religions

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The Importance of the Nicean Creed for Christian Identity: A Theological–Pastoral Reading from the Philosophy of Austin and Lakatos

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Abstract: The act of believing implies an inner assent, but it is neither limited to a blind acceptance of certain arguments nor to an empty repetition, without practical consequences, of a set of concepts that one claims to defend. This article, allied with the philosophy of language (Austin) and the philosophy of science (Lakatos) will aim, on the one hand, to present a philosophical–theological reading of believing and, on the other hand, an understanding of the implications of the assent of faith regarding the Nicean Creed for Christian identity. The research briefly presented here will refer to the firm core of Christianity, as well as the arguments that aid its defence and understanding vis-à-vis believers and non-believers.

Keywords: Nicea; creed; Imre Lakatos; philosophy of science; hard core; protective belt; John L. Austin; philosophy of language

Citation: Vilas Boas, Susana. 2024. The Importance of the Nicean Creed for Christian Identity: A Theological–Pastoral Reading from the Philosophy of Austin and Lakatos. *Religions* 15: 447. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040447

Academic Editors: Alex Villas Boas, João Duque and Isidro Lamelas

Received: 28 February 2024
Revised: 27 March 2024
Accepted: 30 March 2024
Published: 1 April 2024

1. Introduction

Talking about the Council of Nicaea today can lead us into a sea of questions about history and about how Christianity became the faith of the Empire. From this perspective, we would face inevitable problems about Constantine's conversion and whether it can be considered a conversion or simply a political strategy. Alongside this, there is also a tangle of misunderstandings and ambiguities that have given rise to more or less violent forms of proselytising discourse and action. While it is true that to think of Nicaea in the fourth century is to open the door to discussing details that have become the subject of discussion and attack, especially with regard to the motivation, interest and acceptance of the Christian religion by the imperial system, it is also true that thinking about the Council of 325 cannot be reduced to these questions. In fact, it is urgent to understand the Council in terms of its specific message, not as an isolated milestone in history, the fruit of the Emperor's individual will, but as an event that followed multiple theological discussions and controversies about the norms that should govern the behaviour of the laity and clergy.

It should be noted that the Council of Nicaea followed the Edict of Milan (313), which already established tolerance towards the Christian faith. This edict meant that Christians were no longer persecuted for their faith, but could worship freely, like all other citizens of the Roman Empire. This law allowed the faith to spread and, combined with the freedom that now existed, the faith became the subject of interpretation and dispute even among those who professed the Christian faith. The Council was called by Constantine precisely to try to put an end to the internal divisions among Christians, seeking to establish a certain hierarchical order within the spheres of the Church and, at the same time, to recover the essence of the Christian faith (cf. Cacanoska and Maja 2014). While it is true that Constantine was also concerned with the effective relationship between Church and State and with the place that the Church and its clergy would occupy in social terms, especially with regard to tax exemptions and practical legal prescriptions, he also sought to create stability for an Empire which, in addition to suffering from a certain political instability,

was still suffering from the aftermath of periods of real massacres and persecutions against Christians (cf. Della Torre 2011, p. 61).

Despite the countless controversies and perspectives on the politicoreligious and social context surrounding the Council, for the purpose of this article it is important to understand, above all, some aspects that seem very similar to what we are experiencing today. As in the third century, Christians are not—objectively and numerically speaking—a minority group, and expressions of the Christian faith can be found in most countries and, above all, in most regions of the Western world. In some ways, as in Constantine's time, Christians have assumed positions of power, and, although there are places where persecution of the Christian faith is felt violently, the West enjoys a degree of tolerance, if not objective then camouflaged by society. The motivations that led to the convening of the Council also seem topical, given the plurality of religions and, in particular, given the great diversity of Churches of Christian confession.

In this sense, this article will try to find connections between the reality of the fourth century and the reality of today. In a certain way, the proposed reading of Nicaea, rather than analysing each of the canons established therein, will be a pastoral and social call to learning: a historical apprenticeship, but one that must be understood, above all, as a theological, doctrinal and religious teaching. Starting from the lived experience of the Christians of the first centuries, it will draw on both the contents of the professed faith and areas of knowledge, particularly philosophy, which will elucidate it and make it intelligible for our time. This is not a philosophical–theological treaty on the Council of Nicaea, but a proposal to recover the meaning and the consequent theological–pastoral and ecumenical possibilities presented by the experiences lived before, during and after the Council convened by Constantine.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary to go beyond historical disputes and recover the meaning of basic concepts that have lost importance over time in the socioreligious sphere. To do so, I will start with a philosophical–theological analysis of the notion of believing and the concrete and objective implications that underlie the act of believing. Thus, this reflection aims to bring together the very meaning of the concept and the way in which the creed appears as inescapable for a Christian to be considered as such. To this end, we will turn not only to Sacred Scripture and theological and magisterial writings, but also to the philosophies of Austin and Lakatos in search for a philosophical foundation capable of generating theology around the Nicene Creed. Through an understanding of belief based on the philosophy of language and the philosophy of science, a reflection on the place and centrality of Nicaea for Christian identity will be proposed.

