in order to give clear and unambiguous expression to biblical and evangelical truth. Hilary had that critical event in mind in the following complaint. 'We are compelled by the error of heretics and blasphemers to do what is unlawful, to scale heights, to express things that are unutterable, to encroach on forbidden matters. And when we ought to fulfil the commandments through faith alone, adoring the Father, worshipping the Son together with him, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, we are forced to stretch the feeble capacity of our language to give expression to indescribable realities. We are constrained by the error of others to err ourselves in the dangerous attempt to set forth in human speech what ought to be kept in the religious awe of our minds... Their infidelity drags us into the dubious and dangerous position of having to make a definite statement beyond what heaven has prescribed about matters so sublime and so deeply hidden'.²⁷

Quite evidently, affirmations of belief which we are obliged to make before God under the pressure of his divine revelation and its inherent truth, must remain open to whatever may yet be learned of God through that revelation. In so far as they are locked into that revelation and are controlled by it, they are put forward as articulating fundamental truth, even though they indicate far more than can be expressed at the time. Affirmations of faith of this kind have heuristic properties in virtue of which they prompt and guide further inquiry and deeper understanding. However, in virtue of their semantic reference away from themselves to the transcendent Reality of the Holy Trinity which may be grasped only very partially, they must be regarded as incomplete and inadequate in themselves and therefore as subject to revision in the light of deeper and fuller understanding of God's self-revelation. That is the profoundly objective yet open-textured character of the doctrinal

20. Athanasius, *Ad monachos*, 1.1-3.

21. Athanasius, *Con. Arianos*, 2.15; 3.28, 35, 58. Cf. also *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 1982, pp. 106 ff.

22. Athanasius, *De vita Antonii*, 77-80.

23. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 1.7-16; 2.5-11; 3.1-6, 18-26.

24. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 1.8 & 12; 2.5, 6, 8, 11.

25. Hilary, *De synodis*, 65; *De Trinitate*, 3.18; 10.53; 11.44-47; 12.24-37.

26. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 2.1-5; 10.51-53.

27. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 2.2.5.

statements asserted by the Council of Nicaea under the rubric *We believe*. It is highly significant that, as Athanasius reported, 'The Bishops who assembled at the Great Synod of Nicaea agreed, not without the will of God, that the decisions taken in one synod should be examined in another'.²⁸ That is to say, the Nicene Fathers thereby gave synodal recognition to the point that by their intrinsic nature the credal affirmations of Nicaea indicated more than could be grasped at the time and therefore more than could be fully justified at the time. Although the canon of Nicaea to which Athanasius referred is not extant in any written form, it was certainly in accordance with it that subsequent Ecumenical Councils acted. After more than fifty years in which the Nicene Creed was subjected to detailed analysis, against it and in support of it, it established itself so deeply in the convictions of the Church that it was revised and finalised at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. and then in that Nicene-Constantinopolitan form was fully ratified by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.²⁹

Inextricably interwoven with faith, to which Nicene theology accorded primacy, there is another basic element which we must take into account, *godliness* (*eusebeia* or *theosebeia*), to which it also accorded primacy along with faith. Faith is itself an act of godliness in humble worship of God and adoring obedience to him, and godliness is a right relationship to God through faith which gives a distinctive slant to the mind and moulds life and thought in accordance with 'the word of the truth of the Gospel'.³⁰ Godliness is thus an essential ingredient in the living tradition of the Church's believing commitment to God's incarnate self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and along with knowledge of the truth it belongs to the evangelical structure of 'the Faith once for all delivered to the saints'. It is godliness of this kind that exercises a directive force in all 'sound doctrine', and that must be allowed to guide theological understanding particularly in the open range of faith when we are obliged to form concepts and make pronouncements about the truth beyond the explicit statements of Holy Scripture where they bear upon the ineffable mystery of God which remains mystery even in the heart of his self-revelation, and where we must be on our guard against irreverent and impious intrusion into what God has kept hidden in his own eternal Being.

As found in Nicene theology *eusebeia* referred to the orthodox understanding of truth embodied in a tradition of faith and worship that derived from

28. Athanasius, *Apol. con. Arianos*, 22.

29. See Archbishop Methodios Fouyas, *The Person of Jesus Christ in the Decisions of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1976, pp. 45, 108 f.

30. Cf. G. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, 1972, on 'the scriptural mind', and 'the catholic mind', chs. 1, pp. 9 ff, and 4, pp. 57 f.

the Apostles. It is to be traced back to the Pastoral Epistles where 'godliness' was more or less a technical word for what had been called 'the Way' in the Acts of the Apostles (9:2; 19:9,13; 22:4; 24:14,22), that is, the way of belief and worship characteristic of those who are committed to Christ and who have to suffer for it. The distinctive feature of godliness is that it is an embodiment of faith or a knowledge of the truth of the Gospel in a corresponding way of life and worship in the reverent service of God (1 Tim. 2:2; 3:16; 4:7,8; 6:3,5,6; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 1:1; 2 Peter 1:3,6; 3:11). It is significant that considerable stress is laid upon the inherent interrelation between 'godliness, faith and truth' and thus upon 'teaching in accordance with godliness' or 'knowledge of the truth in accordance with godliness' (1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 1:1; cf. 2 Tim. 3:7) or upon 'sound doctrine' (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1,2), in sharp reaction to the rise of rationalising and mythologising perversions of the Gospel (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 6:3-6; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16). Thus while godliness is held to be synonymous with belief and truth, ungodliness is held to be synonymous with unbelief and error. That was a contrast that set the pattern for the Church's struggle with heresy for the next three hundred years.

