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WHY THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA *STILL* MATTERS FOR ASIAN TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY

Patrick Vance S. Nogoy, SJ

Abstract. Does the Council of Nicaea still matter for developing Asian trinitarian ontologies? Yes. This paper examines the development of a faith-based ontology of a triune God, the centerpiece of the Nicene Creed. I advance the claim that the Nicene Trinitarian ontology is rooted in faith revelation that frames a novel construal of consubstantial (*homoousios*). From this, one can propose the concept of relation as a co-principle in being. Giulio Maspero calls this the objective genitive sense of the term *trinitarian ontology*: Christian thinkers made innovations on the dominant metaphysics of their time by discerning God's being according to revelation. Part of the failure of those who did not subscribe to the Nicene Creed (e.g. Arius) is their unbelief in a triune God. This unbelief, I will explicate, promoted ontologies that the Council would later anathematize as heresies. They are examples of ontology-driven faiths. This lesson from the Nicene case is necessary, so I shall argue, in developing sound Asian trinitarian ontologies.

Keywords: Nicaea; Trinitarian Ontology; Asia; consubstantial; faith

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Introduction

From an Asian standpoint, one can argue that the language of metaphysics and trinitarian ontologies arising from the debates in the Council of Nicaea are irrelevant. They are antiquated and too European. Although *consubstantial* made it to the creed, it is challenging for believers to find it meaningful in their faith lives. In Asia, the moral and devotional dimensions of the Christian faith matter more than rational ontologies. To address this issue, some Asian theologians use local and cultural concepts (e.g., *yin-yang*, *Advaita*, and *Dao*) to convey the truths about the Trinity, hoping believers might find them relatable and more relevant in their faith lives. However, they face theoretical problems related to orthodoxy. The issue is not merely linguistic; the solution is not confined to translation approaches. For instance, the debates surrounding the *consubstantial* point to a revealed truth that Father and Son share the same divine nature. This should be captured with precision when expressed in local concepts that some Asian theologians suggest.

Does the Council of Nicaea still matter for developing Asian trinitarian ontologies? Yes. This paper examines the development of a faith-based ontology of a triune God, the centerpiece of the Nicene Creed. I advance the claim that the Nicene Trinitarian ontology is rooted in faith revelation that frames a novel construal of consubstantial (*homoousios*). From this, one can propose the concept of relation as a co-principle in being. Giulio Maspero calls this the objective genitive sense of the term *trinitarian ontology*: Christian thinkers made innovations on the dominant metaphysics of their time by discerning God's being according to revelation.[1] Part of the failure of those who did not subscribe to the Nicene Creed (e.g., Arius) is their unbelief in a triune God. This unbelief, I will explicate, promoted ontologies that the Council would later anathematize as heresies. They are examples of

[1] Giulio Maspero, "Ratzinger's Trinitarian Ontology and Its Patristic Roots: The Breakthrough of *Introduction to Christianity*," *Wrocław Theological Review 31/2* (2023): 5-33. DOI: 10.34839/wpt.2023.31.2.5-33, 7.

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ontology-driven faiths. This lesson from the Nicene case is necessary, so I shall argue, in developing sound Asian trinitarian ontologies.

I begin by examining the debates surrounding the term consubstantial (*homoousion*) and its attendant concept of eternal begetting. In this second section, I argue that the belief in a triune God made these concepts proper in thinking about God's being. A serious peril lurks in fostering belief formation that proceeds from wrong, partial, or mistaken faith premises. This led to anathematized ontologies. I shall outline some of its implications for Asian trinitarian ontologies in Section III. I argue that the theoretical inquiry of ontologies found in the debates in the Council of Nicaea has significant implications for the development of trinitarian ontologies arising from the Asian context in the last section.

