

Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology. By Lewis Ayres. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, xvi + 475 pp., \$185.00.

The Council of Nicea, long an important issue among theologians and church historians, has recently become a popular topic of discussion owing to its mention in the bestselling book *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. Brown, who on a “fact page” on the first page of his book asserts that all the information in his work is factually accurate, makes Nicea a focal point of his novel. According to *The Da Vinci Code*, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine, presiding over the Council of Nicea, at that council canonized Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, while setting aside the Gospel of Thomas and other similar works. While the vast majority of readers of *The Da Vinci Code* are unlikely to read the work under review here, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, the appearance of this volume is nonetheless timely in that it is able, among other things, to shed light on *Da Vinci Code*-style conspiracy theories associated with the Council of Nicea.

To spare *Da Vinci Code* readers from having to read the rest of the review, the thorough, eleven-page index to the present volume does not even include the entries “canon” or “Gospels,” removing all doubt as to whether the information included by Dan Brown is “factually accurate” as the author claims. The issue of canon, it turns out, was not even discussed at the Council at all, much less did Constantine at the Council replace Thomas and other Gnostic Gospels with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Rather, as the subtitle of the book suggests, front and center at the Council of Nicea was the matter of Trinitarian theology. The author, who teaches historical theology at Candler School of Theology and Emory University, seeks to provide a new narrative of the Trinitarian and Christological disputes of the fourth century A.D. Ayres contends that simplistic east/west divisions are to be avoided and that even post-Nicean, pro-Nicean theologies are characterized, not by a monolithic orthodoxy, but by a certain amount of diversity.

Ayres contends that at the heart of fourth-century theological discussion was the question of how one should read the scriptural account of Jesus as the Word from the Father: “How does one understand the distinction between God and Word, Father and Son: is this the distinction of two separate beings? Are the two distinct in a way parallel to the seemingly necessary hierarchy of source and product that we see in the creation? Or is this distinction analogous to that of a person who speaks his or her word (the word being here only a dependent and temporary product of the speaker)?” (p. 3). As Ayres notes, the question of the generation of the Son or Word, and consequently of the generated Son’s ontological status, have crucial implications for one’s understanding of incarnation and redemption. Was the incarnate Christ an intermediate being? If the Son is inferior to the Father, how does this affect the Son’s ability to effect closeness to the Father?

In essence, Ayres sketches the events surrounding the Council of Nicea as follows. Probably in A.D. 318, a controversy developed in Alexandria, Egypt, between a priest, Arius, and his bishop, Alexander. Alexander taught that the Son (albeit “between created and uncreated”) was eternally with the Father and eternally generated by the Father, while Arius contended that there was only one God—the Father—with the Son existing “before the ages” but not eternally and without sharing the essence of the Father. In A.D. 325, Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicea to deal with this and related issues, resulting in the Nicene Creed. According to this creed, the Son was generated “from the essence of the Father” and thus is of the same essence (Gr. *homoousios*) with the Father rather than from a different essence (*ousia* or *hypostasis*). Interestingly, Arius was of little significance in the years following the Council, as was the Nicene Creed. Only in the A.D. 360s did the Church, under the leadership of Athanasius,

coalesce around the Nicene Creed, and what Ayres calls a “pro-Nicene theology” emerged that was consolidated at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) and subsequently held sway.

It is not possible in this limited review to exhaust the many fine nuances drawn in this meticulously researched monograph. Nor is it necessary to agree with every detail of Ayres’ reconstruction to appreciate the contribution of the present volume to the ongoing debate surrounding the Council of Nicea and the issues dealt with at that occasion. Yet, while the last word has hardly been spoken with regard to the historical reconstruction of the time period under consideration and the theological and Christological issues under discussion, this new work provides a solid foundation from which to investigate the matter further. And while not everyone will subscribe to the “new narrative” for understanding Nicea proposed by the author, one thing seems clear: one can safely remove Dan Brown’s account of the Council of Nicea from the list of things that, according to his “fact page,” are “factually accurate” in the way they are represented in *The Da Vinci Code*. They are not.

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