The passage that evidently governed the understanding of *eusebeia* in the Early Church was 1 Timothy 3:15-16.³¹ St. Paul was there giving instructions to Timothy that he might know how one ought to behave 'in the household of God' which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness (*to tes eusebeias mysterion*) 'Who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, taken up in glory'. Here, on the one hand, godliness is defined as penetrating into the inner mystery of the faith, into the objective fact of the incarnate self-revelation of God, while, on the other hand, the Church is spoken of as supporting and upholding the truth of God. Expressed the other way round, the revealed truth of God is grounded and built into human life and society as it is proclaimed and believed, known and taught by the Church in a way that promotes godliness. Thus the great mystery of godliness manifest in Jesus Christ and his saving grace became embodied in the Church as its godly counterpart, which corresponds to what St. Paul elsewhere referred to as the great mystery concerning Christ and his Church, which is his Body (Eph. 5:32). The saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the faithful reception and understanding of it by the Apostles were incorporated together in the foundation of the Church, so that in the economic purpose of God the truth as it is in Jesus was made accessible to people

31. See Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 11.9.

in history only through the Apostolic preaching and teaching of the Gospel and only in living continuity with their godly tradition in the Church.

This is surely what is meant in the Pastoral Epistles by the deposit of faith (*paratheke*) entrusted to the Church, to be guarded and defended, and transmitted in godliness to others (1 Tim. 4:6, 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12-14; 2:2, 4; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; cf. also 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6; Gal. 1:9; 2:2,9; 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; 2 Cor. 11:3-4; Rom. 6:17; Hebrews 3:1; 4:14; 10:23). In its primary sense the Faith entrusted to the Church refers to the revealing and saving event of Jesus Christ in its self-interpretation and self-unfolding within the Church which he founded upon the Apostles and Prophets, but in its subsidiary sense it refers to the evangelical content of the Apostolic message and tradition as it is mediated to us through the Scriptures of the New Testament and through participation in the mystery of godliness in the midst of the Church where Christ continues to make himself known and to be savingly at work through the enlightening and regenerating power of his Spirit. It is only through reliance upon the Apostolic witness and teaching, the subsidiary sense of the Deposit of Faith, and under the direction of its semantic reference to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, that people throughout history are enabled to grasp and appropriate the doctrinal substance of the Faith, which is what was primarily meant by the Deposit. However, all that takes place only within the structured integration of truth, faith and godliness in the living tradition of the Church as the Body of Christ or the earthly-historical form of his existence in the world. If we are to appreciate the bearing and force of this biblical teaching upon Nicene theology, it will help us to consider what the Early Church made of it in the period between the Apostles and the Council of Nicaea, as reflected in the thought of Irenaeus and Origen.

Irenaeus worked with a powerful sense of the embodiment of the revealed truth of the Gospel in the Apostolic Foundation of the Church, and of the structured nature of the Faith once for all delivered to the saints and mediated through the Apostolic Tradition. He made much of the Deposit of Faith which he thought of, not at least in the first place as a system of doctrinal statements, but as a body of objective evangelical truth which through the power of the Holy Spirit constantly rejuvenates the Church by renewing its bond to the creative source of its being in the Gospel, and structures its continuing life and mission in accordance with the image of Christ the incarnate Son of God and the pattern of divine Truth embodied in him.³² The Church of Jesus Christ is thus informed

32. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* (edit. by W.W. Harvey, 1987), 3. Pref., 1-5, vol. 2, pp. 22ff; 3.38.1, p. 131 f; 4.40.2, p. 236. For this and what follows see T.F. Torrance, 'The Deposit of Faith', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1983, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 1-28.

by a faith that is 'always one and the same', for it is grounded in the unchangeable reality of Christ and the once for all revelation of God in him.³³

God is utterly ineffable and incomprehensible to us, for his sublime greatness and majesty infinitely exceed the capacity of human beings to know and describe him as he is in his own nature. However, while retaining inviolate the mystery of his own Being, God has chosen to make himself known to us through a movement of love and infinite condescension in which he has drawn near to us by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, thereby bringing himself within the range of human knowing.³⁴ Jesus Christ himself thus constitutes the bridge between God and man, between the invisible and the visible, the incomprehensible and the comprehensible, the immeasurable and the measurable. It is then in Jesus Christ, through 'union and communion' with him in love, thereby sharing in the love of God incarnate in him, that we are enabled to know God in such a way that our knowledge of God is firm and sure for it is anchored in the reality of God's own eternal Being.³⁵ That would not be possible without the aid of the Spirit of God. But in and through Jesus Christ God has accustomed his Holy Spirit to dwell in human nature and at the same time adapted human nature to receive the Holy Spirit, which enables us through the gift of the Holy Spirit to share in the relation of mutual knowing between the Father and the Son and thus in God's knowledge of himself.³⁶

