

---

ΟΜΟΟΥΨΙΟΣ ΤΩ ΠΑΤΡΙ'

**THE EXPRESSION OF NICAEA VICTORY ON  
MIDDLE PLATONISM**

**Vasile Cristescu\***

*University 'Al. I. Cuza', Faculty of Orthodox Theology, 9 Closca, 700065 Iasi, Romania*

(Received 11 July 2012, revised 6 September 2012)

---

**Abstract**

*The attempts to find in Christianity a strong influence of Greek philosophical thought that would have changed the content of the Christian preaching are present in Western theological studies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until today. The 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council is also the receiving end of such criticism, being assigned a language and a way of thinking tributary to the classical Greek metaphysics. A closer theological analysis reveals sufficient arguments to demonstrate the integral character of the Nicene Confession.*

*Keywords:* person, kerygmatic, event, metaphysical, dualism

---

**1. The thesis of Christianity Hellenization in general and of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in particular on Western scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The Hellenization of Christianity is a theme that appeared in the Western theology since the first half of the sixteenth century [1] and remained discussed very much until today. It was born from the Western scholars' critique. According to it, the Evangel was loaded with layers coming from Platonism, Aristotelianism and stoicism through Christian theology. The term 'Hellenization of Christianity' became through A. Harnack a well known word in Western theology. By it, the early Church dogma is seen as 'a work of the Greek spirit on the realm of the Evangel' (the problem seems to be put it for the first time in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Catholic humanist G. Budé 1535: *De transitu Hellenisimi ad Christianismum*) [2].

Harnack's fundamental thesis is based on the assertion that the Greek notions and the Greek spiritual instruments which have been attracted during the early Church in order to understand the Evangel did not remain mere instruments, but they were mixed with the content of the primary preaching. Thus the history of dogma would have become the antithesis history between 'pure Evangel' and 'dogma'. The latter would have been "Christianity within the meaning of antiquity" [2, p. 21].

---

\* E-mail: veniamin2001@yahoo.de

Harnack's thesis echoed not only in the Lutheran theology, but also in the Catholic one. H. Küng has undertaken a harsh criticism against the dogmas of the early Church. They would have expressed, according to Küng, the message of the New Testament with partially suitable notions of the Greek metaphysics. *The* deity of Christ would have been understood in the metaphysical sense [3]. Another Catholic theologian, B. Welte, undertook a more detailed critique against the dogmatic formula of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea [4]. On the one hand, Welte aims to show how Nicaea formula acts and its dogmatic consequences regarding the language of the Scripture and on the other hand how it behaves towards our way of speaking and thinking [4, p. 105].

In this context he formulates two theses. Scientifically and theoretically viewed, they have according to Welte 'a character of theories or hypotheses in analogy with their use according to K. Popper [4]. Welte's first thesis is the following: as far as considering the person of Jesus as the one of Christ, the modes of understanding of Scripture are separated from the ways of understanding the dogmatic formula of Nicaea by a radical epochal *change* [4, p. 106]. *The* dogmatic formula of Nicaea and the theology following the Councils that develop from it, as the one after it, says Welte, are rooted in the soil of an understanding of the being that compared to that of the Bible which is new and particular [4].

In the Bible we find a richer vital growth of the theological impulses "Between these impulses there will be some that are closer to the understanding of the Christianity at Nicene that came through the breach" [4, p. 107]. But generally, says Welte, we can say that the Bible is predominantly harmonized on another basic principle of understanding than the Nicene and what follows after that. As regards Nicaea the manner of going into the question is another, the weight points of theological consciousness went away, notion and language changed, even if all they had in a certain group of elements of the biblical theology something like a possible core [4].

Welte states that even when the first thesis shows that the biblical language about Jesus and His revelation is separated from the dogmatic formula of Nicaea, it does not state that between both levels, there would be any continuity [4]. "On the contrary it shows the special manner of this continuity, the epochal manner. It states that the step from one level to another, is not explanatory, but rather an epochal one" [4, p. 107-108].

But such a step is understood by Welte as a process of translation. Through this, the entire sent fortune of faith would have been reorganized, articulated once again, so that a new image began to develop from the beginning of the old faith. This process is set up as a key for knowing this particular way of continuity, which for Welte is "an epochal discontinued passage" [4, p.108]. This is because the old grounds of faith under the influence of newer forms of thought go into the background or disappear.

