

Being Nicene in the Context of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Addis Ababa

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Abstract

This article makes clear how an understanding of the patristic sources can help sharpen the Christian claims in a dialog with Muslims in Addis Ababa by nuancing concepts like 'divine begetting' and 'divine suffering'. An attempt is made to engage church fathers' theological discussions in a way relevant to the present context of interreligious dialogue in a meaningful way to what it means to be Nicene today.

Introduction

The fourth century Trinitarian controversy was a complex and loaded theological debates which began from the pre-Arian and pro-Nicene thoughts, and developed in the controversy between Arian and orthodox groups, and climaxed in the decision of the Nicene council and the subsequent defenses of the Creed by the later church fathers.¹ Conventionally, many Christians today think that being Nicene is to confess the Creed and believe in it as a manual that provides solid doctrines for Christian belief. Although this is true, however, to be Nicene has to do a lot other than that. Being Nicene today should begin from correctly and fully comprehend the fourth century multifaceted theological controversies as developed before, during, and after the council.

Modern scholars (e.g. Lewis Ayres, Cathrine Mowry Lacugna, and Khaled Anatolios) tried to appropriate the theology of the Nicene Creed in relation to contemporary concerns. Especially, Ayres emphasized on the need to carefully study the pro-Nicene theology, which has a profound and deep 'theological culture' that offers doctrines and theological and exegetical strategies.² Indeed, all of the above theologians agreed for a new way of retrieving the Nicene on the basis of the bigger picture of the Trinitarian theology, though they differ on how they portray the controversy.

In this paper, first, an attempt is made to retrieve and find out the theological 'plotline'³ of the controversy from all groups point of views.

¹ In looking at the fourth century theological controversy we mainly consider Arius, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nazianzus for this paper.

² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to the fourth Century Trinitarian Theology* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1 & 12. According to Ayres, a 'theological culture' is an engagement of the pro-Nicene doctrinal preposition and their theological strategies which coined principles on how those doctrines and theologies should be understood and read.

³ In this case 'plotline' means the basic theological understanding of the Arians group and the Orthodox Christians group which also influenced their exegesis and interpretation of each texts in the Scripture.

Then, we tried to comprehend their effort in finding out the ‘Mind of the Scripture’⁴ (the plain reading of the Scripture in line with the overall Divine message of the Scripture) in their interpretation of specific texts as it fitted to their ‘plotline’. Finally, we tried to engage the materials we read in to the present context of interreligious dialogue and proved what it means to be Nicene today. In this section we tried to deal with Christian-Muslim conversation on the ‘sonship of Jesus’, and put some effort on how to retrieve the Nicene theology in to this particular context.

Analyzing the theological moves before, during, and after the Nicene Council

Modern scholars criticized a simplified understanding of the fourth century Trinitarian controversy.⁵ And they claim that before the occurrence of the Nicene council, there were several points of arguments and competitions principally focused on the Trinity, which was primarily Christological and God’s plan of salvation through Christ.⁶ They also attempted to explain how the eternal and divine God is present in Christ’s incarnation and suffering. When the Arian groups came in to the controversy and the Nicene council was born, the controversy was moved from the *oikonomia* (which is God’s plan of salvation as worked out through Christ) to the *theologia* (a controversy about the full divinity and the eternal existence of the Son with the Father), and the council focused arguing for the eternal and ontological equality of the Son and the Father.⁷

Lewis Ayres also questioned the conventional thinking of the debate as a controversy on the status of Jesus Christ either as a divine or a human being. He rather suggested that the argument was about the generation of the Son from the Father and how the candidates explained that fact in human language or word.⁸ It was this extensive and theologically affluent argumentative event which forced the Emperor Constantine to call both Arians group and the Orthodox Christians group for a meeting to decide on the matter.

Before the Arians group and the Orthodox Christians group came for the debate, they had their own theological ‘plotline’ by which their entire theology and the subsequent theological controversy were framed. Moreover, their ‘plotline’ influenced the way they interpret, exegete, and employ certain Bible texts to defend their position. Arians group’s argument usually began from the *humanity* of Jesus, who is vulnerable to change, and then they moved to his exaltation as a reward of his godly living and complete obedience to the Father.⁹ On the contrary, the Orthodox Christians group began their argument from the deity of Jesus, and then they moved to his incarnation, humiliation, and exaltation, but they did not identify Jesus as human being who later became God.¹⁰ Rather, the Son’s suffering and exaltation took place not as a reward to the ontologically subordinated Jesus, but it was for the sake of human beings and for our salvation. One of the Bible texts that both groups interpreted differently in a way it fitted to their ‘plotline’ comes from the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians. And it reads,

⁴ The term ‘the mind of the Scripture’ is used by Frances M. Young in her article which I read for the course on the electronic reserves posted by Dr. David Maxwell, Concordia Seminary, Summer 2016. This is why Anatolios said, “... Scriptures, when properly read according to their “ecclesiastical sense,” reveal Christ to be nothing less than the eternal Word who is fully divine by nature, whose fullness of divinity is the ultimate “security” for human redemption and deification.” Khaleen Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Father* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 88.