As Irenaeus understood it, communion with God through Christ and in the Spirit, which arises out of the reconciling and healing assumption of our humanity that took place in the Incarnation, necessarily takes a corporate form in the Church, for it is to the Church that God has entrusted the Deposit of Faith, to the Church that he has given his Holy Spirit, and in the Church that he has provided us with the ministry of the Gospel and all the other means through which the Spirit works. Thus he could claim that 'where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every grace: but the Spirit is Truth.'³⁷ While Irenaeus pointed to the Church as the location of well-grounded knowledge of the Truth and thought of the Church as structurally integrated with the Truth embodied in it,

33. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 1.3, vol. 1, p.94; 3.1-4, vol. 2, pp. 1ff; 3.11.1, p. 47; 3.12.9, p.62; 4.4 ff, pp. 234 ff; 5.20, pp. 377 ff.

34. Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 2.15.4, vol. 1, p. 282 f; 2.39.1f., pp. 345 f; 2.40-43, pp. 349-358; 3.38-1-2, vol.2, pp. 131-132; 4.22.2, p. 178; 4.34.4, pp. 215-219.

35. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 3.11f., vol. 2, pp. 43 f; 3.17.6, p. 87f; 4.6, p. 153; 4.11.1-5, pp. 158-162; 4.34.1, 4-6, pp. 212, 215 f; 4.6.1, p. 291; 5. Pref., 1-2, pp. 313 ff; 5.27.2, p. 398 f.

36. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 2.3.7.1-4, vol. 1, pp. 342-344; 3.6.2, pp. 22 f; 3.18.1, p.92; 3.19.6, p. 100f; 3.21.2.0.107; 4.11.1-5, pp. 158-162; 4.34.5,7, pp. 210, 218 f.

37. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 3.38, vol. 2, p. 132.

he nevertheless laid the emphasis upon the objective self-revelation of God through Christ and in the Spirit as the actual source of our knowledge of the Truth.³⁸ His distinctive emphasis was very evident when, with reference to 1 Timothy 3.15, he did not speak of the Church itself as 'the pillar and ground of Truth', but of 'the Gospel and the Spirit of Life' as 'the pillar and ground of the Church' (*stylos kai sterigma ekklesias, to euangelion kai Pneuma zoes*).³⁹ On the other hand, Irenaeus held that it is only within the framework of the Faith entrusted to the Church and incorporated in the Apostolic Tradition that the word of revelation in the Scriptures may be faithfully interpreted without lapsing into presumptuous and ungodly error, and Christ himself who is the treasure hidden in them may be truly known.⁴⁰

For Irenaeus, then, knowledge of the Truth of God or the Truth of the Gospel is not given in an abstract or detached form but in a concrete embodied form in the Church, where it is to be grasped within the normative pattern of the Faith imparted to it through the teaching of the Apostles, and is therefore to be grasped only in unity and continuity with the faith, worship and godly life of all who are incorporated into Christ as members of his Body. He regarded the Truth revealed through the Holy Scriptures as an organic structure, 'the body of Truth', within which various truths, and correspondingly beliefs, may be distinguished, but which form a coherent whole from which they cannot be separated, any more than the limbs of a living body can be severed from the body without dismemberment and destruction of the whole.⁴¹ Nevertheless Irenaeus gave himself the important task of uncovering the intrinsic order embedded in the Deposit of Faith, and bringing into clear focus the internal arrangement of 'the body of truth and the harmonious adaptation of its members' so that it could be used as an aid to the interpretation of Holy Scripture and as a 'canon of truth' enabling the Church to offer a clear demonstration of the Apostolic *kerygma* in the face of heretical deviations and distortions.⁴²

The work of Irenaeus in this respect clearly reflects the general activity of the Church in the second century in its attempt to clarify the doctrinal substance of the Faith in the light of its own objectively grounded order, in the course of which there emerged

the explicit formulations of belief which were eventually to take the form of the early creeds.⁴³ From the way in which Irenaeus himself handled these incipient credal formulae, it seems clear that they were not doctrinal propositions connected together through a logico-deductive system of thought, but assertions of belief that are organised from beyond themselves by their common ground in the Apostolic Deposit of Faith and ultimately by the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the one incarnate Truth of God from which all evangelical truths flow. Accordingly, they do not have their truth in themselves but in that to which they refer and into which they are locked. While Irenaeus spoke of them as constituting the 'canon of truth', he made it clear that the actual canon or centre of reference was the Truth itself.⁴⁴ These assertions of belief, however, were regarded as having regulative force themselves in so far as they are rightly related to that Truth and serve its supreme authority. All our theological knowledge is only 'in part', for there is much that belongs to God which we must reverently leave to him, for it would be ungodly even to think of intruding into it.⁴⁵ Thus it should be recognised that the credal formulations of what we may know of God, even under the control of what he has revealed to us, are not final but partial, not closed but open confessional statements which are revisable in the light of deeper and fuller understanding of the Gospel. Their importance lies not in 'the form of sound words' which they use, but in their service in bringing the mind of the Church under the compelling claims of divine Truth, and in their guidance to the Church in its mission to guard and defend 'the Evangelical and Apostolic Faith' entrusted to it and to hand it on to others in accordance with 'the mystery of godliness'.