To follow this path towards a more objective understanding of the truths of faith expressed in the Christian Creed and their implications for the life of believers, we will start from the very concept of believing. Here, using philosophy, we will understand the dynamism implicit in the act of believing and, consequently, from a theological reading of these arguments, we will recover the reasons that led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed (325) and its relevance for believers and non-believers of the time. Once this reading of the faith professed by Christianity has been carried out, reflection on a theological and pastoral understanding of believing in the face of today's reality will be opened up.

The conclusions will echo the philosophical–theological arguments presented on the act of believing and its concrete implications for contemporary Christianity. Furthermore, with a view to a contemporary understanding of what was advocated at the Council of Nicea, avenues will be opened for further development of the topic at the level of theological praxis, in particular, in the field of missionary and ecumenical pastoral care.

2. The Sense of Believing

One of the fundamental points that come to mind when thinking of Nicea is the creed, the systematisation of faith, what was established as necessary for someone to be defined as a Christian. While this was a very objective question in the context of the council, it certainly requires deeper reflection today, starting from the very meaning of believing. Belief has

been characterised by a dichotomy: sometimes as something to be devalued, given its subjective and/or imaginary character, and sometimes as the principle of all knowledge, religious or otherwise. It is important to note that, in a very progressive principle, Nicea rejects the radical separation between believers and non-believers. There is a full awareness "that we are all on board, each conditioned by his or her belief. It is not that the religious is a believer and the irreligious is a non-believer, but that they believe in different things" (Corominas 2023, p. 27).

Far from abstractionism, what we have to remember is that belief, rather than being the result of something (life experiences and/or scientific research), is the starting point of something. In a way, belief is not the result of an elaborate process of seeking knowledge; rather, it is the reason for living and thinking in a certain way. Adherence to certain ideas predisposes us to a specific way of life and a specific way of developing and progressing in (scientific or religious) knowledge (cf. Corominas 2023, p. 28). The inherent depth of the act of believing derives from its intimate relationship with life. This is expressed from the very etymological root of the concept, since "*to believe* derives from the Latin *credere*—composed of a double Indo-European root, *kerd*, from which come heart, cordiality, courage -, and *dheh* (to put, to give, to surrender, to leave). *Believe* alludes fundamentally to that for which we give our heart, that is, to the centre or ultimate core of our being".[1]

From this point of view, the act of believing presupposes some fundamental premises that must be taken into account in order to better understand the impact of the Nicene Creed for its time and for our own day. The first premise is that the act of believing is not a point of arrival and therefore cannot be confused with the end of a rational or empirical process. On the contrary, although rooted in lived experience and logical–rational knowledge, belief points to action, to the direct consequences inherent in the act of believing. This internal dynamism inherent in the act of believing leads to a second premise. This is the realisation that belief is not reduced to a response or analysis of the past, but a way of understanding the present and looking to the future. This does not mean an understanding of belief detached from the past. Rather, it points to the dynamic nature of the act of believing. A dynamism that is intrinsic to it and that, for that very reason, allows for the evolution of belief and the consequent reconfiguration of the arguments that support it.

In a way, the third premise to be taken into account as a presupposition of the act of believing is a point of union or articulation between these two premises. The philosopher John Austin offers us a systematic way of understanding this by speaking of the profession of faith—saying "I believe"—as something more than a concept. For Austin, saying "I believe" is not a verbal act, but an action; for it is *not something I say*, but *something I do* (cf. Austin 1961, pp. 221–22). In this case, to affirm that one believes implies, in itself, the action of believing, the concrete act proper/inherent to believing. If this were not so, we would only be dealing with the utterance of words, the affirmation of something completely extrinsic to the essence of the self. To do so would be to misrepresent the concept itself, since its etymology would not express the *word in act* (the word as action), but only the *act of speaking* (the word as a verbalisation of concepts).

To better understand Austin's proposal, which in my view is the third premise for *Believing*, it will be important to think about and distinguish the profession of faith—"I believe"—from the affirmation of believing—expressed, for example, in the statement "you believe" or "he believes". In the first case, saying "I believe" is already "believing"/the "act of believing". In the second case, it is the simple (conceptual and non-action) assertion that another believes (that another performs the action of believing) (cf. Austin 1961, p. 226). This philosophical reflection helps us to enter into the problem of believing and to think of the *creed* beyond a formulation capable of expressing the Christian faith. Consequently, Nicaea can affirm itself as more than a doctrinal systematisation and lead to a renewed perspective, both on how the Church of the first centuries thought and lived belief and on how today we can discern and shape a way of life, starting from the act of believing in the light of the signs of the times.