Welte wonders: What reason was found in the theology of the Evangelists Mark and John and of the Apostle Paul that under the power of a new formulation of the problem of Nicaea “homoousios formula could be announced as a decisive expression of the old beliefs”? [4, p. 109]. And another: what correspondence exists between this dogmatic formula and its older reasons? Welte wants the second thesis to belong with the first one to a whole hypothesis, without losing the two theses their hypothetical character.

## **2. B. Welte's hypothetical objections to Nicaea based on the criticism of M. Heidegger against the ancient Greek metaphysics**

The second thesis stated by Welte is the following: at Nicaea the understanding of the being by the Western metaphysics has come to master the theology, while in the Bible the understanding seems to be understood by the notion of event [4]. When speaking of Western metaphysics, Welte understands it in the sense that Heidegger speaks about in his later writings. By this, there are considered “less certain content” [4, p. 110] and especially ‘a certain way of thinking of all content’ [4]. In addition, Welte’s way of understanding the event is marked by Heidegger and is a more concrete understanding to it. Its significance is close to the act as Bonhoeffer understood it as opposed to the being [5].

Viewed this way, the Bible is understood as event-speaking. “It expresses the revelation and preaching of Jesus predominantly as an event of the approaching moment of the Kingdom of God ... This is why in the Bible is less written what it is, and what happened is said and spoken.” [4, p. 110] Even the titles of Jesus appear in this vision with the meaning of ‘what happened in Him’ and not ‘what He was in Himself’ [4]. In the event something happens, so that this one ‘coming out of it and self-opening’ [4, p. 110-111] looks and calls the man prepared for faith: “This happens from the divine origin and adapts to its human addressee” [4, p. 111].

The specific qualified temporality belongs to the event. The event ‘produces the incomparable moment’ and in this one it is totally separated from ‘the idea of an existence, by which time would pass somehow indifferently’ [4]. In order to show in his second thesis that at Nicaea was imposed in the Church a metaphysical thinking and language, Welte uses some of Heidegger's reflections. Heidegger developed the idea that all metaphysical thinking from the Greeks and until its fulfilment at Nietzsche, and after it, in the modern technology, must be understood as a single epoch, the metaphysical epoch. For Heidegger the ascent of the metaphysical epoch is early related to the loss of origin in Western thinking. Understood as the fate of the being, this loss of the origin leads, according to Heidegger, to the fact that in the epoch of the thinking open by it, the being is no longer supplied, but the material.

The question, what is the material, is the question that leads the thinking. *The* material about whose being the question is arisen becomes the object. This means that: “the object stability (essentia, possibilitas) and the

positioning of what is against (existential) belong to the object. The object is the unit of steadiness of the existing.” [6]

Thinking is now guided towards the object, meaning towards the steadiness of the material existence. The steadiness of the material means its understanding as stage and duration, being identical with itself in time. The material is what remains in time so that time is running indifferently besides it. It is the stage of the indifferent time. In the newest thinking of the time the material is in time, in the way this one remains in time, touched by it. The material stays compared to the event as something static. It is generally called *usia*.

The term is understood by Heidegger as the existing present. For Heidegger the material becomes for the epoch of metaphysics, object, as the existing present or *usia*: “the existence in its state is essentially related to the position of representation as the one that has certainly itself before it” [6]. What man generally receives during the metaphysic epoch as material or object gives rise to a proper way of thinking and speaking. This thinking is called by Heidegger thinking focused on the idea, representation [7].

The material is constant and entirely fixed on idea. To the extent that it found constant and fixed, it is subjected to the range of the thought and made available to this thinking. Finding and ordering in the being of thought are characteristics of the metaphysical thinking. Thinking is positioning the reality as a presence existing in front so that it so that it sits through it in itself. Thinking must be what is stable in itself. In this sense *usia* means the understanding that finds the presence of the existence as such.

### **3. The event, as unique form of interpreting the Scripture and the Tradition of the Church at Nicaea according to Welte**

Welte undertakes this idea from Heidegger and applies it to his second thesis, according to which at Nicaea metaphysics took control over the Church and the theological thinking [4, p. 113]. For Welte this means that: the original event of revelation involutes in its capacity as event. The basic question is no longer what happened and what happens, but what it is. This question has for Welte a static character. It does not exclude the other, what happened and what happens, but goes in another direction. Nevertheless it asks: what is in Jesus the constant present? And how can it be found as such this thing? From the event of salvation and from it's the narration and preaching becomes an object as *usia*, for a new way of thinking. The support event of the oldest and Christological thinking is reflected on a new level, meaning the metaphysical one and so appears the event as a being, *usia*. [4]