This account of the Irenaean contribution to the theological unfolding of the Church's confession of faith in the light of its implicit conceptual structure, requires to be complemented by some account of Origen's wide-ranging contribution to theology which had a considerable impact upon thought in the Church leading up to the Council of Nicaea. Origen was a very learned biblical scholar unsurpassed in the Early Church, but he was a theologian with an essentially speculative, though devout, mind, who felt compelled to carry his thinking beyond the literal content of biblical statements to the divine realities they signified. Although he held with Irenaeus that the controlling centre of reference in our knowledge of God is ultimately the Truth itself as revealed in Jesus Christ,

38. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 3.38, 1-2, vol. 2, p. 131 f; 4.53, 1-2, pp. 261 ff; 5.20.1, pp. 378 ff.

39. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 3.11.11, vol. 2, p. 47.

40. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 1, Pref., vol. 1, pp. 1 ff; 1.15, p. 67 f; 1.1.19-4.1, pp. 89-97; 2.7-9, pp. 271-274; 2.40-43, pp. 349-358; 3.1-5, vol. 2, pp. 1-20; 3.38, pp. 131-3; 4.40-42.1, pp. 234-238; 4. 53-54, pp. 261-264; 5. Pref. pp. 313 f; 5.20.1-2, pp. 377-380.

41. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 1.1.15, pp. 66 f; 1.18, pp. 80ff; 20.40-45, pp. 347-358.

42. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 1.19-20, pp. 80-90; 2.37-43, pp. 342-358; 3.12.11, vol. 2, p. 65; 3.38, p. 13 f; *Epideixis*, 1-6.

43. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 1.2, pp. 90f; 3.1 f, 4, vol. 2, pp. 2 ff, 25ff; 4.1, pp. 146ff; 4.53.1, pp. 261 f; 5.20.1, pp. 377 f; *Epideixis*, 6.

44. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 2.41, p. 349. The same point is made by Clement who spoke of 'cleaving to the truth by taking the canon of truth from the truth itself', *Stromateis*, 7.16.

45. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 2.15.3-4, pp. 282 f; 2.41-43, pp. 349-358.

not in human formulations of our knowledge of the Truth,⁴⁶ unlike Irenaeus he worked with a dualist framework of thought, the Platonic or Philonic disjunction between the sensible world (*aisthetikos kosmos*) and the intelligible world (*noetos kosmos*)⁴⁷, which implied that the invisible and incorporeal things in heaven are true, but 'the visible and corporeal things on earth are copies of true things, not true themselves'.⁴⁸ This outlook deeply affected Origen's understanding of the Holy Scriptures as providentially provided media within the sensible world through which the divine *Logos* accommodated his communication to human weakness, wrapping up the mysteries of divine revelation in forms and figures that can easily be grasped, but only in order that through them he might lift up believing minds to an understanding of spiritual or divine realities in the intelligible world beyond.⁴⁹ On the one hand, Origen held that through divine inspiration the human terms found in the Holy Scriptures are governed by the nature (*physei*) of the realities they signify, and are not just conventionally (*thesei*) related to them. They are to be understood only through an assent of rational faith to the 'kateleptic' claims of those realities upon the mind of the interpreter, but that means that he must engage in careful investigation to make sure that the assent of faith really does match, or set its 'seal' to, the truth.⁵⁰ On the other hand, he insisted that a spiritual interpretation of the Holy Scriptures in accordance with the spiritual nature of those realities, must involve a passage in thought from the lower level of 'bodily', literal sense to the higher level of spiritual, mystical meaning where the truth shines in its own self-evidencing intellectual light.⁵¹ But that requires considerable spiritual training of the mind in theological insight (*theoria*), a kind of divine sense (*aisthesis theia*), appropriate to the knowledge of God.⁵²

This combination of careful investigation and spiritual training was very characteristic of Origen. He was not unaware of the dangers it involved. It led him to distinguish between the 'bodily' or 'sensible' Gospel and the 'spiritual' or 'intellectual' Gospel, the former being the 'temporal Gospel' which corre-

ponds to the advent of the Saviour in his state of humiliation when he assumed the form of a servant for our sakes, while 'the eternal Gospel' corresponds to the glorious advent of Christ in the future, when the shadows of the first will give way to the ultimate realities of the second.⁵³ The implication of this was that the historical Christ was to be regarded as a time-conditioned form in which the eternal Truth of God is mediated to fallen creatures, but that, once the eternal Truth is known, the historical medium will be relativised.⁵⁴ This is evidently why Origen laid such emphasis upon allegorical exegesis and the cultivation of a spiritual 'feeling' for God which would enable the believer to penetrate through the husks and shadows of the historical revelation to the eternal, invisible realities of God that may be grasped only in a simple immediate way and cannot be expressed in human words.⁵⁵ Dangerous as this speculative outreach of the spiritual mind was, beyond the realm of knowledge subject to the kind of criteria of truth with which Greek philosophy and science operate,⁵⁶ Origen was fascinated with it, particularly as it was associated with Old Testament men of God like Melchizedek the pioneer of celestial worship, or Moses who spoke with God face to face, or with the experiences of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and with what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the fourth and twelfth chapters of his Second Epistle, all of which pointed to the kind of sublime vision of God that may be opened up to 'the mystic and inexpressible insight'.⁵⁷