⁵ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to the fourth Century Trinitarian Theology*. (Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-7 & 11-15. ⁵ See also Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (HarperOne: An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 2-4. She argued that the fourth century controversy was not only about the unity of being between the Father and the Son, rather, it was mainly about a ‘theology of relationship’, which dealt with the communion of the Triune God with creatures.

⁶ Khaleen Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 15-17.

⁷ Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (HarperOne: An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 21-44.

⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to the fourth Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-4.

⁹ Khaleen Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers*. (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 91-94.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 96.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11 NIV, *emphasis mine*)

Based on the above reading the Arians group's 'plotline' said that Jesus needed to be exalted by God, because he is a created being who was completely obedient to the Father's will. For Arians, if Jesus was fully divine, he would have not needed the exaltation. To the contrary, the Nicene 'plotline' interpreted the text to affirm Jesus' divinity. The very context of the text itself proves the eternal and divine equality of the Father and the Son (see v-6). And the Son's exaltation in this text was the result of His incarnation for humans' sake. Jesus was exalted not for His own sake but for sinners and for their redemption and reconciliation with the Creator.

When we look at the Nicene council, there were three groups who attended the historical meeting. First, the Arians group, who said that the Son was *monogenes* (a Latin word meaning 'begotten' or 'made'), and they argued that Christ was the offspring of God who is uniquely created.¹¹ Their view implies that Jesus is a perfect created being who is not ontologically equal to the Father, but better than other creatures. And this is why Arius went on saying, "There was when the Son was not", a wrong claim which led him to a sharp critics and condemnation.¹²

Second, against the Arians group's claim the Council of Nicene, as attended by Hozaias of Cordova, Alexander of Alexandria, and Athanasius declared the Son as true God, co-eternal with the Father, and the Father and the Son are *of the same substance* (*homoousios*), and they strongly affirmed the 'unity of being' between the Father and the Son.¹³ However, they clearly put that the Son is also different and separate from the Father in person. In the assertion of the terms like *ousia* and *homoousios* the council fervently condemned Arians group. Later on, based on the decision, the controversy seemed to be shifting from *oikonomia* (the Father-Son relationship in the economy of salvation) to *theologia* (the question of the inter-relatedness of the Father and Son), which intensified the controversy.¹⁴ The Nicene decision on the ontological equality of the Father and the Son precisely defended the orthodox teaching of the Divine and eternal Father-Son relationship.

Third, there were also the Eusebina groups attended by Eusebius of Caesarea, who have the same theological idea with the Orthodox Christians group, but with slight difference on the use of the term *homoousios* by the council.¹⁵ There were an intensive debate and fight among the attendants and finally the meeting was closed by declaring the full divinity of Jesus and the new orthodoxy was used as a tool to evacuate all other views that argued against the orthodox Christians group. However, this does not mean that Christ's divinity was made up of the Nicene council as some Muslim brothers and sisters often criticize us today. With this in mind, we now turn to Christian-Muslim dialogue in Addis Ababa on Christology.

The Nicene effect in the contemporary Christian-Muslim dialogue

Beside the differences in their confession of faith and authoritative texts, which makes the dialogue prickly, Muslim's strong conviction of purifying true Islam led most of them to reject Christian-Muslim dialogue and interaction in Addis Ababa. According to my observation, they have developed an internal attitude of isolationism which views Christians as the enemies of Islam who corrupt Muslims from exercising their faith.

¹¹ Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (HarperOne: An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 30-33.

¹² Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 52.

¹³ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁴ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers*. (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 189.

¹⁵ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 59. Eusebians were not happy with the use of the term *homoousios*, because the same word had been used earlier before the Council of Nicene by the *Modalist heresies*. However, the difference between the Eusebians group and the Orthodox Christians group was one of terminology, but not one of theology.