Believing does not derive from an illusory desire that exists to fill gaps in knowledge and that may be dispensable once we know something that was previously incomprehensible. On the contrary, as the creed of faith shows us, believing "is not temporary, but constant, quite variable or flexible, and also a fragile and problematic process, requiring care, attention and even a certain ethic" (Oviedo Torró 2023). It is in this dynamism inherent in the act of believing, where culture, knowledge and ethical–religious values come together, that the identity of the believer is forged, making it possible for believing to be an action and for the believer to understand and live his faith as an identity, not as an external and dispensable value. In this sense, the act of believing is first and foremost an act of being and therefore, has a concrete expression both on the level of personal life and in the forms of community life.

Once the act of believing is understood, it is important to reflect on the "what" or "who" is the object of belief. By separating and distinguishing the essential from the "accessory" in the act of believing, one will better understand what can and cannot be changed and what is or is not required for a believer to remain attached to a certain group of believers, even if he or she lives or understands differently the arguments that support his or her belief. It should be noted that belief in essence, as a rule, inherently carries with it a belief in the arguments surrounding it. However, in order to bring more clarity to the reflection, and specifically to the Nicene Creed, I think it may be pertinent to think about the act of believing using the pillars of the methodology of scientific research programmes proposed by Irme Lakatos.

For Lakatos, all scientific research is based on pillars that underpin the entire research programme. This is a structured set of theories and methodological rules that guide the research and are developed throughout the study. At the centre of this structure is the hard core of the hypotheses or theories. It is a universal statement, or a set of universal statements, which cannot be renounced. To do so would be to abandon scientific research and any link to the hypothesis/theory it is intended to prove and defend. For example, when Newton presented the laws of motion and the principle of gravitation, both ways of protecting the theory from attack and ways of developing this "hard core" without compromising its essence were simultaneously developed (cf. Lakatos 1989, pp. 47–89).

Thus, while Lakatos speaks of the hard core of an investigation as the set of fundamental theses, the negation of which implies an automatic departure from the thesis, he also defends the creation and subsequent existence of a negative heuristic and a positive heuristic. Negative heuristics imply anything that explicitly or implicitly forbids questioning the hard core. Positive heuristics involve making explicit, extending and concretising the truths contained in the hard core. These forms of heuristics are combined with what the philosopher calls the "protective belt", i.e., the set of hypotheses and theories created to protect the hard core from external attacks on the research. These are auxiliary hypotheses that make it possible not only to safeguard the truths of the hard core, but also to arrive at a more fundamental understanding of its essence.

If we apply the pillars of the methodology of Lakatos' scientific research programmes to the truths of faith proper to Christian belief, we will be in a better position to understand and clarify what Nicaea contributed anew to the development and enlargement of the hard core of professed faith. At the same time, Lakatos' proposal will also enable us to reach into the Nicene protective belt, safeguarding and discerning what may or may not be the essence of the faith, that is what appears in the creed as an inescapable identity for every Christian and the supporting arguments that may be susceptible to change and/or pastoral development.

3. The Nicene Creed

The Council of Nicaea is an inescapable historical and religious landmark, both for understanding the fundamental truths of Christianity and for realising how society, culture and politics can influence the way we profess our faith. If the Roman Empire had been determining ways of living the faith, often marked by martyrdom and torture, with

Constantine, we see another point of reflection. It was no longer just a matter of trying to live the faith professed to the end; it was a matter of finding a theological–doctrinal formulation that would be the criterion for adherence to Christianity. It could almost be said that, rather than the need to find a universal formula to express Christian belief, it was necessary to respond to the currents outside the faith, namely the arguments linked to the Arian controversy[2] and to make Constantine the hero of the faith, without whom it would not have expanded as it did (cf. Corbin 2009, p. 50).

It is true that it was Constantine who convened the Council, but he did so abruptly and unilaterally. It was because of the close relationship between the Emperor and the bishops that the latter wanted Constantine "to interfere in some way in their internal affairs and if, at first, they tried to resolve the conflicts between them consensually, the resistance they encountered soon led them to take severe measures against the dissidents: Donatists and, later, Arians" (Corbin 2009, p. 59). The Nicene Creed arose primarily as a response to heretical attacks. However, there were practical disputes, especially concerning the fixing of dates for the celebration of Easter, the punishments for those who did not respect the rules of worship and the determination of the rules governing the action and articulation of functions among the members of the episcopate. In this sense, in addition to the desire for a formulation that synthesised the faith, it was hoped that the meeting called by the Emperor would put an end to the quarrels between the bishops and inaugurate an era of concord within the Church (cf. Rubenstein 1999, p. 98).