There was another side to Origen's approach, however, which provided this 'theologising' (*theologein*) with safeguards against fanciful 'mythologising' (*mythologein*), and with a normative frame of faith and devotion which might help to keep knowledge of God in the centre of the life and living tradition of 'the Great Church'. This had to do with the way in which he brought careful inquiry and training in godliness to bear upon each other. In line with the conception of scientific knowledge (*episteme*) which had long prevailed in Alexandria, that exact knowledge is in accordance with the nature (*kata physin*) of what is known, Origen concentrated on developing a way of knowing God which was strictly in accordance with the nature of God as he has revealed himself to us, that is, in a godly way, and he set himself to cultivate personal godliness in reliance upon the grace of Christ and the power of his Spirit, so that he could bring to knowledge of God an appropriately godly habit of mind. Hence *theologia*, which is pro-

46. Origen, *De Principiis*, Pref., 1.2.6. Origen also spoke of Christ as *autoaletheia* = self-subsistent Truth, *Comm. in Ioannis Evangelium*. 6.6; cf. 1.27; 2.4, and *Contra Celsum* 8.12.

47. See especially Origen, *In Ioann.* 1.25-28, and cf. 1.8.

48. Origen, *In Canticum Canticorum*, 2; *Con. Celsum*, 7.31, 37.

49. Origen, *In Ioann.* 1.7; *In Matt.*, 10.1; *In Deut.*, 1.21; *In Jer.*, 18.6; *Con. Celsum*, 4.71, etc.

50. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 1.2.9 f, 13, 24f, 42, 71; 3.23, 39, 42, 86; 4.2; 5.45; 6.27; 7.10; *De Principiis*, 4.3.15.

51. Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.1.1 f; 1.3.3; 2.2.2; 2.4.4; 2.5.2; 2.7.2; 2.11.2ff; 3.12.4; 3.5.1; 4.2.1-3.15. Origen sometimes distinguished between three meanings, cf. 4.2.4.

52. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 1.48; 6.23; 7.34; *De Principiis*, 1.1.9; 4.4. 10. Cf. Prov. 2.5 LXX.

53. Origen, *In Ioann.* 1.8-10; 2.6; *De Principiis*, 3.6.8; 4.2.6; 4.3.13.

54. Cf. Origen, *In Matt.*, 10. 14, where he commits himself to the expression 'beyond history'. See also *In Ioann.* 10.4, 18.22; 20.3, 10, etc.

55. Origen, *De Principiis*, 4.3.15.

56. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 1.2; 8.53.

57. Origen, *In Ioann.* 13.24; 32.25-29.

perly knowledge of the Trinity, and *theosebeia*, or *eusebeia* defined through Jesus Christ the Son of God incarnate, were regarded by Origen as mutually conditioning each other in the course of deepening theological inquiry.⁵⁸ The more truly God is known in accordance with his nature, the more godliness is advanced, and the more godliness is advanced, the more likely we are to know God in a godly way that is worthy of his nature as God.⁵⁹ Generally speaking, then, 'the aim is to get as near the truth as possible and to shape our belief according to the rule of godliness'.⁶⁰

Behind everything lay Origen's immense respect for the Holy Scriptures and his 'priestly' devotion to the Word and Truth of God which they communicated.⁶¹ As the inspired product of the Holy Spirit they have to be investigated and interpreted in accordance with their divine character (*theiotes*), in a reverent and religious way, in the realisation that they have a 'superhuman' depth of meaning which does not admit of quick understanding.⁶² By their very nature, then, the Scriptures call for long study, meditation and prayer, and for hard labour.⁶³ That is just what Origen himself exhibited in his immense product of biblical commentaries, all of which bear impressive witness to conscientious treatment of the text in its linguistic detail and exact grammatical sense, and to prodigious research in the clarification of historical circumstances and background that might affect the meaning. But he also sought to bring to bear upon each book and each passage the whole world of biblical revelation and the whole tradition of Christian faith and understanding in the Church, so that as far as possible the Holy Scriptures might be understood out of themselves, in the light of the divine intention which they embodied and which they manifested in their inner unity and continuity.⁶⁴

Now since the Scriptures are the result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ, and since the Word of God who speaks through all the Scriptures became incarnate in Jesus Christ, it is Jesus Christ himself who must constitute the controlling centre in all right interpretation of the Scriptures. To interpret the Scriptures, even the Gospels, in this way through 'the mind of Christ' is, Origen claimed, to keep 'the canon of the heavenly Church of Jesus Christ in accordance with the succession of the Apostles'.⁶⁵ Jesus Christ

himself defines for Christians what true godliness (*theosebeia*, *eusebeia*) is,⁶⁶ for he himself is 'the great mystery of godliness manifest in the flesh', who mediates in and through himself both God's gracious condescension to us and our approach to God, both God's revelation of himself to us and our knowledge and worship of God.⁶⁷ Hence in our investigation of the truth we must strive more and more to 'preserve in every way the attitude of godliness (*to eusebes*) towards God and his Christ',⁶⁸ while to be faithful to the mind of Christ in all our interpretation of the Holy Scriptures 'we must preserve the canon of godliness'.⁶⁹

