

# Defining and Supplementing Conciliar Trinitarianism: A Response to Timothy Pawl

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**Abstract:** This article constitutes a brief reply to Timothy Pawl's clear and insightful article on Conciliar Trinitarianism (defined as the Trinitarian theology of the Ecumenical Councils from Nicaea I to Nicaea II). The two basic arguments of that article (regarding the relationship between divine persons and divine nature and the debate over possible subordinationism) are celebrated rather than challenged. I instead offer three short comments. The first concerns the limited nature of the conciliar texts for the articulation of highly developed Trinitarian theology, and thus the question of methodology as it applies to Conciliar Trinitarianism. The second comment argues that the question of strict identity in the Godhead can be extended beyond the relationship of divine person and divine nature to the question of divine nature and divine power, will, and energy. The third comment argues that Pawl gives undue weight to a line from Cyril of Alexandria for a discussion of the Holy Spirit's mode of origination, and not enough weight to the clause related to the Holy Spirit articulated at the First Council of Constantinople, which recurs in one way or another at each of the subsequent Ecumenical Councils, up to and including Nicaea II. These three comments serve more as a supplement than a challenge to Pawl's original article, providing three further avenues for scholarly deliberation on the matter of Conciliar Trinitarianism.

**Keywords:** Conciliar Trinitarianism, Trinity, Divine Energy, Holy Spirit

## Introduction

Timothy Pawl has written an excellent article, which clearly delineates the contours of Conciliar Trinitarianism and offers detailed consideration of two crucial questions

in Trinitarian theology: 1) the relationship between divine persons and divine nature; and 2) the possibility of subordinationism as a consequence of the intra-Trinitarian relations. If the issue editors or readers had hoped for or expected a spirited disagreement with Pawl's findings in this response, they will sadly be disappointed. They might also be disappointed in the style of this response, since I am trained in neither analytic philosophy nor analytic theology. Be that as it may, I certainly agree with Pawl's basic arguments on the matter of the relationship between divine persons and divine nature, viz. that on the terms of Conciliar Trinitarianism, the relationship cannot be one of strict identity (person = nature) in the manner of Sabellianism or modalism, nor can it be construed in terms of a strong form of instantiation (each divine person individually "instantiates" the divine nature) which easily leads to some version of tritheism. I also agree with Pawl's position that the atemporal causal dependency of the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit on the person of the Father espoused in Conciliar Trinitarianism need not imply a form of ontological subordinationism in the Godhead. The ontological aseity or independence of the divine nature common to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as Pawl argues, sufficiently addresses the apparent threat of ontological subordination. Aseity and independence for Pawl indicate "that the thing [has] a nature that doesn't depend on something else," a condition satisfied by the aseity of the divine nature of the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> This definition of aseity or independence does not preclude "depending on the Father in other senses of the term," specifically in the sense of atemporal or eternal origination (the relationship of cause to caused).<sup>2</sup> These are the chief arguments of Pawl's paper, and I agree with them.

In what follows, I will merely amplify some of Pawl's points and attempt to nuance others. I begin by emphasizing the limited nature of the conciliar texts for the purposes of mining an in-depth Trinitarian theology, and use this to raise the question of methodology as it relates to Conciliar Trinitarianism. I next turn to the identity question raised by Pawl and argue that the question can legitimately be extended beyond the matter of relating person to nature in the Godhead to the matter of relating divine nature to divine power. I then deal briefly with Pawl's treatment of the Holy Spirit, which I argue gives undue weight to a line in Cyril of Alexandria for the extrapolation of a conciliar understanding of the Son's

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<sup>1</sup> Pawl (2020, 123).

<sup>2</sup> For further stimulating theological discussion of "the Father as Cause," see Zizioulas (2006, 113–54). Of course, if we define aseity and independence differently to mean strictly "unbegotten" as a personal or hypostatic property, then aseity and independence would, according to Conciliar Trinitarianism, belong to the Father alone.

involvement in the origination of the Spirit, and not enough weight to the clause related to the Holy Spirit articulated at the First Council of Constantinople and ratified verbatim at each subsequent Ecumenical Council up to and including Nicaea II.