It is necessary to weigh these two aspects in order to better understand that the desire for unity in the Church arises and develops alongside the foundation of the core of the creed. Thus, an approach to the creed proclaimed at Nicaea involves first of all taking into account the most fundamental principles underlying it and then understanding the formulation of the faith from the specific context surrounding the Council of 325. Here there are countless examples of clear narratives and expressions of faith. Take the examples of the Gospels, which sometimes begin with messianic narratives (Mk 1:1; Lk 1:35) and sometimes integrate narratives that echo and express the words of Peter when he pronounces his first creed: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). All Christian faith seems to derive from this formula, however it is presented, whether through professions of faith like Peter's, or through concrete actions that manifest the "act of Believing" as "Believing in act" (see, for example, Mary's yes to the Angel's announcement, Joseph's yes, the yes of each of the apostles at the most diverse moments of Jesus' life, the yes of the women who followed Him, etc.).

However, I believe that it is in the book of the Acts of the Apostles that we find the clearest expressions of faith that say the most about Christianity in the first centuries and, consequently, about Christianity today. I say this because these professions of faith appear in the mouths of non-believers and non-Jews, giving a unique meaning and timeliness to the formulas with which Christianity, in Nicea and in contemporary times, is confronted when it thinks of the creed as a consensual and lived expression of faith. In some ways, like the Gospels, the Book of Acts is full of simple expressions of faith, linked to baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit. They are no longer the fruit of living directly with the person of Jesus Christ, but of a relational experience that goes beyond the biological and empirical dimension.

Examples of profession of faith are also abundant in the Book of Acts, and, in my opinion, in a way, it could be said that these simple formulations of profession of faith could constitute its hard core, as they appear as "necessary and sufficient" for the action of the Holy Spirit and the acknowledged incorporation into the believing community. Despite the innumerable situations in which they are narrated, perhaps the one that raises the most questions, both for the Nicene context and for today, is the example of Philip's dialogue with the Ethiopian eunuch. After Philip has explained and announced the Good News of Jesus Christ, Philip responds to the Ethiopian eunuch's desire to be baptised—to enter the believing community—by appealing to his faith in what had been announced to him.

The eunuch responds by formulating the essential and indispensable creed for baptism: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37).

This is one of the most striking and simple examples that make the expression and profession of faith inescapable, and it is curious that the clarity of the Christian faith appears in Scripture formulated through the mouth of a non-believer, a pagan who, not being a Jew, seeks understanding and the foundations of the Christian faith. At the same time, it is equally significant that this figure picks up on another problematic issue addressed by the Council of Nicea: the questioning of castration and the place of eunuchs, which was precisely the first of the Council's Canons. The profession of faith "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37) thus reveals the breadth of Christianity, underlining both the openness to universality, allowing pagans to enter into this dynamism of faith and salvation and the possibility of integrating and/or linking to this hard core of faith, a clear response to the heretical currents defended in the paganism of the time.

Belief in Jesus as the Christ, *the* Son of God, seems to be the deepest core of the Christian faith. That is why it seems so obvious that one cannot be a Christian without Christ and without assuming his divine status as the Son of God. However, the Nicene Creed seems to go further in its formulation, given the context of its time. From the outset, there is a concern to make explicit what it means to be the Christ and to be *the* Son of God. Firstly, through a historically rooted formulation, which links the person of Jesus with the accounts of His Passion and death described in the Gospels. It also states categorically and clearly that this man, being in fact God, could only rise from the dead to the extent that He is also truly God (divine Sonship). Secondly, by explaining and incorporating into the hard core the essential and intrinsic presence and relationship of the person of Jesus Christ in the Trinity.

Taking up the guiding principle of the first letter of Peter (1 Pet 1:2), the Nicene Creed formulates the Trinitarian mystery. By this formulation it seeks, on the one hand, to realise that the Person of Jesus Christ cannot be understood, and therefore believed, apart from the intrinsic union of the Persons of the Trinity, and, on the other hand, to answer the questions and currents that sometimes saw Christianity as polytheism and sometimes saw Jesus Christ as someone extraordinary, but who was only a human being. From these two principles, we can understand the development that took place at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, where the expression "hypostatic union" gained strength and meaning, becoming one of the most solid foundations of the protective belt of the Christian Creed (cf. International Theological Commission 1979, §221).