It is significant that for Origen godliness was defined not only by reference to Jesus Christ (*kata Iesoun Christon*) but through Jesus Christ (*dia Iesou Christou*), in respect of his unique relation to the Father as Son of God, and of his unique relation to us as our High Priest in whom and with whom and through whom we worship the Father.⁷⁰ By his atoning sacrifice he heals and cleanses us through his own divine power, so that we worship him as well as the Father, for he and the Father are one; but because he is one with us as well as with the Father, we may pray to him as our 'Mediator, High Priest and Paraclete', asking him to present the desires, petitions and intercessions, that ascent from us to him, to the Father, and thus we worship the Father in union with him and through him. As Son of God incarnate and High Priest Jesus Christ has shown mankind the pure way to worship God, that is, what true godliness is in which our faith and understanding are confirmed in God.⁷¹

Undoubtedly what Origen wrote about Christ-centred and Christ-mediated worship of the Father showed an outlook upon the Church in the living tradition of its faith and in its service for the salvation of mankind, in which reverential wonder in the knowledge of God, praise and thanksgiving for the saving acts of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, godliness in words and deeds, were intimately and inseparably interwoven reflecting the Eucharistic

66. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 1.27; 3.60, 81; 5.33; 7.46; 8.20; *De Principiis*, 4.1.2, 5; *In Ioann.* 28, 23.

67. See Origen, *In Ioann.* 6, 5-6; *De Principiis*, 4.1.2, 5; *Con. Celsum*, 2.4; 3.34, 81; 5, 4; 8.13, 26, 59.

68. Origen, *De Principiis*, 3, 1, 17.

69. Origen, *De Principiis*, 1, 5, 4; 2.6.2; 3.1.17, 23; 3.5.3; 4.3.14; cf. also *Pref.* 2; 3.3.4; 4.2.2, 4; 4.3.15. The expression 'rule of piety' (*regula pietatis*) is that of Rufinus, the Latin translator of the *De Principiis*. From his rendering of 3.1.17 it is evident that this does not always correspond to Origen's original text, but the term *pietas* = *eusebeia* is not far from the mark. In his preface to the translation of the third book, however, Rufinus appears to equate 'the rule of piety' with 'the sound rule of the Catholic Faith', GCS edition by P. L. Koetschau, 1913, *Origenes Werke*, vol. 5, p. 193.

70. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 3, 34; 5.4; 7, 46; 8, 13; *De Oratore*, 10, 2; 13, 1; 15, 1-4.

71. Origen, *In Ioann.*, 1, 33, 35; 2, 34; *Con. Celsum*, 3, 34; 5.4; 7.41, 46, 49; 8.12, 13, 26, 75; *De Principiis*, 1.3.4.

58. Cf. Origen, *In Lucam*, 14, 28.

59. This is strongly emphasised by Origen in *Con. Celsum*, 3.8, 34, 60, 78; 5.33; 7.40, 49; 8, 13, 75.

60. Origen, *De Principiis*, 1, 5, 4.

61. Origen, *In Ioann.* 1, 3.

62. Origen, *De Principiis*, 4, 1, 1-2; 4, 2, 2.

63. See Origen's *Letter to Gregory* 3, and to *Africanus*, 2-5.

64. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 7, 11; *De Principiis*, *Pref.*; 4.2.4, 7-9; 4.3.5.

65. Origen, *De Principiis*, 4.2.3; cf. *Pref.* 1-2; *In Ier.*, 3, 22-4.

Liturgy of the Church.⁷² Hallowing the Name of God, thinking and speaking appropriately of him, with the utmost respect for his self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, were essential marks of the Christian mind and, as Origen believed, of the mind of the Church under the imprint left upon it by the Apostles. Hence when Origen set about composing a work on the fundamental principles of the Faith with a view to promoting order and harmony in the understanding of Christian doctrine, he first laid down 'a definite line and clear rule' to the effect that exposition of the Faith must keep within the bounds of the unanimous teaching of the Church as it had been handed down from the Apostles and in the light of those doctrines which they considered to be absolutely necessary. However, in view of error and disagreement Origen felt he had to go further: to investigate 'the grounds of the statements made by the Apostles' in their preaching of the faith of Christ in the hope of establishing the ultimate basis of Christian belief, and then to determine the rational interconnections of revealed truth so as to build up a body of consistent Christian doctrine.⁷³ Throughout this undertaking, which was the first of its kind, as he sought to apprehend the Truth of God as faithfully as possible, Origen took care, especially at what he considered to be 'the more difficult points', to allow his judgement to be guided and formed in accordance with the canon of godliness or the rule of piety. Only those theological conceptions which were felt to be worthy of God, formulated under the compelling claims of his transcendent Being and Nature as God, could be allowed.

