

THE START OF THE REVOLUTION



Former Archbishop of Canterbury **ROWAN WILLIAMS** explains why the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea of 325 should matter to Classicists as well as Christians

Time was when real classicists looked with some suspicion and disdain at patrologists – scholars working on the early Christian Church; the latter, it was assumed, would be interested in theological disputes which were, at best, marginal and amateurish from the point of view of serious intellectual history. Patrologists, it was further supposed, would be no more than semiliterate in the social and economic context of late antiquity.

Relations have eased a bit; there has been more recognition on both sides of the interest and value of the

perspectives of the other. The Council of Nicaea in 325, whose anniversary has been marked this year by a string of substantial international conferences, should, then, be of interest to anyone studying the ins and outs of Roman imperial history and Greek intellectual debate. While it certainly marked a watershed for the Christian churches, it also signalled the beginnings of a revolution in the politics of the Mediterranean territories and the culture of the empire.

By 400, a new imperial capital had been created. And although succession in imperial office was not

much more stable than in the past, and imperial authority was often divided variously between east and west, the office had been sacralized in a new way. Emperors were both more important than their pagan predecessors had been – as tangible representatives on earth of the single and supreme God – and less important, as their decisions could be challenged by a quite new class of religious elites – bishops and ascetic leaders – who were at least equally confident of their divine authorization.

Christian faith was the legal norm for citizens and office-holders, and

dissidents were subject to civic penalties and restrictions. Bishops were frequently stepping into the social vacuum created as traditional local aristocracies withdrew from civic life. Those local aristocracies frequently reinvented themselves through patronage of and leadership in the Church.

Nicaea was one of the earliest public manifestations of a changing climate. For reasons that are still not completely clear, the western-based leader, Constantine, had come to see the Christian churches as a resource for unifying the entire empire, and so as a tacit ally in his own ambition for sole imperial rule. He had ended the legal harassment of Christians and made some helpful contacts with senior leaders in the churches. And so when, in 324, he finally became the supreme ruler of the empire, east and west, it was a matter of some concern that the churches of the Eastern Mediterranean were locked in a bitter internal dispute, threatening precisely the unity he had so valued.

The dispute was triggered by a senior priest in Alexandria – still a major political and intellectual centre – who had accused his bishop of erroneous teaching. The senior priest had pulled together a very loose alliance of bishops in Syria and Asia Minor who, if they did not entirely support him, were at least hostile to the bishop of Alexandria and his theology. Feelings ran high and there was anxiety about the possibility of public disorder. Constantine decided rapidly that he needed to convene a meeting of bishops to settle the debate and unify the churches. It met over several weeks from May to July 325.

Local meetings of bishops to sort out this kind of crisis were not unusual; what was new was the idea of an ‘ecumenical’ meeting, one that in theory represented the *oikoumene*, the whole ‘household’, of imperial territories. In fact, there were very few participants from western Europe (the Bishop of Rome did not attend but sent a couple of delegates). According to some sources, there was at least one bishop from beyond the

imperial border, probably from what is now Iraq or Iran. We have only very limited documentation of the council’s proceedings, but we know that an overwhelming majority of the 250-odd bishops present agreed in condemning Arius, the priest whose protest had set all this in motion.

As so often happens, a clear ‘official’ majority vote was no sign of durable consensus, and the next few decades were marked by even sharper and more violent conflict. But that is another story. What were the things that Nicaea actually changed?

The most obvious is that a Church that had been on the wrong side of the law since its beginnings now found itself under direct imperial patronage. Not an unqualified plus, despite what some enthusiasts at first claimed, since this patronage entailed the emperor’s perceived right to interfere in the Church’s internal business. But this equally changed how the imperial office was understood: it took on a role within the Christian worldview, a role that was both authoritative and subordinate. The emperor was the providentially appointed source of power in and out of the Church, and his authority mediated the power of God; yet he was essentially a servant of the Church and could be held accountable to its discipline. The Byzantine world had begun, the subtle *symphonia* between Church and autocratic authority that still haunts the eastern Christian world.

But the nature of authority within the Church was also at issue. Arius had claimed, against his bishop, the authority of a charismatic, inspired teacher. Nicaea had reinforced the status of the institutional leadership. But this institutional leadership had also begun to ally itself to charismatic authority of a certain kind, the authority of those who lived dedicated lives of renunciation and prayer in the new style of Christian life represented by monasteries. Bishops appealed to monks for support and legitimacy; monks looked to bishops for protection. Just as, at Nicaea, extra respect was given to those bishops who still bore the marks of

torture or enslavement from the days of persecution at the beginning of the century, so those who lived lives of manifest sacrifice and renunciation commanded increasing attention and compliance. Here lay another uneasy alliance or ‘symphony’ that would create new tensions and conflicts in the fourth century.

Finally, the actual debate at the Council – and in the copious exchange of letters and pamphlets beforehand – showed how the theology of the era was engaging with and transforming a range of existing philosophical discussions. Participants in the debates – which centred upon whether you could say of the creative ‘Word’, the *logos*, of God that it was in the strictest sense ‘divine’ – drew on a remarkably wide repertoire of philosophical sources, from Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s logic to more recent material from Aristotelean commentators and (possibly) Neoplatonists. Not all of their use of this material is sophisticated, but closer study of the texts shows a lot more intellectual literacy than many scholars have realized.

And one of the very interesting by-products of all this was recognition that the question of the relation between God and the intelligible patterns of life in the universe needed to be thought of in a ‘non-mythological’ way – i.e. it was not about a transcendent God delegating responsibility for the universe to a deputy. The order of creation was directly linked to the coherence and stability of the divine intelligence. In the long run this proved a key element in a vision of the universe as intelligible to scientific enquiry and as pervaded by, and communicative of, divine life.

Political myth, ecclesiastical authority and the potential conflict between institutional status and the power of personal holiness, the issue of how to see and understand divine rationality within the structures of the world – all this adds up to a significant legacy for Nicaea. An anniversary worth celebrating beyond the confines of theology alone. **A**