According to a testimony of a friend of mine, even if interaction with Christians is permissible only for the sake of defending Islamic doctrine, it may also create an opportunity for Christians to infect Islam. Consequently, they create their own island and have very limited interaction with Christians who attempted to disprove Islamic doctrine with the hidden intention of converting Muslims to Christianity.¹⁶

Athanasius in his controversy against Arians group he tried to deal with the sonship and justify the divine and eternal unity of the Father and the Son based on his Bible interpretations and exegesis in a way it fitted to the Nicene 'plotline'. It is very important to follow the Nicene 'plotline' to qualify what we mean by 'Jesus is the Son of God' in our controversy with Muslims in Addis Ababa today.

The Holy Scripture tells that God spoke to St. Mary that she would give birth to Jesus through the help of God and the Holy Spirit; it says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35 NIV). If Jesus is a Divine being, then, why he needs the coming of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High to overshadow Mary? Why Jesus as the second person of the Trinity could not command the supernatural pregnancy of St. Mary by himself?

Arians would say that Jesus is not a divine being, but he is uniquely made or created being and that is why he needed to depend on the Divine power of the Most High. Their argument of the text begins from the conviction that Jesus is a created being, who later on, as a result of his complete obedience and godly living was exalted by the Father.

To the contrary, the Nicene and the subsequent defenders of the Nicene Creed begin their argument from the conviction that Jesus is the Divine, but He needed all helps for the sake of sinners and for their salvation. They analyzed and interpreted Bible texts (c.f. Philippians 2, Psalm 45, Proverbs 8) beginning from the deity of Jesus, then moved to his humanity and exaltation for the sake of humans' salvation. The Nicene Creed itself affirmed the fact when declaring,

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he came incarnated from the Virgin Mary, he was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scripture; He ascended in to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. ...

When Christianity says that the Divine sonship is an absolute truth that should be accepted by faith¹⁷, it does not imply some sort of *irrationality*, as Muslims often wrongly accuse Christians for being irrational. This is why we need to correctly comprehend and retrieve the Nicene debates which precisely supplied what the Divine sonship means. In "On the Council of Nicaea" (*De Decretis*), Athanasius described the term son and what the name implies in two ways.¹⁸ First, obedience to the Law of God and improvement in human's conduct brings a privilege to be God's sons (Deuteronomy 13: 19, 14:1 & John 1:12). And the other one is through a biological process of reproduction in which human beings possess a natural father-son relationship.

Nevertheless, the Divine sonship neither fits to the first nor to the second experience of sonship, because Jesus is an eternal and true God who neither can undergo change nor can be a product of a biological process of reproduction.

¹⁶ Muslims in Addis Ababa never attempt to convert Christians on the basis of Christian-Muslim conversation, rather they hesitantly engaged in the conversation to defend and justify their doctrine. However, their main way of evangelism is through marriage that allows a Muslim man to get married with many Christian women, with the intention of converting them to Islam and have many Muslim children afterwards. This has been a very effective method of evangelism that contributed to their tremendous growth in the country, up to 42% of the total population.

¹⁷ See how the Church Fathers (c.f. St. Irenaeus of Lyons and Gregory of Nazianus) underlined the necessity of faith to fully understand the Divine sonship, though Christianity does not simply appealing to 'faith' to describe the divine sonship. See John Behr, tr. *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 40-41. And see also Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers: The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 16.

¹⁸ Khalek Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 183-184.

Athanasius correctly said, “I speak of “from the essence” (*ek tes ousias*) and “one in essence” (*homoousios*) and that the Son of God is not a creature nor work nor one of the things that come to be, but that the Word is offspring from the essence of the Father (*gennema tes ousias tou patros*).”¹⁹ If Muslims were serious about God being transcendent, they would have not perceived the Divine natural sonship identically to human natural sonship. Then, would it not be abomination against God when Muslims counter Christians as if Christianity believed in God the Father who underwent a physical process of reproduction? Christianity strongly and seriously believes in the transcendent God who needed *the* mediator, the only way to reverse humans’ fall and deal with our sins, so that the transcendent God may have relationship with creatures through His only-begotten Son, through whom He created the universe (John 1:3, 1 Corinthians 8:6) and in whom the Father made himself known to us (John 1:18).