Owing to the force of his philosophical presuppositions which were not sufficiently subjected to criticism in the face of his commitment to biblical revelation, Origen's speculative mind transgressed the rule of piety at a number of crucial points which brought his teaching into conflict with the mind of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Origen's combination of scientific investigation of the objective grounds of faith and his insistent deference to *eusebeia* or *theosebeia* in the knowledge of the Holy Trinity had an immense impact upon the Nicene and post-Nicene theologians. The great principle at work among them, to which of course many other sources contributed, was later known as: *lex orandi - lex credendi*.⁷⁴

Again and again in the history of the Church ideas about God born of a daring irreverence have been advanced which the Church has instinctively rejected out of a profound respect for the mystery and majesty of God which had been built into the fabric of its faith through prayer and devotion. That was what happened at the critical juncture in its history brought

about by the Arian heresy which called in question the unity of the Holy Trinity by asserting the creatureliness of the Son, thereby separating him from the Being of the Father and introducing inconsistency into the Godhead, at which the Bishops at Nicaea reacted in utter horror at the affront of Arian 'ungodliness' (*asebeia*) and advanced against it essentially 'godly arguments' (*apodeixis eusebeius*)⁷⁵. Athanasius told the Bishops of Egypt that when he was writing down the ungodly and perverse statements of the Arians, he had to cleanse himself by thinking of the very opposite and holding fast 'the mind of godliness' (*ten tes eusebeias dianoiān*).⁷⁶ With reference to the fact that the Council of Nicaea had to use the non-scriptural term *homoousios* to explain what was meant by the Scriptures in speaking of Christ as 'of God' or 'from God', Athanasius pointed out that it does not matter whether a person uses a non-scriptural term or not, so long as he has 'a godly mind' (*eusebe ten dianoiān*), and that as a matter of fact the Fathers of Nicaea, far from speaking irreverently, spoke reverently of Christ 'with an exalted mind and a Christ-loving godliness' (*hypsele dianoiā kai philochristos eusebeia*).⁷⁷

When at a later period Arianism broke out again, this time by asserting the creatureliness of the Holy Spirit, presuming to subject to their impertinent scrutiny the inner relations of the Holy Trinity where 'the cherubim spread their covering wings', Athanasius put forward counter arguments in the same way governed by a Christocentric godliness. The Faith that has been handed down is to be received through the hearing of faith and expounded not through linguistic argument, but 'by a godly and reverent mode of reason' (*eusebei logismo met' eulabeias*).⁷⁸

Athanasius used to insist that the obedience of faith gives rise to a lawful way of thinking and speaking of God in virtue of its being inwardly regulated by the worship of God. In every attempt to understand and give expression to the mysteries of the Faith, what is needed is a reverent restraint and a disposition of mind attuned 'through constant prayer to God, godly knowing, and supplications offered not in some casual way but with the whole consent of the heart'. That would be an approach to God in which faith and godliness mutually condition each other in our knowing of him. 'For faith and godliness are connected and are sisters: he who believes in God is not

74. See Prosper of Aquitaine, *De gratia Dei et libero voluntatis arbitrio*, 8: *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, PL vol. 8, p. 209. *Lex orandi-lex credendi* represents a telescoped form of Prosper of Aquitaine's thought, found in the *Ineffabilis Deus* of Pius IX, and the *Munificentissimus Deus* of Pius XII, AAS, 1947, pp. 540 f.

75. Athanasius, *De decretis*, 1-3; cf. his *Epistola Encyclica*, 1, where Athanasius speaks of 'godliness being persecuted by ungodliness' (*eusebeia apo asebeias dioketai*).

76. Athanasius, *Ad. Episcopos Aegypti*, 13; cf. 4, 9, 12.

77. Athanasius, *De synodis*, 39.

78. Athanasius, *Ad. Serapionem*, 1, 17, 20; 4, 4.

72. Origen, *Con. Celsum*, 3.60; 5.4; 7.46; 8.57,75; *De oratione*, 14-16, 20,31; *In Ioann.* 32.24; *In Matt.* 11.14. See also Origen's *Dialogue with Herakleides*, *Sources chrétiennes*, No. 67, edit. by J. Scherer, 1960, p. 62, 64.

73. Origen, *De Principiis*, Pref. 2, 3, 10; cf. 1.4.4; 4.4.5.

cut off from godliness, and he who has godliness really believes.⁷⁹

The same basic principle, *lex orandi-lex credendi*, played an important role in Hilary's theology. As we have seen, he was rather troubled by the way in which heretics took advantage of the open range of faith to obtrude their own presumptuous ideas into the knowledge of God, and by the need for orthodox theology in rebutting them to make definite pronouncements beyond the statements of Holy Scripture about matters that are essentially inexpressible. In these circumstances we must rely upon the kind of apprehension of God that is implicit in faith expanded by worship, and the kind of worship into which we are initiated by God himself, as through the Son we are given access to the Father.⁸⁰ No matter how much we try to adapt our language to indicate the reality and greatness of God, it falls immeasurably short of what God is in his eternal Being and Nature, but it may nevertheless be controlled and directed from below by the fundamental acts of worship which God calls forth from us through his self-revelation in the Gospel. Thus Hilary operated with a concept of faith structured in evangelical devotion, and with a concept of devotion expanded through faith in the inexhaustible Reality of God. 'We must believe him, apprehend him, worship him, and allow these acts of devotion to be the basic ways in which we speak of God'.⁸¹