This way of thinking has, according to Welte, elements that are in the books of the New Testament: “They have the world of gnosis. They have what is known as middle Platonism. On these paths and others related to them the Greek metaphysical thought moved as a thinking horizon of preaching the New Testament. *The homoousios* formula of Nicaea decisively summarizes these

paths and joins them together. It obligatorily opens an understanding of the Evangel in its own way. This way underlies and makes possible a great theological development for the entire period of the metaphysical world.” [4, p. 114]

This because, according to Welte, Theology went on the road started here. The basic question - what is it? – In the meaning of the question about the stable existence, remained the main concern of finding in the idea that stability: from here the role that is played by notions such as *usia*, *hypostasis* and *substantia* in the teaching about Christology and Trinity that is developing in itself [4].

However, Welte noted that the older language loaded by the event remained present in the Church: it remained present in the words of the Scripture and remained present in the exceptional forms of the Christian worship, where Scripture becomes language. But theology ... has increasingly gone more on its own way. Hence resulted a double own line in the Christian thought and even in the Christian worship. [4]

In connection with the stated thesis, Welte added the issues of time understood as a control of Metaphysics which comes to an end. From the philosophical point of view, the fulfilment of the metaphysical thinking is seen in the type of neo-positivism thinking. In this sense Heidegger speaks of metaphysics overcoming. By overcoming is understood a movement that preserves the traditional, but changed to a new level. This level would be a bigger one with a purer dimension of the origin [4, p. 115].

Reported to Theology, such a movement would mean reaching a crisis of the theological formula of Nicaea and this crisis would be the overcoming time. This does not mean that the dogma of Nicaea would have no meaning. On the contrary, Welte seeks to understand that the Nicene formula can and should be seen again in its historical place. “It was the basic formula of the theology in the metaphysical epoch. Herein lays its great historical right. If the metaphysical epoch was for us a necessity full of skill, if in the Christian understanding it was an addition of God, it has the metaphysical faith, whose base was laid at Nicaea.” [4]

On the other hand, Welte says that if the overcoming time of metaphysics has really come, then the formula of Nicaea must be overcome: “One cannot dispute what it expresses. It expresses the Christian revelation and the preaching in a particular epochal manner, which for a certain epochal space was determined. But the expression manner is not what is already stated. By keeping the decisive content, the expression manner may change and move. In our case this would mean overcoming the metaphysics of Nicaea. So, trying to change the way of thinking and speaking towards a larger origin approach” [4, p. 116]

This would involve for Welte finding the reasons in the primordial image of the revelation that in a new historical position would lead to the answer given to Nicaea, and thereby to the answer given to Metaphysics. If we know these reasons and also the new position of metaphysics, we find out a way to retroactively translate Nicaea, in order to make transparent the great formula by

keeping its essential content, and also by the relativization of its form of epochal thinking and then by looking towards at what is more at the origin. Towards the preaching filled with event of the Evangel. What may be perceived from the biblical preaching through the Nicene formula could not stay in the direction: in the event ... which is being interpreted in the history of Jesus, so in the way of life, death and ascension and in what humanly happens in usia, which is united with the Father (homo ousia to patri) is united through the event, and opens as rescue of all? [4]

#### **4. Ecumenical Council of Nicaea: testimony of Scripture and Church tradition and overcoming middle Platonism**

To these hypothetical theses of Welte we will answer first of all by showing that at the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, the Church has not remained to a limited thinking to usia, but expressed its testimony about the divine persons and their relationship to nature. The consubstantial persons are deity persons, meaning person of the Father and His incarnated Son. Although the being is the content of the person, however, the person is characterized by its irreducibility to nature. To express the reality of the person we must give up to any conceptualized notion. Thus, through person's category the Eastern Christianity definitely exceeded the static substantialism of the ancient philosophical thinking, and the thinking of the Western metaphysics that Welte referred to appealing to Heidegger. In a larger work of comparative analysis we showed these aspects related to the person and also the weights of the Western theological and philosophical thought of understanding the reality of the person as it was developed and experienced by the Christian East [8]. The person is a gift of the Eastern patristic theology expressing the existence manner of the being related to the level of the person. In this sense, the person is a sui generis existence and its way of expression is closer to the Hebrew thinking of the Old Testament about the existence than it is in comparison to the Greek thinking. At the same time, however, its understanding is reduced to understanding the existence of the Hebrew Old Testament thinking.

