



The Council of Nicaea in Jewish-Christian Relations Today. An Orthodox Christian View

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Intervention by Dr. Geoffrey Ready during the webinar “From 325 to 2025: The Council of Nicaea and Jewish-Christian Relations Today”, presented on September 9, 2025 by the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ).

In his book, [*Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*](#), Daniel Boyarin presents the parting of the ways as two sibling traditions born from the same mother (that is, second Temple Judaism, in all its diversity) and gradually developing apart over a long and complicated historical and cultural process, almost the way different languages emerge from their root mother – French and Italian from Latin, for instance, though intervening languages like Provencal, Occitan, or Romansch complicate a simplistic either/or picture.

But this wasn't simply a matter of what would become rabbinic Judaism on the one hand and orthodox Christianity on the other coming up with different responses to the same questions, but almost more fundamentally, the traditions asked different questions. Boyarin argues that Christianity *invented* the modern concept of religion—an independent system of beliefs separated from ethnicity, culture, and geography. In contrast, Judaism remained a national-ethnic identity that included religious elements but could not be separated from history, language, and peoplehood. This difference explains why Judaism has an ambiguous status as a “religion” even today.

In this respect, the Council of Nicaea really marks the birthplace of Christianity as religion. It set out the parameters of belief that define what Christian faith is all about, establishing an orthodox way of believing against competing beliefs.

What I want to suggest is that whilst this is partly true, it is to no small degree a modern construal of what Nicaea set out to do, a misunderstanding that is backed up by centuries of Christians misinterpreting the point of the Council of Nicaea and the creed it produced.

The confusion can be captured in the meaning of the word “Orthodox”. In a modern vein, it is used of opinions and rational beliefs, opposing what is considered deviant from what is traditional and approved. Etymologically, from the Greek, it is *orthi* = *right, true* and *doxa* = *belief or opinion*.

But in the early church, *doxa* meant primarily *glory, worship*. It was the immediate truth of spiritual experience and mystical encounter with the living God. “Orthodoxy” is the preservation of that truth with careful pastoral boundaries, not reducing it to thoughts (God is incomprehensible), or words (God is ineffable), but putting guardrails to ensure others could follow the same path to the experience of the mystery of God.

Introduction: Map vs Destination

In this way, the fathers of the council wrote the Nicene Creed to be a map — to be used for navigation but not the destination itself. For 1700 years, Christians have often confused the map for the journey's end, the fence for the garden that the fence contains.

1. Nicaea's True Purpose — Pastoral Defence of the Experience of God

The creed emerged as a response to specific attacks on core Christian teachings. These attacks threatened to undermine the possibility of experiencing the living God.

It was not intended as a comprehensive summary of faith or a replacement for the whole Scriptural story, but as a protection against particular heresies. If it had been intended to tell the whole story, it would have taught about God and his covenant with Israel, about Torah and obedience and disobedience, about prophetic experience and teaching, about promised land and exile, and God's promised future, the peaceable kingdom of the age to come.

The Church fathers knew the full scriptural story of God and Israel (as evidenced in their homilies, letters, commentaries). Bishops at Nicaea — like Athanasius, Alexander of Alexandria, and Eusebius of Caesarea — read, quoted, and expounded the Scriptures of Israel constantly. Their sermons and letters are saturated with Israel's story. In liturgy, Scripture was proclaimed in abundance: psalms, prophecies, and the commentary, the midrash on the Scriptures that formed the apostolic witness.

For the Church fathers, the experience of Jesus was intelligible only as the fulfilment of the covenant with Israel: the Wisdom of Proverbs, the Servant of Isaiah, the antitype of the paschal Lamb. The creed, however, does not rehearse this narrative; it presupposes it as the living matrix of the community's experience and proclamation.

But it was in their particular historical context, with the specific need to address the systematisation and narrowing of that faith and experience by Arius, they resorted to using credal statements and Greek philosophical terms (*homoousios*, *hypostasis*) as precision tools, not replacements for the Biblical narrative.

The goal was to safeguard the fence around orthodoxy — around true glory, true worship, true mystical experience — so people could continue to journey along the path to experience the living God within the worship and life of the church.

2. Recovering the Jewish Foundation

There's an opportunity on this 1700th anniversary of Nicaea — not only for rediscovering the creed's original pastoral purpose, but also for recovering that full narrative content of faith that we have neglected. Early followers of Jesus as Messiah understood him within the narratives, symbolism, and vocabulary of Second Temple Judaism. Their Christology was thoroughly Jewish, and essentially midrash on Scripture: Torah, Wisdom, Tabernacle, Shekinah, Glory

Boyarin argues that core Christian ideas — such as a dual godhead (Father and Son), a divine-human Redeemer, and a suffering and dying Messiah — are deeply rooted in the diverse Jewish tradition of Second Temple Judaism. These ideas were not novel creations of early Christians but emerged from centuries of Jewish thought and scripture.

3. What are the Implications for Today's Dialogue?

It has long been assumed that the parting of the ways has resulted in an unbridgeable gulf between the two traditions that emerge from second Temple Judaism. Christians and Jews alike very often conclude we worship different Gods. Jewish communities often view Christian theology as a Hellenistic (and pagan) departure from Israel's faith. I want to suggest that's in no small part because Christians have misunderstood and wrongly proclaimed the purpose of Nicaea.

But when Christians speak of Christ in terms of embodied Torah or divine Wisdom, Jews hopefully

recognise familiar concepts. This scriptural framework offers common ground that Greek philosophical categories cannot provide.

Nicene formulations remain the essential fence protecting orthodoxy. But within that fence lies a vast territory of Jewish-rooted narrative and vocabulary which remains the theological and spiritual landscape for human life and experience of the one true God.

Conclusion: From Arguments to Encounter

In conclusion, the creed was never meant to be the whole edifice — just its vital protective fence. Nicaea's objectives were not primarily to craft a new doctrinal system, but to guard the integrity of Christian worship, the truth of salvation as deification, and the relational knowledge of God known through direct spiritual, mystical encounter.

The creed functioned as a shield for the lived encounter with the living God — liturgically, mystically, and communally — rather than as an end in itself. The council did not set out to innovate but to draw boundary lines around what could and could not be said, in order to safeguard the mystery that believers encountered in prayer and contemplation.

Even the much-debated word *homoousios* ("same substance") was a fence, not a speculative system — it excluded Arius' reading but did not attempt to explain the inner mechanics of divine life. The goal was humility before the mystery, preserving a faithful path of worship rather than constructing a philosophical edifice.

Inside that fence lies the living reality: God's redemptive self-disclosure in Israel's story. Honouring Nicaea means not to mistake the map for the experience of the destination, or the fence for the garden, which remains what it always was: encountering the one true God of Israel who creates, sustains, and redeems all things.

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The full video of the webinar "From 325 to 2025: The Council of Nicaea and Jewish-Christian Relations Today" is available on the [website of the ICCJ](#).