The Holy Quran, nonetheless, says, “God is not begotten, nor does God beget.”²⁰ In this section of the Quran the nature of God/Allah²¹ is described briefly and to believe in God as a father who has a son is like to “import animal qualities into our conception of Him.”²² However, as we have stated above, our argument with Muslims about the Divine sonship cannot be labeled from a biological or human experience of conception and birth. Said in other words, we do not understand the Divine sonship in the carnal way as Muslims often presume. Athanasius is correct when saying, “Moreover, every bodily thought must be shunned in these matters.”²³

This argument leads us to inquire another question. When did the Father-Son relationship begin? Based on their plotline the Arians would say, “Not always Father, not always Son.”²⁴ An argument that led them to conclude that the Son was not there before his birth. “Therefore God has not always been Father of the Son. But when the Son came to be and was created, then it was that God was called his Father.”²⁵ However, the divine sonship is totally a different story, because their eternal Father-Son relationship is affirmed both in the Scriptures as well as in the holy councils, to which we will turn now.

Basically, there are two issues we would like to discuss here. First, when did Jesus become the Son of God? Since our Muslim friends begin their argument from the humanity of Jesus, they misunderstood our claim of Christ’s sonship as an eternal fact; rather, they criticize us for labeling the divine and supreme God in to human experience of child bearing. Mistakenly, some Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church members in Addis Ababa also understood Jesus’ sonship only on the condition of his physical birth, which led them to give more credit to እመቤታችን ቅድስት ድንግል ማሪያም (“Our Holy Saint Virgin Mary”) and teach to honor and venerate her.²⁶

The above conclusion is true only in reference to human being’s childbearing experience. However, we believe that it is not because Jesus was born of St. Mary that he becomes the Son of God. The Holy Scriptures (both the OT and the NT) affirms the Divine sonship. This is why knowing the Nicene ‘theological culture’ and their ‘plotline’ become extremely important both to correctly comprehend the fourth century Trinitarian debate as well as to correctly find the ‘mind of the scripture’ in our interpretation of specific texts, in the context of Christian-Muslim conversation.

The Holy Scripture gives ample affirmations about the Divine sonship. To begin with, the Book of Proverbs reads, “...Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and the name of his Son? Tell me if you know!” (30:4b NIV). In this text we clearly see the preexistence of God and His mighty creating act together with the Son. The Son existed before creation and known by the name ‘the Son of God’, who became the means for the establishment of all the ends of the earth.

¹⁹ Ibid, 180.

²⁰ Quran: Surah 112:3.

²¹ The writer is quite aware of the huge debate whether Christian’s God and Muslim’s Allah are the same or distinct. Due to the purpose of the paper and its limitation he is not engaged in such debate at this point, however, he has used the proper names or the terms interchangeably.

²² Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Quran: New Edition with Revised Translation and Commentary*, (Amana publications, Beltsville, Maryland, 1989) (6296 A footnote commentary on surah 112:33), 1714.

²³ Khalel Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers*. (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 201.

²⁴ Ibid, 189.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Indeed, the EOTC members do not deny the eternal sonship of Jesus and the Father; however, their focus on the physical birth of Jesus from St. Mary supported their exaggerated “Mariology” that led them to venerate, worship and pray in the name of St. Mary as the mediator.

The going up to heaven and coming down in the Book of Proverbs 30:4a dramatically echoed in John 3:13, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man.” (John 3:13a NIV). And later in verse 13b-14 John replaced the name ‘the Son of Man’ with ‘the Son of God’, which implies that both are referring to the same person, Jesus. Indeed, God asked Agur in Proverbs to depict his limitations and ignorance to fully comprehend the Divine being.²⁷ However, Christians, as people who live in the NT, are far better than Agur in understanding God’s revelation through His Son, and we may read Proverbs 30:4b in light of John 3:13 and clearly argue that Jesus is the only preexisted and the Divine Son of God, who ascended from heaven and descended for the sake of the economy (See also Matthew 2:14-15).

The Prophet Daniel says, “Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” (Daniel 3:25 KJV).²⁸ The appearance of the fourth being in the furious fire or the blazing furnace brought divine deliverance. And this Divine being was said to be ‘the Son of God’. Indeed, most commentators have interpreted v-25 as a prophetic reference to the Christ. For example, the African Bible Commentary says, “Nebuchadnezzar could not recognize the pre-incarnation Son of God, and so he described him as an angel or a divine being (3:28).”²⁹ James L. Mays says, “This enigmatic fourth figure was understood by early Christian interpreters to be none other than the second person of the Trinity and is depicted as such in early and medieval Christian paintings.”³⁰ Irenaeus said, “It is manifest [in Scripture] that the Father is indeed invisible, of whom also the Lord said, “No one has seen God at any time.” But his Word, as he willed it and for the benefit of those who saw the Father’s brightness and explained his will...”³¹ This shows that there was an understanding that Jesus used to be called the Son of God before his miracles birth.