It is a hard core that has been present in the most varied expressions of faith and has taken shape in various documents of the Magisterium. It is not by chance that, for example, in the Year of Faith, the Apostolic Letter begins precisely by referring to what is inescapable in the Christian faith, and it is unthinkable to think of it outside this hard core. Here it is clearly stated that "to profess faith in the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is to believe in one God who is Love: the Father, who in the fullness of time sent his Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, who in the mystery of his death and resurrection redeemed the world; the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church through the centuries in the expectation of the Lord's glorious return" (Benedict XVI 2011).

One might think that a simple formulation of faith is sufficient and that, in a sense, everything else in the Nicene Creed is incidental and of no real relevance. However, to think in this way is to distort the deeper meaning of the council and to reduce the formulation of the faith to arguments which, without being rooted in reality and theological understanding, can be hollow and meaningless for the life of the believer. This was precisely the novelty of Nicaea, from which we must learn if we are to have greater coherence of faith today. The hard core of Christian belief cannot do without a growing understanding of it and, consequently, a reflection on its protective arguments, for "we cannot live without beliefs, and that axiom also includes ultimate and transcendent beliefs, with which we motivate our decisions and project meaning into our lives" (Oviedo Torró 2023, p. 269).

The Nicean reflection on the essence of the faith was therefore not reduced to a better understanding and enlargement of the hard core, i.e., to affirming more explicitly and concretely the meaning of "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). Along with the enlargement of the hard core, many arguments were added, seeking more to respond to the heresies and doctrinal deviations of the time than to increase the core of the Christian faith. In my opinion, Nicaea was the starting point both for enlarging the core of the creed and for creating a protective belt for it, based both on historical principles (Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the prophecies foretold, as the one who was crucified by Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried) and on principles of faith based on the biblical accounts and on the message of Jesus Christ described in the Gospels (he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, he rose from the dead; he will return in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end) (cf. John Paul II 1994).

At the same time, a positive heuristic is introduced linking faith in the hard core to faith in a holy, Catholic and apostolic Church. In a sense, Nicea adds something that helps to protect and maintain the hard core within its own argumentation and understanding, although it may fall into a certain fallacy of generalisation. To some extent, Nicea is faithful to the Scriptures and to the faith professed there as a consequence of the descent of the Holy Spirit or as a starting point for his coming. However, it seems to leave out other biblical narratives, such as the story of Cornelius, in which the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God are at work even outside the sphere of the community of apostles and before the reception of baptism (cf. Acts 10).

The history of the Church up to the present day shows how merging the arguments of faith in the Church with the hard core of the Christian faith can lead to ambiguities and deviations which, instead of protecting the essence of believing, alienate it and lead to its denial. By this I do not mean to argue that "belief in a holy, catholic and apostolic Church" is secondary or ancillary to the Christian faith. Rather, I want to safeguard that this is a truth of faith that is not part of the hard core of Christianity, for if it were, we would be opening the door to arguing that God and salvation are limited to ecclesial mediation. While it is true that the Church is mediator par excellence, it cannot arrogate to itself an exclusive place for God's action, nor can faith in the Church be equated with or be as fundamental as faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It will be important to understand these nuances of the Nicene Creed in order to distinguish and not confuse what is essence from what is a response to a particular historical moment. Moreover, to understand the faith from its foundations and not so much from the arguments of its protective belt is to allow a rational understanding, which improves adherence to the faith, even for non-believers. It is a path that is no longer travelled as a hostage of the protective belt, but from the hard core. This is also the starting point for understanding the arguments of the shelterbelt and not the other way around (as the Nicene formulation might have intended).

This understanding leads to a better understanding of the so-called "Apostles' Creed". This, dated around 215, contains the most developed sense of Jesus Christ as a Trinitarian Person and the consequent clearest sense of believing in Jesus as Christ and Son of God. Here, rather than the desire to respond to heresies or doctrinal interpretations, is the desire to be clear about what one believes. Perhaps because of this, there is little or no "protective belt", which means that to this day, in general, the various Christian Churches do not feel constrained or blocked by this formulation of faith. Nicaea was a breakthrough in a particular context and still makes sense today for a considerable part of Christianity (especially Catholicism), but in my opinion it is in the "Apostles' Creed" that faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, acquires the greatest nuclear force. This is the basis for an ecumenical dialogue capable of generating new possibilities of doctrinal and theological understanding and, consequently, of discovering belts of protection across the plurality of Christian identity (cf. Wolff 2023).

4. What Creed for Christianity Today?

Austin and Lakatos, drawing on philosophy, help us to better understand the truths of faith and the very act of Christian belief. However, the professed faith goes far beyond this objective understanding, and, consequently, the Nicene Creed can also be understood beyond its biblical roots and its sociopolitical and religious context. For this very reason, it is possible to develop an ecumenical argumentation of faith and to experience a faith that is not only spoken, but lived from the essential unity between the objectivity of revelation and the subjectivity of believing. In a single act of profession of faith we have, "on the one hand, the believer's own attitude [. . .], in trusting God who reveals himself and admitting the content of revelation as true (*fides qua creditur*); on the other hand, the very content of faith which is accepted by the believer [. . .], in a single act (*fides quæ creditur*)" (Sueiro 2022).

