

Quakers and Nicaea

Friend Rowena Loverance shares a reflection on the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea from the Quaker tradition. <https://cte.org.uk/quakers-and-nicaea/>

It is a common caricature about Quakers, that we are mostly defined by what we *don't* have –priests, liturgy, sacraments – and certainly not creeds. At first sight this seems peculiar and contrariwise, unecumenical even, but it derives from a longstanding way of thinking about God known as the apophatic tradition. From this view, God is both indescribable and inconceivable; in prayer, we try to empty our minds of words and ideas, simply resting in the presence of God with us.

Consequently Quakers in Britain are largely indifferent to the Council of Nicaea and the resulting Nicæan Creed. Those who have joined us from more traditional churches talk of the impossibility of engaging with its more abstruse theology or the oddity of its omission of any mention of the historic life, mission and teachings of Jesus. We suspect that many who continue to worship in more traditional churches have difficulty with reciting the Creed for these reasons.

But the Quaker response to the historic Creeds goes beyond indifference; I don't think it is too strong to talk about a degree of revulsion. Would it be too much, I wonder, to cite a parallel with Islamic revulsion over images of the Prophet? How can God, or even our understanding of God, be confined within any form of words, however ancient or lapidary. It is not the thrust of the Nicæan Creed which is the problem. Quakers are not non-Trinitarian – the inner voice which Quakers try to hear in silent worship is regularly identified as the 'inward Christ', and that the Spirit bloweth where it listeth (John 3.8) is central to Friends' experience. It is the 'otherness' and the 'once-and-for-all nature' of the Creed which is the problem for us. Life in Christ is not about adopting the words of others; nor is it only about truth already revealed. It is about what we can say from our own experience; and what we, through God's grace, are in process of becoming.

So for Quakers, creeds are flawed, even potentially blasphemous, in their concept. They are also intentionally exclusive in their use; the Nicæan Creed, with its anathematization of Arius and his followers, set a grim precedent in that regard. Quaker understanding of the Christian message is that it is universal, the divine Light of Christ 'enlightens every man that comes into the world'. (John 1.9) We are all given a measure of that Light; it is not for us to judge the measure given to others, but to try to live by our own. From this understanding comes the Quaker emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusivity, which has borne fruit in our own time in our witness to equal marriage and to trans rights. I have characterised these two arguments as 'Fetter' and 'Fence'. But Quakers can often come across as self-righteous, so I'm happy to note in closing that I don't want to suggest that maintaining this position has been entirely straightforward. In the mid 19th century the Anglican theologian F.D Maurice, an admirer of the Quakers, lampooned the Quaker stance on creeds: 'by this means all universality is lost, that a body which professed to be for mankind became in a very few years the narrowest and most peculiar of sects', while the vast majority of Quakers in the world, unlike those in Britain, have since the late 19th century adopted a 'statement of faith', which could be described as a creed by another name. But all Quakers would agree that we are to speak and act out of our own personal experience of God. There is no other way.

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