Arian Ontology and Revelation

Significant work has been done on the philosophical relevance and implications of the debates in the Council of Nicaea. The most popular of the lot is the Arian case. Harry Wolfson,[2] for instance, highlights the reliance of Arius and his cohorts on Aristotelian syllogism in constructing their ontological framework and their concomitant interpretation of Christian scriptures to package their beliefs. On the other hand, Rowan Williams[3] underscores Arius' motivation in fighting against what he thought was damaging to doctrinal beliefs in his bishop's preaching. According to Williams, Arius argues against Alexander's affirmative position on the substantial unity (*homoousion*) of the Father and Son because it puts in danger the Son's independent existence.[4] Arius' aim to correct what he identified as a serious threat to the Christian faith was not uncommon in his time. Marilyn Dunn

[2] Harry A. Wolfson, "The Philosophical Implications of Arianism and Apollinarianism," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers 12* (1958): 5-28, http://www.jstor.com/stable/1291115.

[3] Rowan Williams, "The Logic of Arianism," *The Journal of Theological Studies 34/1* (1983): 56-81, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23963208.

[4] Ibid., 56-57.

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surveys the early Christian communities during Arius' time. Surrounded by Valentinian Gnostics and Manicheans who called themselves Christians and claimed apostolic authority, Arius tried hard to combat a range of beliefs and arguments fostered by these religious movements, some of which were mainstreamed by his fellow bishops and priests.[5] These elaborate ontologies sowed confusion and division among the faithful. Little did Arius know that his ontological framework would be as controversial and even more divisive than those he had challenged.

Let us briefly examine the debates about the use of *homoousion*. Behind the use of this term lies three essential truth claims of the Christian faith: (1) the nature of Jesus as God, (2) that He is eternally begotten, and (3) His *relation* as Son to the Father is a co-principle of being. Against this, Arius proclaims that "there was a time when the Son was not." This famous proposition yields sub-claims that are in direct opposition to faith revelation: (1) Jesus is only a creature, albeit a perfect one, (2) He is not eternally begotten but made out of nothing, and (3) his substance (*ousia*) is independent of and unique from the Father. In Arian ontology, God the Father is alone the Unbegotten, the first principle, and that which possesses divine substance fully. To claim that Jesus is homoousion of the Father is a contradiction in Arian logic because one cannot have two first principles and unbegotten(s).[6] For Arius, Jesus must be ontologically subordinate; if not, then the ontological identity of Father and Son remains modal, following the Sabellian heresy.[7] Confined with the Aristotelian understanding of *homoousion* as an individual substance, Arian ontology seems to stand on solid philosophical ground.

A closer look, however, reveals acute problems that render Arian ontology inconsistent with faith revelation. First, suppose Jesus is only a perfect creature and is limited to *partaking* in God's properties (e.g., *Sophia* and *Logos*). In this case, his role as mediator in Arian

[5] Marilyn Dunn, *Arianism* (Arc Humanities Press, 2021), 12.

[6] Dragos Andrei Giulea, "Reassessing Arianism." *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 95/1* (2019): 63-96, doi:10.2143/ETL.95.1.3285813, 67.

[7] Ibid.

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cosmology has no salvific value because He does not partake of the divine essence. The Christian faith holds that only God saves, and this will not admit an Arian ontological argument where Jesus appears as quasi-divine (partaking of properties) instead of truly God (partaking of the divine substance).

Second, Arius' unqualified defense of God as Unbegotten and Jesus as a creature exacerbates the problem of the ontological distance between God and the created world, instead of addressing it. God remains unconnected to the world by hiding behind the mediating work of Jesus. Putman similarly asserts that for Arius, God is radically immutable: (1) He cannot have direct contact with a mutable, changing creation; and this means that (2) the Son, through whom all things are made, is also alien to the Father.[8] This is incongruous with the Gospel of John, which asserts that the Word made flesh fully reveals who God is, and with St. Paul's assertion that Jesus, as Son, is the perfect image of the Father.

Lastly, Arius' central claim that "there was a time the Son was not" misunderstands the notion of time. Everything that occurs in divine substance happens outside created time and space. If applied in the case of Jesus as eternally begotten, then the term *eternally begotten* pertains to the fact that there was never a time when the Son was not with the Father. Although the Son is *caused*, the construal of *caused* is not the idea of a sequential and logical series found in the created world. *Caused* in simple terms means *from*. This is part of what begotten entails: Jesus comes *from* the Father. For the Eastern Fathers who opposed Arius, *eternally begotten* implies that (1) the begetting of Jesus occurs outside time—therefore there was *never* a time when the Son was not; (2) *caused* is understood in a lateral way as *from*—therefore Jesus as Son receives everything from the Father; and (3) not to confuse with Valentinian emanationism, *begotten* is personalizing—Jesus is always *Son*. Jacobs argues likewise that the term *begotten* is read by the Eastern Fathers analogically: it is *not* how we think of it as material emission or gestation,