This dynamism makes it possible to converge both the revealed truth present in the hard core of the faith and the arguments that each Christian expression or confession assumes as fundamental to the protective belt of that core. From this perspective, the essence of the faith is safeguarded, without being confined or circumscribed by circumstances and historical–temporal events. In other words, it is possible to reflect on the Apostles' Creed today, taking into account new heresies and new ways of believing, without in any way defrauding or denying what was defended at Nicea. On the contrary, it is by following the example of Nicea that we can find theological and pastoral ways of saying and living the faith today. As at Nicea, we must recover the deepest meaning and truth of Christianity—belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God—seeking, in the light of our times, to answer the questions by strengthening the protective belt.

It must be borne in mind that, since Nicaea, there have been many formulations and reformulations of the Christian Creed, taking into account those who participated in the various councils and the various Christian Churches which, in a way, constructed different protective belts according to the way they received and perceived revelation and the very core of the faith. It is therefore understandable that no single formulation has "replaced" the previous one. Rather, it has "updated" the protective belt arguments. This way of believing has often been viewed with suspicion and even as a certain trivialisation of faith. However, the hard core remains unchanged, creating possibilities for ecumenical, pastoral, theological and even extra-religious dialogue.

In this sense, neither the different approaches to the hard core of faith appear as possible attacks (they are protection belts specific to a given time and historical context), nor are culture and society assumed, *prima facie*, to be enemies of belief. On the contrary, all this can be read and contribute to more solid arguments that, in addition to protecting the essential truths of faith, improve its understanding. For example, today we seem to be witnessing a widespread trivialisation of belief, linked to the way culture has become individualistic and increasingly subjective. However, this can be a unique pastoral and theological opportunity to realise that "such a context has helped to rediscover the importance of belief as a personal act, with the conviction that the personal experience of the religious becomes a criterion of authenticity, showing that faith is a biographical and salvific affair rather than a theoretical and metaphysical one" (Sueiro 2022, p. 533).

With this contribution of today's culture, especially in the Western context, it seems more possible and pertinent to rethink certain pastoral dynamics and sacramental formulations. It is not a question of postulating a new formula for the creed, for if this were the case, it would have to be thought out and implemented in its own ecclesial and ecumenical context. It is rather a matter of thinking, on the liturgical level, of ways of updating the protective belt of faith, safeguarding and focusing attention on the core while enhancing the distinction between it and the arguments that are ancillary to it. In a way, distinguishing between the essence of faith, the truths we perceive as derived from it, and its mediations will allow it to be lived more clearly and authentically (cf. Fisichella 2012, p. 86).

I am thinking, for example, of the credal formulae that take the form of a question-answer in the context of the sacrament of baptism (often used in the context of other sacraments as well). In these questions, there is, in a way, a negative heuristic ("Do you

renounce…?") and a positive heuristic ("Do you believe in…?") that goes step-by-step towards the different affirmations of faith present in the Nicene Creed. However, even today, everything seems to remain at the same level, with no distinction between the core and the protective belt. Moreover, the basic principle that led to the Nicene formulation has been circumvented: it no longer takes into account the current reality, but remains in the realm of heresies and doctrinal interpretations that characterised the first centuries of Christianity. Today, however, theological and doctrinal developments and the way of conceiving "Jesus as Christ and Son of God" feed new approaches, new heresies and, consequently, new needs for a response and formulation of the truths of faith.

It is not a question of abandoning the Nicene Creed or of forgetting the road travelled so far. It is rather a question of keeping the faith alive, in its dynamism and its continuing relevance for human beings, both as individuals and as members of a believing community. Nicaea is an inescapable milestone in the history of Christianity, not because it responded to and solved all the problems of the time in terms of formulating and living the faith, but because it was a mirror and a reference for how to formulate belief. In it, the hard core of the faith was maintained, taking into account the Scriptures and the different formulations that, in a way, expanded this core (see the example of the "Apostles' Creed", mentioned above). However, Nicaea did not remain stagnant. On the contrary, it updated its protective belt in the light of today's reality.