### **1. The Sources and Methodology of “Conciliar Trinitarianism”**

The idea of elaborating a “Conciliar Trinitarianism” based on the proceedings of the Ecumenical Councils from Nicaea I (325) to Nicaea II (787) is an attractive one, but immediately faces a challenge. The challenge is the fact that a detailed articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is not the primary or direct concern of any of these councils. Certainly, I would argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is upheld by all of these councils, its outline is also creedally defined, and its deniers clearly anathematized. Its details, however, are largely addressed indirectly as they relate to the articulation of the doctrine of the person of Christ, which forms the fundamental impetus for the summoning of each Council (and, in the case of the First Council of Constantinople in 381, also the doctrine of the Holy Spirit). To help remedy the “shortfall” of explicit Trinitarian texts in these conciliar documents, we find Pawl drawing on later Western conciliar sources (the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215) in order to build his argument more deeply.<sup>3</sup> The argument is made that drawing on the Fourth Lateran Council is legitimate, even though “its documents do not count as part of Conciliar Trinitarianism, as defined here,” because “in it, we find one of the most detailed discussions of the Trinity from later councils.”<sup>4</sup>

This raises for me an important question of methodology for the enterprise of Conciliar Trinitarianism. If the Councils from Nicaea I to Nicaea II serve as the basic parameter for the discussion, can a leap to the theology of 1215 be justified methodologically? Surely it would be more justifiable to draw on the detailed Trinitarian texts of those figures who directly contributed to one or another of the Councils from Nicaea I to Nicaea II (e.g. the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril of Alexandria), rather than to pull in far later texts, simply by virtue of their falling under the rubric of “conciliar.” Perhaps it can be justified in terms of the reception of the earlier councils by later ones, but that argument is not made.

I sympathize with Pawl insofar as if we attempt to limit Conciliar Trinitarianism to the bare text of the Councils (Nicaea I to Nicaea II), we will struggle to find developed answers to a number of philosophical questions related to the doctrine of

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<sup>3</sup> Pawl (2020, 109).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the Trinity. Pawl, having mentioned five philosophical questions that do receive answers, gives one such question to which he does not find a detailed answer in the Councils, namely, what is the relation between each person and the divine nature?<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Conciliar Trinitarianism defined as the Trinitarian doctrine of the Councils from Nicaea I to Nicaea II calls out for immediate supplementation (which perhaps makes Conciliar Trinitarianism itself an unduly limiting category). Rather than immediately leap to later conciliar documents, however, I think the first port of call should be either 1) the Trinitarian writings of figures linked to the Councils themselves or 2) the explicit reception of less developed or ambiguous Conciliar Trinitarian doctrine in later Christian tradition. Otherwise, the exercise defined as Conciliar Trinitarianism becomes something different.

## **2. The Strict Identity Question: Person, Nature, Will, and Energy**

Pawl establishes with lucidity the fact that the categories of person and nature in the Godhead (as these are elaborated in the conciliar documents) cannot be strictly identified in all respects, if for no other reason than that there are three persons yet one nature. This is an important position, but a relatively uncontroversial one in post-Nicene theology. It is I think fair to say that a strict identity theory to describe the relationship between divine persons and divine nature is straightforwardly incompatible with Conciliar Trinitarianism. The question of strict identity can also be brought to bear, however, on another element of Conciliar Trinitarianism. When Pawl discusses what there is “one of” in God, the answer is given as “nature, substance, divinity, essence, Godhead,” although a little earlier he cites texts that also include power, might, majesty, glory, will, and other attributes.<sup>6</sup> To extend the discussion of strict identity, we might ask: does Conciliar Trinitarianism posit a strict identity between the attributes of God and the nature or essence of God? Clearly, they all belong to what there is “one of” in God, and thus one might on this basis think they are strictly identical with each other. This, however, need not be the case and indeed, there are two good reasons why Conciliar Trinitarianism may not permit such a strict identity between divine nature and divine power, energy, or will.