More captivately, for the later church fathers (Athanasius and Origen) the term ‘Wisdom’ was the most primary biblical title used for Christ.³² Indeed, such reference to the Son based on the Book of Proverbs 8 had not been a point of divination between Arius and Athanasius, though their interpretation of the term “brought me forth” (Proverbs 8:22 NIV) was treated differently on the basis of their dissimilar theological ‘plotline’. Moreover, the LXX translation for the term “he brought me forth” reads γεννᾶ (he begets). Had the council used this translation, the Arians would have not used Proverbs 8:22 as a foundation of Anti-Nicene theology, which the subsequent defenders of the Creed had to disprove the Arian way of transition and interpretation of the text.³³

There are numerous witnesses in the NT too that affirms the preexistence of Jesus as the Son of God. The Apostle Paul said, “He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* over all creation (Colossians 1:15 NIV, *emphasis mine*). Here Paul is not saying that God created Jesus first; rather, it means creation got its beginning in Him.”³⁴ Thus, the term ‘firstborn’ does not necessarily refer to a specific period of time; rather, it is a confirmation that Jesus had been eternally God’s Son. Said in other words, Jesus had only one birth in terms of him becoming God’s Son which took place eternally before the creation of the universe.

In the Gospel of John Jesus’ deity was affirmed as eternal Word of God; it reads “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:1-3 NIV). That same eternal being, who was called the Son of God is now incarnated and dwelt among us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14 NIV).

²⁷ Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed. *African Bible Commentary. A One-Volume Commentary written by 70 African Scholars.* (Zondervan: WorldAlive publisher, 2006), 996.

²⁸ Most of the modern translations say, “a son of the gods”.

²⁹ Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed. *African Bible Commentary. A One-Volume Commentary written by 70 African Scholars.* (Zondervan: WorldAlive publisher, 2006), 996.

³⁰ James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary.* (San Francisco: Harper & Roe, Publisher, 1988), 699.

³¹ Daniel Ezekiel. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament XIII.* (USA: Inter Varsity Press, 2008), 181.

³² Khalel Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 110-111. Though I am not convinced, see what Anatolios said on page 110 when referring to some ‘modern biblical criticism’ saying, “Proverbs 8 does not refer to Christ”.

³³ David Maxwell, “A video lecture for the course ‘S-894 CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS’”, Modular (Accessed from the E-Reserves on Blackboard, St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, August 5, 2016). There are more OT texts where God addresses himself in first person plural, which implies the Son’s existence prior to creation and his incarnation (See Genesis 1:26 & Isaiah 6:8).

³⁴ Khalel Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 156 & 163.

Finally, the writer of the Book of Hebrews said, “But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” (Hebrews 1:2-3a). This is why Athanasius said, “For who can even conceive that there was once no radiance of light, so as to dare to say that the Son is not always, or that the Son was not before he was begotten?”³⁵ Since the Son is the radiance of the Father, anyone who has seen the Son has also seen the Father. And the Son has been from eternity being radiance of the Father’s glory and the Father made the universe through the Son. Thus, we may conclude that there was no time when Jesus was not called the Son of God.

This is why the council had to affirm that Jesus was the Son eternally and the Father had always been the Father eternally. Athanasius said, “But God, being without parts, is Father of the Son without partition or possibility, for neither outflow nor influx pertain to the Incorporeal as they do to human beings. Since his nature is simple, he is Father of the one and only Son.”³⁶ St. Irenaeus also said, “... Since, for God, the Son is [in] the beginning before the creation of the world, but for us, now, when He was revealed, for before this He was not for us who did not know Him.”³⁷

In sum, the current church has to stick to what the early church fathers, our prestigious traditions, and the Creeds taught about the eternal Father-Son relationship which has been affirmed as biblical fact against the heretics. The current church continues to strongly teach that the divine sonship is an eternal fact which Christians need to keep on witnessing to others. Contrary to this, anyone who believes the birth of Jesus as the beginning of his sonship is also saying that the Son had a beginning of his existence. Indeed, his incarnation was the result of Mary’s miraculous conception and birth, as realized by the Father and the Holy Spirit, and willingly accepted by Jesus. Even then, it was not because Jesus cannot get out of that humiliation, but for our sake and for the sake of our salvation that he was incarnated and humbled himself.

The second point of controversy is on the ‘impossibility of God’. Our Muslim brothers and sisters accused Christians for contradicting ourselves when we believe Jesus as a Divine being, yet at the same time believe in his suffering and death. This implies that Christians believe in a God who suffers and dies. Contrary to that Muslims believe in the Oneness of Allah, who is One God and eternal and the impassible. Islam is strongly monotheistic religion that strongly opposes the suffering of God.