5. Concerns and Provocations of Nicaea for Our Time

The pastoral call of today is similar to that of the first centuries. The hard core of the faith seems clear, but there is an urgent need to revise and update the protective girdle that envelops it and to rethink and reformulate the arguments of the protective girdle presented in the Nicene faith formula in a way that is audible to our time. Not to do so could lead to a sense of "archaic faith", in which the protective girdle no longer protects and is already interpreted as the core and, being outdated, corrupts the possibility of getting to the very essence of faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God. In a certain sense, this is a point of convergence between the various Christian Churches, and, in this sense, it becomes a propitious moment to return to the origins and, with the teachings of Nicaea, open the doors to a new understanding and living of the Christian faith.

The Council of Nicea is considered the first great ecumenical council. After it, ecumenism seems to have been diluted from the scope of conciliar reflection. This is a lesson to be learned and to rethink ecumenical dialogue at this level in a new way. As Pope Francis warned in 2014 in his address to Karekin II, ecumenism cannot be just about words. It is also about suffering, martyrdom and blood. If this is so, "it means that the ecumenical path is travelled in different ways, but the goal is the same: communion in faith and misión" (Wolff 2023, p. 510), and this seems to be a unique opportunity for a profession of Christian faith, a creed capable of uniting beyond the particularities and specificities of the interpretations and ways of life of each of the Christian Churches/confessions.

Recovering an ecumenical sense of the Christian Creed would open up new paths and, as in Constantine's time, would allow us to tell the world the reasons for the faith, shaping and transfiguring—now without violence—the reality in which we live. In fact, it would not only be a matter of joint reflection or a common understanding of the formulation of faith; above all, it would be about a unity in which all those who call themselves Christians meet, since what would be at stake would not be "words", but what a Christian is obliged to believe in order to be able to affirm that he or she is a Christian. On the basis of this understanding, it would be possible to go further, making ecumenical connections and dialogues authentic Christian relationships, with all the propriety of the term "Christian". A return to a common creed would open the way to greater unity in diversity, as a visible sign of the faith professed.

As I have already mentioned, the Council of Nicaea was not intended solely to stipulate a formula for Christian belief, nor simply to regulate the mission of the laity and clergy within the ecclesiastical structures. It was "negotiated" by the bishops and the Emperor

with a view to regulating the members of the episcopate. To some extent, the regulations for the laity and clergy have helped in this task, but it seems inevitable to think that the creed, which is the result of conciliar reflection and shapes the creed professed by Christians today, has an advantage over the other regulations. What makes us think directly of this Council—the creed—is both the point of departure and the point of arrival for unity among the episcopate and among Christians. Something that seems to challenge us today and to provoke new forms of rapprochement within the ecumenical and Christian movement: starting from the hard core of faith seems to be the way to a working ecclesial peace, to a tolerance that is not indifference and to a joint action that derives from the profession of faith and not from convictions about ecclesial structures or ways of thinking about doctrine and theology.

Within Christianity, the learning of the Nicene lessons, left as a common heritage, would also be a path and an opportunity to rethink the protective belts, which in this case could be different or thought of differently, of the various Christian Churches, turning them also into means of dialogue, but without circumscribing the hard core of faith to the protective belts of each one. The creed would become operative and life-shaping, appearing as a way of peace within and outside the Christian religious spheres. It would be an example to the world: the human capacity to see beyond particular perspectives, to value and prioritise what is essential, leaving free the specifics of one's identity. If the great institutions, such as the Christian Churches, were an example of peace and unity in spite of differences, this would be a living image of the action of believing (Tertullian 1908, Apology 19).

Moreover, on a practical level, Christian Belief could also give rise to different forms of religious expression, namely through the updating of liturgical rites and theological reflection. Similar to what happened during the reign of Constantine, a rethinking of the rites and the way of living the faith liturgically and sacramentally is necessary today. As in the first centuries of Christianity, it seems fundamental and decisive that faith should be operative, that it should lead to a path in which the faith professed and lived today finds expression in personal and communal reality. If the voice and action of the Emperor were crucial for the convocation of the Council of 325, it is also necessary today to read the signs of the times and find the way to summon and unite different perspectives towards the same hard core of Christian faith.

6. Conclusions

The proposed philosophical–theological reading of the Nicene Creed that I present here could run the risk of being misinterpreted, so it is important to underline that nothing should be forbidden in its formulation. What is at issue is how it can—and, in my opinion, must—be updated and revised in the light of what is essential to the Christian faith. Heresies are not perceived in the same way today. However, responding to them is essential for a greater clarity of the faith we profess. It is not just a matter of looking for new heresies, but of realising that those which were in force in the first centuries have been updated and, in their generality and essence, are still valid today. It is therefore necessary to follow a path similar to that which culminated in the Council of Nicea, responding in an updated way to today's reality, with the advantage of a path that has also been travelled along that line.