[8] Rhyne R. Putnam, "Before and After Nicaea: Arianism as a Test Case for the Ongoing Development of Heresy," *Criswell Theological Review* 18/1 (2020): 3-21, www.atla.com, 11.

and yet, it *is* how we understand who the Son is, which is none other than his existence originating from the paternal communication of divine nature.[9]

The brief rehearsal and evaluation of the central tenets of Arian ontology underscore two important points. First, there is a strong tendency to confine faith revelation and its attendant beliefs within the theoretical boundaries of ontological frameworks. Here, the starting point and eventual development of beliefs is ontology. This we gleaned most clearly from the Arian case. Surrounded by different ontological views, Arius offered his own which he claims is most consistent with Christian belief. Although ontological frameworks could sometimes function as a corrective to various interpretations of faith, they can also be illusory. This means that there are occasions where they appear consistent with faith, but when unmasked, they reveal problems that generate mistaken or false beliefs. For instance, although it makes sense in Arian logic that Jesus must be ontologically subordinate because monotheism cannot admit two first principles, this argument compromises the soteriological relevance of Jesus because He is not truly God. Instead of revising his ontological views to accommodate this fundamental and universal belief, Arius insisted on Jesus' quasi-divine nature (partaking of God's properties) and reasoned that a perfect creature could do the soteriological work. This caused widespread division in the Council of Nicaea. His ontology influenced plenty of believers, including presbyters and bishops, who were attracted by the metaphysical neatness of his view and its resulting beliefs.

Corollary to the first point, Arius's attempt to associate his ontology with faith tradition is masked by his exegetical reading of selected verses of the Scriptures. According to Putnam, theorists like John Henry Newman and Rowan Williams maintain that Arius is more of a *biblicist*—an interpreter of the Scriptures—than a logician or metaphysician because his anthropocentric cosmology, confession

[9] Nathan A. Jacobs, "The Begotten-not-Made Distinction in the Eastern pro-Nicenes," *Religious Studies* 55 (2019): 503-535, doi:10.1017/S0034412518000069, 514.

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of faith, and even letters have a firm grounding in Scriptures.[10] For example, his reading of Proverbs 8:22-31 affirms the key assumptions in his ontology: (1) the creation of the Son/Wisdom before the creation of the world (Prov. 8:22), (2) Wisdom is the master craftsman that helps God in creation (Prov. 8:30), and that (3) this same Wisdom is the "one through whom all the depths were brought forth (8:24), mountains were made (8:25), heavens and skies were established (8:26)".[11] Putnam emphasizes that Arius' interpretation of verses in Proverbs aligns with the philosophical, hermeneutical, and theological setting of his time.[12] In other words, Arius is not a novel or eccentric interpreter of the Scripture. This enhances his credibility because he does not depart far from the Christian faith tradition, at least in his interpretation of selected verses. More importantly, his interpretation of Scripture increases the credence level of his proposed ontological system. However, per Putnam, it seems that Arius has a strong tendency to isolate verses to suit his ontology rather than reading them from the comprehensive meaning of the Sacred Scriptures to the extent that he diverges from his opponents with similar exegetical approaches.[13] Arius' main motivation is to prove the plausibility of his ontological system. This has spawned beliefs that are radically opposed to Christian tradition. In my view, the Arian case is an example of an ontology-driven faith.

Beliefs sustained by and rooted in ontology can contradict faith, revelation, and tradition, and even doubt their plausibility. This was a serious cause of division within the church and the empire, which led to the convocation of the Council of Nicaea. The examination of the Arian case shows that the achievement of metaphysical neatness by meeting rigid syllogistic standards comes at a high price: the compromise of fundamental faith premises. In the Arian case, this

[10] Putnam, "Before and After Nicaea: Arianism as a Test Case for the Ongoing Development of Heresy," 14.

[11] Ibid., 15.

[12] Ibid., 16.