Looking at the fourth century debate, the issue of impassibility of God was dealt differently both by the Arians group and the Orthodox Christians group. Christianity had long standing precision and widely held orthodox view of God’s impassibility. Most of the later fathers were on the same page regarding the impassibility of the divine nature. However, their understanding of the deal is still highly dependent on their ‘theological plotline’. Muslims do also believe that Allah/God is not vulnerable to suffering or death. They accused Christians for believing in God’s suffering, as if Christianity underwent change during the Nicene council and its subsequent theological teachings.

It seems important, however, to discuss how the fourth century dealt with the impassibility of God and then try to retrieve it in to our context. Arius complained the orthodox Christians groups of their contradiction to the long-standing truth about the impassibility of God. On one hand, Christians argued for the ontological equality of the Son with the Father, on the other hand, they believe in the suffering of Jesus whom they claim to have a deity.

Arius shifted the argument from the *oikonomia* to the *theologia* and began to challenge the defenders of the Creed. As we have seen in the introductory section of this paper, Arius tried to argue for the possibility of the suffering of the divine only through the *Logos*, who is less divine being, and other than the Highest God.³⁸ For him this *Logos* is generated or begotten by the will of the Father as the first born of all other creatures.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid, 189.

³⁶ Ibid, 188.

³⁷ John Behr, tr. *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Apostolic Preaching*. (Crestwood: St. Valdimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 68-69.

³⁸ Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (HarperOne: An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 34-35.

³⁹ Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers: The Library of Christian Classics*. (Westminster: John Knox Press, Louisville, London, 1954), 332-334.

Therefore, for Arians since the *Logos* is uniquely created being, he and his followers had seen no problem to believe in the suffering of the *Logos*. Although Arius correctly believed about the possibility of God to suffer only through the *Logos*, however his claim to perceive the *Logos* as less divine being entirely falsifies his point of argument. Unlike the Nicene defenders, who insisted on the subordination of the Son only in terms of the *oikonomia*, Arius “concluded that the subordination of Christ to God according to the economy (kat’ oikonomian) implied subordination at the level of the God’s being (kata theologian).”⁴⁰

This position of Arians’ leads us to deal with the *oikonomia*, which is God’s plan and act of salvation for human beings. In the *oikonomia* it is necessary for the divine to suffer through the *Logos* as the second person of the Trinity for the very reason of salvation. And all related humiliation and exaltation of the Son should be seen in light of the economy. However, this may not be true in the *theologia*, because God is eternally impassible God and cannot go under suffering. Otherwise, if Christ was just a human being with whatever uniqueness, as claimed by the Arians group, he would have not been able to mediate, forgive, and reconcile the fallen creature with the Holy God.⁴¹

Athanasius tried to insist on the orthodox view about the impassibility of God. He wisely addressed the controversy by attributing Christ’s suffering to the incarnated *Logos*, but insisted on the impassibility of the *Logos* ‘considered apart from the incarnation’. Athanasius correctly affirmed inseparability of the Word and the flesh when talking about the suffering of the incarnated Word and the impassibility of God in that one Person. He said,

... For these things properly belong (*idia*) to the flesh and the flesh is not another’s but is the Word’s... when the Lord becomes a human being *for our sakes* and puts on a body, he is none the less God. He was not lessened by the covering of the body, but rather divinized it and made it immortal.⁴² (*emphasis mine*).

Similarly, in his letter Cyril of Alexandria described his belief on the *oneness* of Christ in/from both natures. Cyril then denies believing in the suffering of God and affirms his belief on God’s impassibility, unchangeableness, and immutability.⁴³ He strongly affirmed that after the incarnation of the Son, the *Logos* was impassible in his divine nature but capable of suffering in his own humanity.⁴⁴ He said,

And he who is without visible shape is incarnate without change, he who is without beginning is born according to the flesh, he who is all-perfect ‘advances in age’ according to the body, he who is above suffering endures sufferings, enduring insults not in that which he continued to be but receiving the suffering of the body in that which he became.⁴⁵

According to Cyril, those who separate the two natures as distinctive and give the suffering to the son of Mary are actually denying he is the very Word of God. Therefore, this according to both Athanasius and Cyril is the orthodox teaching and all who claim otherwise must be rejected. And this is why we strongly hold on to the later father’s teaching and confession as the ‘rule of faith’ and firmly believe in the suffering of the *Logos* as the second person of the Trinity only for the sake of the economy.