What is common to the way of expression of the person in the Eastern Christian sense and the one of existence in a veto-testamentary Hebrew sense is the dynamic character. Such a character cannot be expressed, as is common today in the Western theology, through concepts such as static-dynamic, the static belonging to the Greek thinking and the dynamic to the Hebrew one [9] because the Christian content of the persons' category according to the Eastern theology is quite different from that of being from the classical Greek philosophy. In addition, static-dynamic notions belong to the mechanical-physical sphere and are therefore totally inappropriate to express the spiritual qualities. Most suitable are the dynamic-harmonic notions.

The common way of expressing the person - existence in the Hebrew vetero-testamentary thinking and the Eastern Christian one person-nature is shown in the fact that when trying to define the person through notions of the

impersonal objective thinking we take into consideration the existence and through it we see that we didn't get too far. But the person is internally moving and acting, including the existence and action. It lives. It is characteristically for it an internal activity objectively constant of the organs and of the consciousness that are going out. The personal existence is an incommensurable existence with the existence of things and cannot be expressed in terms formed by the objective impersonal thought.

But what distinguishes the thinking of person's existence in the Eastern Christianity from the one of the person - existence in the vetero-testamentary Hebrew thinking and the one of the being in the Greek classical metaphysics is not only its irreducibility to things, but also the irreducibility to its own nature. This implies, however, for the Eastern thinking an uninterrupted process of inner and outer motion, of transformation through the relationship with the divine Trinity persons and also with human persons.

The expression of this movement towards another person is given by the category of the communion that is based on such uninterrupted communion of the Holy Trinity persons or their one being. *In order* to express this reality the notion of static content of the being had to be transformed into a personal content to see man's movement beyond the self towards another person. The fulfillment of such movements is not possible without the work of the divine grace that came through Incarnation to Christ. This way the Greek thought has the same value as the Hebrew one. [10]

This is seen in the expression of revelation in the Christian thought: the reality that Christ is God and that through Him God is revealed is expressed by the Greek way of thinking. That He sent His Son, by whom He has fulfilled His love and will is expressed by the Hebrew manner. The touch stone of Christology both for Greek thought and for the Hebrew one lays in the fact that both ways of thinking were mixed with each other [10, p. 168].

Thus, the Apostle Paul preached the transparency of God into Christ as a divine act by which it was depicted to Greeks in a foreign form for them and therefore difficult to reach. On the other hand, the touchstone of Christology was the fact that the highest expression of God's transparency was called the humanity of Christ, which as for the appearance was indistinguishable and whose earthly fate was terrible according to usual perceptions.

On the other hand the mixture of the two ways of thinking was one of the premises of the victory of Christianity in that world, primarily because the Christian way of thinking, that completed them, when it first imposed was more efficient than the older ones known and used (I Corinthians 1.17, 2.13).

Second of all, there must be emphasized the fact that through homoousios the Fathers of Nicaea did not want to 'Hellenize' the personal reality of the revealed God, kept in the preaching of the Church, meaning they did not want to superpose a technical philosophical concept, *usia*. "On the contrary in their case it was about clarifying the statements of the Holy Scripture." [11]

R.E. Person in a study has asked himself about the relationship between Scripture and Tradition at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, concluding that the Council refers to Scripture and Tradition as authority. In order to understand the relationship between them Person proposes the modern model of the dialogue [12]. W. Gessel shows that we should ask what dialogue means in late antiquity. "Instead of an useless attempt to establish the theoretical relationship between Scripture and Tradition would be useful the question whether the Council could lead homoousios on the reception way towards the general recognition of the Church." [13]

In his work *De synodis*, Saint Athanasius the Great says that by homoousios, the Council of Nicaea did not want to go beyond the Scriptures' Parents' desire was to make clear the meaning of the Scriptures. But the debates showed that it was not possible only with the words of Scripture. According to Saint Athanasius, the Nicene Fathers used homoousios as a vocable which had to clearly fix a controversial problem in understanding the Scripture (Saint Athanasius the Great, *De synodis*, 11, p. 96).

They had the courage to keep correct and with complete rigor the biblical church tradition about the Son of God: "The problem about how can there be contained the lineage in a single God being through a philosophical notion was placed in a second plan for them. It was a real kerygmatic process, corresponding to the tradition" [14].

But not only the process, but also the expression and the thought are kerygmatic "(the Council) speaks and thinks in a kerygmatic manner. This is the true and full value element to this Council." [14, p. 408] "As the preaching of Jesus himself and then as the Synoptic Evangelists, the kerygma of the old church did not use any philosophical language, even though there were introduced some vulgar philosophical notions... The kerygma of the Church addressed all, had as target receiving the faith in a language generally understood, without giving anything of its content." [15]

Greeks, however, saw in the Christian preaching a violent invasion of their territory. Greek philosophers felt as a challenge the Christian confession of Christ crucified and risen as God and Lord or as real King and Sovereign of the world [16]. This condition was present particularly in a group of Greek philosophers who are characterized as medium Platonists. They have formed a link between the old academy of Plato and neo-Platonists.