[13] Ibid.

means believing in an uninvolved and unconcerned Monad, who, despite being the Source of everything, delegates everything to a perfect creature. Belief in this perfect creature has no salvific value because he is only God-like. In addition, the God who is supposed to save us turns out to be, from an Arian framework, an uninvolved Source. This goes against the revealed truth and the apostolic witness of the scriptures and tradition.

In the next section, I explore this by arguing against the claim that the Council of Nicaea is merely a linguistic problem that the Nicaean Fathers addressed by reinventing the Greek language. This has serious implications for belief formation.

Revealed Truth and Fresh Ontology

Norman Tanner asserts that the early councils have developed a new vocabulary that could cope with the mysteries of the Christian faith rather than being confined to the language of Greek metaphysics of their time.[14] Tanner's claim can be read in multiple ways. One strand is a perspective that understands the debates in the Council of Nicaea as a set of linguistic problems. This is no surprise because most of the discussion involved the proper use of Greek words to capture the fundamental tenets of faith: *homoousion, hypostasis, logos, sophia,* etc. These words carry multiple layers of meaning, which make it appear that the Council was all about finding the right words to say. For instance, Tanner enumerates the various definitions of *hypostasis*, the Greek word for *substance*, the Latin equivalent of *person*: "support, resistance, lying in ambush, jelly or thick soup, sediment in liquids, origin, foundation, substructure, confidence, courage, resolution, steadfastness, promise, substance, reality or nature, wealth or property!"[15] To fix the problem of meaning, the early councils decided to use *hypostasis* as a reference to the *person* (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and *ousia* to denote

[14] Norman Tanner, "Greek Metaphysics and the Language of the Early Church Councils: Nicea I (325) to Nicea II (787)," *Gregorianium* 90/1 (2009): 51-57, https://philpapers.org/rec/TANGMA-4, 57.

[15] Ibid., 54.

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substance. This bold decision was not immediately welcomed, and it took subsequent councils to confirm it. But this linguistic puzzle is an outcome of ontological debates that strive to capture the Trinitarian mystery.

Take again the case of *homoousion*. It is not found in the Bible, the Greek New Testament, or the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament.[16] Its basic definition points to *substance*. This simple definition contains several conceptual problems that Arius tried to correct with his ontology. For instance, if *ousia* is construed as substance with individuating properties, then the application of *homoousion* would mean that the Father and the Son are not two individual entities but modes of one divine substance (i.e., Sabellian heresy).[17] If that is not the case, then, by logic, we are left with two substances with individuating properties, Father and Son. This contradicts the monotheistic belief in the one God. A third proposal is to think of *ousia* as a *genus*: a common genre under which the Father and Son derive their individuating properties. Here, *homoousion* would suggest that the Father and Son are examples of divine beings or gods![18] This, according to Giula, is the main reason why Arius and the Antiochene tradition rejected the use of *homoousion* because it treads towards different heresies prevalent at that time (e.g., Sabellian, Gnosticism, and Valentinian). The Nicene Fathers agree with Arius' theoretical concerns, but they have a different diagnosis: the main issue is that *ousia* is understood within the limits of Aristotelian logic.[19]

The two cases illustrate the reality that the debates in the Council of Nicaea are not mere language games. I agree partly with Tanner that one of the outcomes of the Council of Nicaea is a new vocabulary that expresses with clarity the Trinitarian mystery in a language understood by most believers at that time. However, what I take as an important

[16] Ibid., 53.

[17] Giulea, "Reassessing Arianism," 70.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

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contribution of the Council of Nicaea is a fresh ontology that is rooted in Trinitarian revelation. In other words, behind the seeking for new definitions of words and terms is the struggle to be faithful to what has been revealed and handed on in Scriptures and Christian Tradition. Even if this would cost revising or abandoning dominant philosophical approaches like Aristotelian syllogism. This seems to be the main reason why *homoousion* made it to the creed: it is an ontology that best expresses Trinitarian revelation. Similarly, Jacobs explains that, in the case of *eternally begotten*, the Eastern Fathers began with the biblical understanding of *begetting* before deepening it by using negative (apophatic) and positive (kataphatic) assertions to highlight the ontological difference between created subjects from divine subjects.[20] This led to offering a fresh trinitarian ontology consistent with revelation as received in scriptures and Tradition. In my view, this is an example of a faith-driven ontology.