By this approach Hilary did not mean that in shrinking in alarm before the transcendent majesty of God, we are to fall back entirely upon the silent veneration of the heart, but rather that we are to think and speak of God only in such a way that we recognise that he infinitely exceeds the resources of human thought and speech. Rather must we allow worship of God through the Son, in whom the unfathomable mystery of the Father is expressed. Govern all that we confess in faith or express in theological formulation.⁸² Theological activity, as Hilary himself pursued it, must constantly be interlaced with prayer that in all our attempts to express what we believe and to confess one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ in accordance with what we have been taught by Prophets and Apostles, God will grant us signification in language, light of the understanding, reverence of statement, and fidelity to the truth.⁸³

We have been probing deeply into the way in which the Nicene Creed is to be traced back to a state of affairs in the Apostolic Foundation of the Church in which saving faith in God the Father, the Son,

and the Holy Spirit, became once for all embodied in it, and also in the way in which that faith began to unfold its theological content in the direction of the Nicene Creed, under the control of the evangelical sub-structure of the Apostolic Tradition at work in the life, mission and worship of the early Catholic Church, evident in its interpretation of Holy Scripture and its expression of Christian teaching. We have found in those centuries a continuing tradition characterised by a deep interlocking of faith and godliness, understanding and worship, under the creative impact of the primary evangelical convictions imprinted upon the mind of the Church in its commitment to God's self-revelation through the incarnate Son and in the Holy Spirit. Those convictions together with a Christ-centred disposition of mind continued to be generated and nourished in the on-going life and fellowship of the Church through regular meditation upon the Holy Scriptures and participation in liturgical worship.

That was the matrix within which there took shape the theological intuition and godly judgment which were at work in the formulation of more formal beliefs within the boundaries marked by the claims of Christ upon the obedience and service of the Church. Thus there emerged a general interpretative framework of life and godliness, and a particular framework of beliefs derived from Holy Baptism in which, as Athanasius expressed it, the whole substance of the Trinitarian Faith was lodged.⁸⁴ Under the normative functioning of that interpretative framework and of the rule of faith, but with continued access to divine Revelation mediated in the Holy Scriptures, the Church's understanding and formulation of the Truth of the Gospel expanded and deepened. Thus there is to be found in the pre-Nicene period of the Catholic Church a progressive penetration into the intelligible structure of the Christian Faith which, while gaining increasing comprehension and precision, took place within the scope of the premises of the Church's ultimate beliefs embodied in the Apostolic Deposit of Faith.

It is significant that when explicit formulations of belief began to appear out of the intergrated body of the Apostolic Faith they frequently included a clause on the Church which eventually came to establish itself in the mature form of the Apostles' or the Nicene Creeds.⁸⁵ That seems to represent the fact that even when formal creeds developed, they remained bound to the implicit structure of the faith embodied in the Apostolic Church and would be seriously defective if they were abstracted from it. Thus the deep interrelation between implicit and expli-

79. Athanasius, *Epistolae*, 2. 9-11.

80. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 5. 18, 20.

81. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 2.6-7, 11.

82. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 2.2, 5-8, 10-11.

83. Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 1. 38.

84. Athanasius, *Con. Arianos*, 4. 21.

85. See the *Der Balyzeh* papyrus, cited by J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 1950, p. 89; or the *Epistola Apostolorum*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

cit belief, informal and formal acts of knowledge was not forgotten but carried over into full-orbed confession of the Catholic Faith. That is what we are surely to discern in the Nicene Creed. At the Council of Nicaea clear and definite theological formalisation of the Faith was recognised as relying on what the Church had always believed and instinctively known to be true, and that it was through this kind of credal formalisation that the whole body of belief implicit in the Apostolic Tradition of the Church was being reinforced and equipped with an institutional form that extended its regulative force in the life of the Church. At the same time, as we have seen, the Nicene Creed as essentially a confession of faith before God was characterised by an open scope focussed indefinitely beyond the range of its formulations, for the Truth that had laid hold of the Church, and which it felt bound to confess in Ecu-

menical Council, reached back into the transcendent mystery of the Holy Trinity. By the same token, in being locked into that Truth, the theological formalisations taken up in the Creed opened the door to deeper and fuller modes of understanding which could only be dimly seen, if at all, at the time. All that, however, reposed upon a 'knowledge of the truth according to godliness' embodied in the Church's tradition and yet transcending it, an instinctive sense of God imprinted upon the mind of the Church by divine Revelation and an insight through all explicit formalisation of faith into the inner intelligible relations of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is more to be adored than expressed. Trinitarian worship and Trinitarian faith thus provided the implicit controlling base both for a faithful restructuring of the life of the Church and for a godly renewing of its understanding in the mind of Christ.