What is at the stake?

Currently, when Christians claim that we are creedal, we must first of all fully comprehend the entire theological culture of the Trinitarian controversy within the context of the bigger theological culture of the fourth century. We should also comprehend how current Christian scholars and theologians tried to retrieve the Creed and the bigger theological theme of the fourth century debate. However, although the later fathers set profound and normative doctrines to defend Christian faith against heretics, which Christians should be treasured in every century, fortunately, they did not set *the* universal methods or *the* general principle on how we technically defend the Christian faith and how we ought to have conversation with people of the other faith.

⁴⁰ Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (HarperOne: An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 35.

⁴¹ Khalel Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers*. (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 121.

⁴² *Ibid*, 191.

⁴³ John I. McEnerney, trans., *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Letters 51-110* (Washington: CUA Press, 1987), 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 30-31 & 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 34. (See his Letter 55).

Christian scholars, theologians, and churches today are compelled to choose contextualized and working methods for interreligious dialogue. Nevertheless, due to the confused understanding of the Divine sonship, the mystery of incarnation, and the mystery of Trinity among the evangelical believers in Ethiopia today, we seem to lose the game in the battle field when having conversation with Muslims (a religion growing faster than ever).

Sticking to the patristic indoctrination from the very moment of Christian-Muslim dialogue may increase the level of intensity between the communities of the two religions. On one hand, what is very important in interreligious dialogue is to listen to each other, which at the same time helps us to detect their error and be able to hear their heart-felt needs.

On the other hand, we must strategically and systematically select theological themes and carefully choose where to start the conversation. We should not begin our conversation arguing about the Divine sonship. Rather, we purposefully delay that absolute truth until we establish a theology that is developed for further and solid theological dialogue. However, when we come to the point of the Divine sonship, it is extremely important to hold on the Nicene theology and clearly describe what it meant by the Father begetting the Son.

Once we know that the Quran will not tolerate any idea of God having a son or the description of Jesus as the Son of God, how effective would be to argue about “always Father and always Son” from the very beginning of the dialogue? It is Christian theologians and churches who should prayerfully discern from where to start the dialogue. I would rather suggest that one of the ways of dealing with such challenging issue is to draw out a Christology developed from Quran to be placed for study alongside those to be found in the Holy Scripture. It is only then that we may continue to have conversation with Muslims based on the studied fact about Christology from the perspective of Quran then move to the Scripture.

The main question could be, which part of Quran’s saying about Jesus is helpful to start the conversation? The Holy Quran speaks about the *ascension* and *second coming* of Jesus,

That they said (in boast) “We killed Christ Jesus the Son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah”- But they killed him not, Nor crucified him, But so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, With no (certain) knowledge, But only conjecture to follow, for of surety they killed him not- Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah Is Exalted in Power: Wise And there is none of the people of the book But must believe in him before his death; And on the day of judgment he will be a witness against them.⁴⁶

The Holy Quran and Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion and the death of Jesus. They rather believe that Jesus’ earthly life time was as mystery as his birth. He seemed to be crucified on the Cross and died and buried only in the eyes of his followers, but in reality, he was taken up to heaven to live with God until the last days. So, this could be a starting point to question our Muslim brothers and sisters why do they think that Jesus was taken up to heaven alive? Just like the Arians, they may begin their argument from the humanity of Jesus, and they may say that he was taken up because he was obedient to God and as a result God exalted him up beyond the death.

Here we may tell them the *oikonomia* of his death, for us and for our sake that he was killed, but towards his Divine being death had no power to defeat Jesus. The Muslims believe in Jesus’ three and half years of ministry, a time when he had thousands of followers and enemies simultaneously. Thus, it should be difficult for them not to believe in his death while he had historical rivals both from the religious and political groups, who had power to execute anyone they dislike.

Thus, the very fact of his resurrection is then because of the economy, because God wanted to reconcile the universe unto himself through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Son. The Scripture says, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” (Leviticus 17:11 NIV). And the Book of Hebrews affirms the same notion, “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Hebrews 9:22 NIV).

Jesus’ second coming is also affirmed in the Quran. The same Surah we have read above says, “And on the Day of Judgment he will be the witness against them.” And we also read in several other places where Jesus is mentioned as a Judge at the End of the Age.

⁴⁶ Quran: Surah 4:157-159.