The new Christian vocabulary that Tanner suggests is an outcome of the faith-seeking understanding that dominated and shaped the thinking of the Nicene Fathers. It also resulted in unique and revolutionary trinitarian ontologies. As an example, Maspero points to the concept of relation as a co-principle of being that arose from the thinking of the Nicene Fathers. He argues that the dominant conception of *logos* is a *necessary causal link*—that which mediates between God and the created world. This construal is, in Aristotelian terms, *logos ut ratio*: prime mover, intelligible cause, rational will.[21] This line of philosophical argument has made ontological problems more difficult to address, as I have highlighted in the Arian case. In contrast, per Maspero, the Nicene Fathers have understood *logos* as *logos ut relatio*. This pertains to the being of the Son as a "pure ontological relation to the Father."[22] In this case, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share in one, eternal, and

[20] Jacobs, "The Begotten-not-Made Distinction in the Eastern pro-Nicenes", 525.

[21] Giulio Maspero, "Life as Relation: Classical Metaphysics and Trinitarian Ontology," *Theological Research* 2/1 (2014): 31-52, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/thr.677, 38.

[22] Ibid.

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undivided nature, and the created world is ontologically dependent.[23] Here, *homoousion* is applied without contradiction because the partaking of the divine substance of the three persons takes place in a relation: consubstantial *with*. The correlated term *hypostasis*, which pertains to the individuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is understood together with *homoousion* in the lens of a personalizing relation. This kind of ontological thinking, which is faithful to the deposit of faith in scriptures and tradition, shaped new ways of expressing and making sense of the Trinitarian mystery.

In contrast, an ontology-driven faith (e.g., Arian case) betrays an unbelief that is composed of a double blindness. On one hand, there is strong credence in the ontological framework. In this first type of blindness, the believer only sees the interpretations of beliefs and scriptures that align with her ontological framework, whilst rejecting those that do not fit. Think of a believer as a racehorse with blinders. Blinders limit the horse's field of vision. Similarly, Arius and his followers cannot accept believing in Christ, who is of one substance with the Father. Even their exegetical interpretation of the scriptures appears cherry-picked to suit their ontology. The horizon of their field of vision is determined by the limits of their ontology. The second type of blindness is an outcome of the first one. This comes in the form of a firm rejection of revealed truths. It is very difficult for Arius and his followers to accept revealed truths even when they were forced to retract under the threats of deposition and exile. They continued to hold onto beliefs that were founded on their ontology rather than revising them in the light of revealed truths. This second blindness nurtures unbelief into stubborn false belief.

In sum, the revealed truths of faith compel the Nicene Fathers to push the limits of metaphysics to produce novel ontologies and radical vocabulary, and not the other way around. The Nicene Fathers did not solely aim to win the language games in the council. Behind the revolutionary Christian vocabulary of the Nicene Fathers is a fresh ontology rooted in faith. Although metaphysical neatness

[23] Ibid.

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and Aristotelian logic are essential standards to meet, they impose limits that lead to a contradiction to revealed truths. This influences belief formation to a large extent: the rejection of revealed truths, an appeal to ontology rather than faith, and exegetical interpretations of Scriptures aimed towards the confirmation of one's ontology. It has caused confusion and division among the faithful through the spread of false beliefs.

I shall outline the implications of this in the development of Asian trinitarian ontologies in the last section.

Asian Trinitarian Ontologies and the Council of Nicaea

Teresa Grace Brown raises a very important thesis on why there is a need for new trinitarian ontologies today. She claims that there is a shift in contextual critical consciousness towards recognizing voices who are excluded, silenced, or marginalized in any dialogue, which includes the relevance of the Trinity in the post-modern world.[24] By *critical consciousness*, she underscores the kind of thinking the Church Fathers employed in their dialogue with various philosophies of their time.[25] In particular, Brown states that the Nicene Fathers, for example, did not simply transpose revealed truths into philosophical categories but worked out points of convergence and divergence in their constructive engagement with philosophy.[26] On the other hand, *contextual* refers to the *'sitz-im-leben'* or "the signs of the times", where urgent issues facing the world demand the recognition of different marginalized voices, the theological blind spots of Western theology, and the diverse trinitarian ontologies that are developing in other parts of the world.[27] Brown asserts, together with other theologians (e.g.,

[24] Teresa Grace Brown, "New Trinitarian Ontologies? Trinitarian Theology, Theological Anthropology and Contemporary Critical Consciousness in Dialogue," *Modern Theology* (2024):1-24. DOI:10.1111/moth.12952, 7.