Something else must also be taken into account. Indeed, today there seem to be different questions and different ways of understanding the principle of believing that emerges from Nicaea. Those who profess the faith, living and praying the same creed, often have different understandings of the different arguments to which they give their assent of faith, and even of the meaning of believing. This seems to be a reality that troubles and provokes ecclesial and social life today. In my opinion, it seems clear that, even more than in the early days of Christianity, there is an urgent need to recover the meaning of believing, both for Christians and non-Christians, both in terms of the understanding of faith in the hard core of Christianity and in terms of the reasons and arguments for believing. It

has to be kept in mind that while at the beginning of Christianity the faith professed was the faith—visibly—lived, today, this is not so evident. Non-believers and non-Christian believers can no longer see what distinguishes Christian life and faith from other ways of living or believing. Professed faith no longer seems to shape the way believers think or act from within.

In this sense, the urgency of updating Nicaea for a more authentic Christianity today seems clear. For Christians, this could be the starting point for a purifying re-encounter with the fundamentals of faith. From here, we can follow the theological, ecclesial and pastoral path of moving from a faith *that is said* to a faith that is authentically *professed/lived*. The act of believing in the person of Jesus Christ—true God and true man—will lead to a rediscovery of the face of God and the essence of human nature. In this way, it is possible to think of "God" beyond a certain theorisation, as if it were an empty concept and outside any discussion of the proof of his existence.

More than that, it will be the opportunity to think of God beyond a conceptual dimension: the God revealed in Jesus Christ is not just "a God" *to be spoken of*, but *to be spoken to*. This is the nature of believing. An interconnectedness in which to speak of what is believed—to speak of the One in whom the believer's faith rests—reveals also the essence and nature of the believer. Nicea reveals this dynamism and offers new horizons for the human being to understand himself in the fullness of his humanity. The "true man" presents itself as a provocative and disturbing point of reference for those who profess the Christian faith and for those who seek a greater meaning to human existence.

If it is true that testimonies of martyrdom for the faith are no longer news in today's society, it is no less true that a life lived on the basis of the values that emerge from the faith professed reflects that man called Jesus who lives his humanity on the basis of an intimate relationship of love with God and with the world. A man who, being truly God, reveals by his word and action both the excellence of human nature and the way in which human beings can be reconfigured and transfigured, making their lives a permanent profession of faith, making visible the image and likeness of God that constitutes them (Gen 1:27).

It is important to remember how much the religious reality has changed since Nicaea. The persecuted religion has progressively become the persecuting and dominant religion. If faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, implied a believing maturity and a responsible and communally recognised adherence, after Nicaea it became "presupposed" and, consequently, trivialised. After Nicaea, there was a gradual distancing between professed faith and lived faith: it was no longer necessary to struggle, to know and to recognise the hard core of the truth of the faith in order to be baptised and to be part of the believing community. On the contrary, one begins to be "born a Christian", to live according to a path of faith, or of traditionalism, of family and society, instead of following a path of discovery and assent to life. Questioning Jesus Christ is no longer the concern that opens the door to faith and the subsequent proclamation of the creed. There is an inversion: first one receives baptism and *says* the creed. Then there seems to be a restlessness that either leads to a distancing (feeling that faith is imposed and not a free assent) or leads to true faith, where the creed *is professed* (cf. Bidar 2013).

It is true that, given the cultural and religious plurality present in the contemporary world, unlike Nicea, it is not possible today to create a creed that responds to all the heresies of our time, to all theological interpretations or even to all the desires of Christian believers. But, as we have seen, this will not be the aim of the creed either. The roots and core of the faith remain unshakable (this is the great challenge of Christianity today!), it is the "protective belt" that must be strengthened and adjusted to the demands and needs of our time. As the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea approaches, a new council is urgently needed, not to create a new creed, but to reflect on how to do it and to make it come alive. From this "revisiting" of the hard core, the doctrinal, sacramental and ecclesial development and updating that needs to take place will become clearer.

By making clear what the "hard core" of belief and what the "protective belt" are, as at Nicaea, it will be possible to take steps towards action, shaped by professed faith,

for today's world; it will be easier to abandon doctrines more concerned with salvific theories or structures than with the truth inherent in the core of Christian faith. And it will undoubtedly be the best way to do justice to the spirit of Nicea, both at the level of Christian identity (because of its ecumenical dimension and its proximity to the Christ event), and at the level of the very path of hope, unity and ecclesiology that today, as in Nicea, must be opened and travelled.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] (Corominas 2023, p. 44). On the etymology of believing, cf. also Ress et al. (2021).

[2] Briefly, Arianism, named after its leader Arius, preached the hierarchy of the persons of the Holy Trinity, and, according to this view, Jesus Christ was inferior to the Father. This controversy led to a general schism among Christians and, in particular, to the opening of disputes with Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. On the Arian controversy, (cf. Papandrea 2012; Noll 2012).

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