For example, “And (Jesus) shall be a sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of Judgment): Therefore have no doubt about the (hour), but follow ye me: this is a straight Way.”⁴⁷ “When Jesus came With Clear Signs, he said: “Now have I come to you with Wisdom, And in order to make Clear to you some Of the (point) on which Ye dispute: therefore fear Allah And Obey me.”⁴⁸ Then, we may question, if Jesus is a created being, how can he judge human beings at the End of the Age?

The Holy Scripture says that human beings have no mandate to judge others, but leave judgment for God. The Book of James said, “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:11-12 NIV). Jesus also said, “I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge.” (John 8:50 NIV). Moreover, we may refer to the adulterous woman, who was accused of adultery and was about to be stoned by the Pharisees and the religious leaders. Jesus said, “When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7 NIV).

This implies that human beings are sinners and they have no mandate to judge on others. And at the same time Jesus was not able to judge against the woman, “Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:10-11 NIV). Since Jesus was an incarnated human, who bore our sins, he could not judge the adulterous woman. For us and for our sake Jesus became a sinner, a murderer, a thief and a slanderer. Martin Luther interestingly in his exposition on the Book of Galatians said that Jesus Christ took upon himself the guilt of thieves, adulterers, blasphemers, and murderers, and in turn, he became a thief, greatest adulterer, blasphemer, and murderer whom the Law condemned Him to die on the Cross.⁴⁹ Paul also said, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV). Paul again affirmed the fact saying, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” (Galatians 3:13, NIV). Human beings were the one who actually committed the sins and brought God’s curse upon themselves; but, it was Christ who willingly took the penalty by becoming a curse for us, who have been already cursed because of our transgressions. This is why Luther said, “Therefore when the Law found Him (*Jesus*) among thieves, it condemned and executed Him as a thief.”⁵⁰

The above interpretation is true only in the *oikonomia* of God, in relation to God’s plan of salvation ‘for us’. This is why the whole emphasis of Paul’s argument about Jesus as a person who was made a chief sinner, whom the Law cursed, rests on the term ‘for us’.⁵¹ Nevertheless, this cannot be true in the *theologia* aspect, because Jesus as ontologically equal and holy as the Father can judge human beings while he was in his earthly ministry.

Of course, there are some other places in the Scripture where Jesus forgave sins, which is a task that can be done only by the living God. The Gospel of Mark says, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:5-7 NIV). Then, the question we should ask our Muslim brothers and sisters is that, if they continue to insist and believe in Jesus as a non-divine being, then how do they attribute the task of judging to Jesus at the end of the Age, which is a task that must be done only by the Divine God?

Concluding Remarks

We clearly tried to retrieve the fourth century Trinitarian debate from both groups point of views and tried to comprehend their ‘theological plotline’ when interpreting certain Bible texts. We also observed not only the Nicene Creed and its subsequent defense by the later fathers, but also the pro-Nicene theology which continues to be authoritative for the current Trinitarian controversy. We share the common theological culture when confessing, living, introducing, and defending our Triune faith.

⁴⁷ Quran Surah 43:61.

⁴⁸ Quran Surah 43:63.

⁴⁹ *Luther’s Work, Lecture on Galatians 1535, Chapter 1-4*: Volume 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963), 277- 278.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 278.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 277.

Since we have observed Muslims' sensitivity about Jesus being called the 'Son of God', however, it will be appropriate for us to find other common point of contact about Jesus which is accepted both in the Bible and the Quran. The Holy Quran speaks about Jesus' ascension and his second coming to judge. And I think this can be taken as a common ground to start conversation with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Although their overall understanding of Jesus refers Him as a created being, but still the Quran recognizes Jesus' exalted position. Indeed, most of my Muslim fiends whom I converse with have not read that section of the Quran, but they said that they do not have any problem to recognize and accept it as far as it is written in the Holy Quran.

Based on the common ground, we may then move to explain the theological culture about the impassibility of God and the divine sonship. Instead of insisting on Jesus as the 'Son of God' from the beginning of our conversation, will it be possible to start from the common Christological concepts?

I strongly believe that our patristic indoctrination is very important to our Christian belief, teaching, and practice. However, it did not set and put universal principles on how to have conversation with people of the other faith. So, I humbly call Christians, cross-cultural missionaries, Christian apologetics and theologians to rethink on how to approach and where to start the conversation with our Muslim brothers and sister.

When we get in to the heart of our discussion, it is extremely important to hold on the Nicene theology and what it meant by the Father begetting the Son. And one way forward is to assemble evidence to support the Christian position, not only from the Scripture but also from the Creeds, the church traditions and doctrines and also from the Holy Quran itself, and thereof, try to convince people of the other faith with the truth of the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit.

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