[25] Ibid., 3.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 7.

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Graham Ward and Hemmerle), that theological imagination demands that we understand our relationship with the Trinitarian God in dialogue with a range of theological anthropologies in other parts of the world, in keeping with the signs of the times.[28]

I agree with Brown that context is a crucial element in developing trinitarian ontologies that believers can understand and find relevance in their lives. In Asia, context is largely defined by religious and cultural pluralism. Asian culture is a mix of philosophies, practices, religions, social norms, and ways of thinking. Asian believers are surrounded by religions with heritage and sophisticated cosmology. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are examples of closed systems that contain within them a blend of religion and culture. This poses a challenge to the theological imagination in developing relevant trinitarian ontologies that also remain faithful to Christian tradition. Unlike the Arian case, which is an *intra*-faith issue, most developments in Asian trinitarian ontologies are identified as *inter*-faith. Paul Chung raises the same issue of whether our conception of the Trinity can be inter-religious or relevant to religious pluralism in Asia.[29] This is not easy. The main tension is to maintain a faith-seeking understanding that allows us to grow roots in the trinitarian mystery found in the heritage of the Christian faith, whilst extending branches in our engagement with culture. In other words, following Maspero, it is making innovations on local concepts by thinking about them according to God's revealed truth.

Take the case of Raimon Pannikar's advaitic trinitarian ontology in dialogue with Hinduism. Chung observes that in Pannikar's approach, a trinitarian structure is imposed on Hinduism whilst an advaitic structure is imposed on the understanding of the Trinity to achieve a vision where all religions and spiritualities are subsumed under the Trinity (God is in all and all is in God).[30] In this unique ontology,

[28] Ibid.

[29] Paul Chung, "The Asian Pursuit of Trinitarian Theology in a Multireligious Context," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 144-156, DOI: 10.1163/156973109X448706, 144.

[30] Ibid., 145-146.

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the Trinity is understood as the symbol of unity of whatever divine and human is; and, since it is advaitic (non-dual), the differences are preserved.[31] In Pannikar's Trinitarian language, Christ is the universal Logos who links the Transcendent (Father) and finite (the created world); and, as the mediator, he is present in all religions (e.g., Hindu *Isvara*, Buddhist *Tathagata*, Hebrew *Yahweh,* and Islam *Allah*).[32] The Father only expresses himself through the Son, with whom we can enter into dialogue with God, and the Holy Spirit makes this kenotic relationship between Father and Son complete and the dialogue with God through the Son possible.[33] As a result, for Pannikar, religions are variations of entering into dialogue with the Father through the revelation of the Son in the Holy Spirit.

From Chung's summary of Pannikar's advaitic trinitarianism, we can deduce that (1) local concepts are not isolated elements; rather, they are integral parts of a closed system, which implies that (2) in inter-faith cases, one must be critically conscious of a religion understood in its breadth and depth. Here, we are looking at and comparing two faith traditions in trying to find points of convergence and divergence. In my view, this should not necessarily lead to a fusion, merger, or worse, an incorporation of one into the other. Pannikar's attempt at an Asian trinitarian ontology maintains unity among differences, a key tenet in Trinitarian mystery. However, some aspects of trinitarian revelation will be muted (e.g. humanity of Jesus of Nazareth) and some will be highlighted (e.g., Christ as universal Logos) to emphasize the mediating work of Christ. Like the Arian case, Pannikar's trinitarian ontology is not a mere language game or a transposition of revealed truths to Hindu categories. In engagement with other religions, faith-seeking understanding is expressed in dialogue where one enters a world and sees it from the perspective of the Trinity. Call this *analogical dialogue*.