Here there were two attitudes: one marked by a program of developing a sure knowledge of the divinity. This attitude corresponds to a particular method in search of knowledge. This was *via negationes*. "Because God communicates with the world through the Logos as Logos, for the one who wins this habit both objectively and subjectively is important to know where the Logos is half-hiding" [17]. But there was also a different attitude directed against *via negationes* method, giving up to the Platonic myth. Its favourite source was Aristotle. The result was "a *via negationes* logically determined, free of intuition" [17, p. 118], which finally ended in "an abrupt monism".



Both philosophical groups so different interiorly met in a unanimous rejection of Christian preaching about the incarnated and crucified God. Philosophers were particularly upset that their closed system related to a continuous communication of the Logos in nature, history, culture and training, had to be shattered by the revelation and salvation brought by Christ.

Determined adversaries of Christians, Celsus and Porphyry the Neo-Platonist philosopher, reproached the Christians that their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as God proves to demolish the true notions about God [18]. Through their preaching on the Incarnation of the Logos, Christians would contradict the spirit of the Greek Logos, the Greek rational thought. On the contrary, Greek is what Porphyry recommends to Christians, that instead of honouring Christ as God, to walk on the philosophical path of salvation, the path of cleansing the spiritual soul.

Facing a closed system of the middle Platonism, Christians were able to represent the Christian doctrine even by means of the Greek philosophy and culture. Christ is shown as a true teacher, which was a direct attack on the religious culture of middle Platonism [15, p. 53].

## References

- [1] W. Glawe, *Helenisierung des Christentums in der Geschichte der Theologie von Luther bis auf die Gegenwart*, Trowitzsch, Berlin, 1912.
- [2] A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, I, 5. Auflage, J.C.B. Mohr (Siebeck), Tübingen, 1931, 20
- [3] H. Küng, *Christ sein*, Verlag R. Piper, München, 1974, 438.
- [4] B. Welte, *Die Lehrformel von Nikaia und die abendländische Metaphysik*, in *Zur Frühgeschichte der Christologie*, hg. von B. Welte, Verlag Herder, Freiburg, 1970.
- [5] D. Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein*, 3. Auflage, Chr. Kaiser, München, 1964.
- [6] M. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Bd. 1, Verlag G. Nieske, Pfulingen, 1954, 74.
- [7] M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Bd. 2, 1. Aufl., Verlag G. Nieske, Pfulingen, 1961, 452.
- [8] V. Cristescu, *Persoană și comuniune în creștinism și filosofie*, Tehnopress, Iași, 2008.
- [9] E.V. Dobschütz, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, **6** (1922) 212.
- [10] T. Boman, *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen*, 5. Aufl., Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1968, 18.
- [11] F. Ricken, *Theologie und Philosophie*, **44** (1969) 335.
- [12] R.E. Person, *The mode of theological decision making at the early ecumenical councils. An inquiry into the function of Scripture and Tradition at the councils of Nicaea and Ephesus*, Theologischen Dissertationen 14, Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, Basel, 1978.
- [13] W. Gessel, *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum*, **17** (1985) 1.
- [14] A. Grillmeier, *Jesus Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, Bd. 1, 3. verb. u. erg. Aufl., Herder Verlag, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1990, 410.
- [15] A. Grillmeier, *Nicaea (325) und Chalkedon (451). Über das christliche Gottes- und Menschenbild*, in *Wegmarken der Christologie*, A. Ziegenaus (ed.), Verlag Ludwig Auer Donauwörth, Donauwörth, 1980, 45.

- [16] A. Grillmeier, *Fragmente zur Christologie*, von Th. Hainthaler (ed.), Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1997, 82.
- [17] H. Dörrie, *Logos-Religion? Oder Nous-Theologie? Die hauptsächlichlichen Aspekte des kaiserzeitlichen Platonismus*, in *Kephalaion. Studies offered to Prof. C. J. de Vogel*, J. Mansfield J. & L.M. de Rijk (eds.), Assen van Goreum, Assen, 1975, 124.
- [18] Origen, *Contra Celsus*, VIII, 12, in *Des Origenes acht Bücher gegen Celsus*, P. Koetschau (ed.), Verlag Kempten, München, 1926, 311.