The Nicene Fathers have appealed to analogical thinking where, as Jacobs explains, in the case of begetting, similarities and differences are simultaneously highlighted. In my view, Pannikar applies the same

[31] Ibid., 146.

[32] Ibid., 147.

[33] Ibid.

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kind of thinking in the case of two religions. There are concepts in Hinduism where the Christian understanding of the Trinity is captured, but at the same time, escapes them. This is an essential element of developing Asian trinitarian ontologies. One must be immersed in a particular culture and religion without losing the heritage of the Christian faith. It is contemplating the revelation of the trinitarian mystery through a specific religion.

This is the same case, as Chung argues, with Jung Young Lee's trinitarian ontology in dialogue with Daoism. Lee's use of theological imagination resulted in a theology of change in his exploration of *yin-yang* in Daoism and the Trinitarian mystery. The Dao, the ultimate reality, is understood as Change, and it is manifested in the *yin-yang* process.[34] Here, Christ the Logos is identified with the Dao with its powers of creativity and self-emptying revealed in the interplay of *yin-yang*.[35] This interplay, Lee emphasizes, forms and re-forms the created world. Unlike Pannikar, Lee does not aim to distinguish the trinitarian God in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit. Rather, he is focused on the active aspect of relation, which is *proceeding from* (e.g., *filioque*, *paterque*, and *spiritusque*).[36] This aligns with the dynamic flow of existence in the Daoist framework of change. Chung's rehearsal of Lee's trinitarian ontology shows that some aspects of the Trinitarian mystery are stressed to express its revelation in Daoism—these points of convergence open contextual meanings of the Trinitarian mystery. By analogical dialogue, we can examine whether Lee's trinitarian ontology is an appropriate exploration of the points of convergence between Daoism and the Trinitarian mystery. We can also identify talking points between two religions, which could serve as a basis for an Asian theology (e.g., Lee's theology of change).

Without the appeal to analogical dialogue, Pannikar's and Lee's trinitarian ontologies could easily be identified and censored as

[34] Chung, "The Asian Pursuit of Trinitarian Theology in a Multireligious Context," 150.

[35] Ibid., 149-150.

[36] Ibid., 150.

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heresies. The fatal mistake of Arius and his followers is that they kept themselves within their ontological system and remained defiant in their unbelief. To avoid this, we take the cue from the Nicene Fathers by contemplating the revealed truths of God found in different religions and cultures. Analogical dialogue, like the Nicene Fathers' faith seeking understanding, aids us in seeking and understanding the revelation of the trinitarian God in the various religions and cultures around us. It demands that we understand these closed systems without losing what has been handed on to us in the Christian faith. From this, we can think of ways to communicate the Trinitarian mystery through dialogue with local concepts and frameworks. Pannikar's advaitic trinitarianism and Lee's theology of change are Asian trinitarian ontologies that arise from analogical dialogue. They are applications of theological imagination in the Asian context of religious pluralism.

Conclusion

The attempts at constructing Asian trinitarian ontologies should not be for the sake of maintaining pluralism, staying *nouveau*, appeasing marginalized voices, or implementing inculturation alone. It must stay true to the deposit of faith in dialogue with the different theological anthropologies. Here, we must allow the revealed truths of the Trinitarian mystery to motivate, shape, and push the limits of ontological thinking in dialogue with other religions with deep heritage. This is an important lesson from the Council of Nicaea: the Fathers dealt with Arius and his followers, who refused to believe and instead chose to remain within the limits of their ontological systems. Moved by the same faith-seeking understanding of the Nicene Fathers, we continue to contemplate the mystery of the Trinitarian God wherever it is revealed in and through our critical engagement with the world.

About the Author. **Fr. Patrick Vance Señga Nogoy, SJ** obtained his Master in Philosophical Studies Research and Doctor of Philosophy with a specialization in Political Philosophy from the University College London (UCL). He teaches philosophy courses

at Ateneo de Manila University and Loyola School of Theology. His published works include Touching Love: Thoughts and Stories (2016, nominated in the Inspirational Category of Catholic Mass Media Awards) and Pilosopiya, OPM, Pag-ibig, co-authored with Michael Aurelio, PhD (2024, Ateneo de Naga University Press). He entered the Society of Jesus in 2005 and was ordained a priest in 2016.