The first reason is connected with the decisions of the first Councils (Nicaea I and Constantinople I), in which the Son of God is identified as consubstantial with the Father and (in the words of the original Nicene Creed), ‘of the essence [*ousia*]’ of the

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<sup>5</sup> Pawl (2020, 107).

<sup>6</sup> Pawl (2020, 104).

Father. In the arguments presented by Athanasius of Alexandria between these two Councils, a forceful distinction was posited between something being a product of the divine nature and something being a product of the divine will.<sup>7</sup> According to this idea, the Son of God is so “by nature and not by will” in contradistinction to the created order, which exists by the divine will but not by the divine nature. If the divine nature and the divine will are thus not identical in every respect (strict identity theory), then it can legitimately be claimed that there is thereby introduced a certain distinction into what there is “one of” in God.

The second reason that Conciliar Trinitarianism might be uneasy with a strict identity theory between divine nature on the one hand, and divine power, energy, or will on the other can be discerned in the decisions of the Third Council of Constantinople (680–1). There, the theology of Christ’s two wills and energies (divine and human) was ratified. In the process of ratifying this theology, the Council declares that:

we recognize the energy [*energeian*] of each nature, that is to say, the essential, natural, and corresponding energy proceeding from each essence and nature undividedly according to its innate natural and essential quality, as well as the indivisible and unconfused co–operation [*synergeian*] of each essence that takes place [in the person of Christ]. For it is this that causes the difference of energies in Christ, just as the being of natures [causes the difference] of natures.<sup>8</sup>

It must be emphasized that this Council’s assertion of Christ’s two energies and wills is primarily offered as a corollary of the Chalcedonian affirmation of Christ’s two natures. However, the language used is certainly open to the implication that there is a distinction in the Godhead between divine nature and divine energy, the latter of which “proceeds” from the former in an undivided but nonetheless distinct manner. This is exactly the argument that would be taken up with such vigor in late Byzantium during the so–called Hesychast or Palamite controversy.<sup>9</sup> It is also an argument, however, resisted in Thomist theology, in which the divine nature and divine act or energy (and thus also the divine will) are generally construed to be strictly ontologically identical on the basis of a strong understanding of divine simplicity. There is, certainly, the added complex philosophical and theological

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<sup>7</sup> See Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 3.59–67.

<sup>8</sup> *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum Series secunda, volumen secundum: Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum tertium (680–681). Concilii actiones I–XVIII* 11.444–446.

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of this controversy and the theology of its main protagonist, Gregory Palamas, see Meyendorff (1964). For a spirited defense of the essence–energies distinction in God, see Bradshaw (2004).

question of real versus nominal or conceptual distinctions in the Godhead, although I think the language of the Third Council of Constantinople can only with great difficulty be touted as assuming a purely nominal or conceptual distinction between the categories of essence and energy (and essence and will). This Council's decisions are partly predicated on the idea that energy and will are discrete ontological categories that wholly and undividedly issue or proceed from nature, but are not thereby merely conceptually or nominally distinct from it (and thus their explicit presence in Christ calls for definition). If the distinction were merely nominal, presumably the Chalcedonian Definition of "one person in two natures" would suffice without the further need to supplement this with language of two "natural wills" and two "natural energies." There is a form of real distinction at play here, in however qualified a sense, and it is a distinction applied in the Conciliar decisions to the human and divine natures of Christ in equal measure. In short, Conciliar Trinitarianism thus offers resources that are not frequently tapped but are nevertheless important for ongoing discussions in Trinitarian theology East and West.

### 3. The Person of the Holy Spirit in Conciliar Trinitarianism

Lastly, in this brief response to Pawl's article, I would like to discuss his treatment of the person of the Holy Spirit. His comments come in a section dealing with the relations (of origin) between the three divine persons. To speak of the Holy Spirit, Pawl chooses as his Conciliar source a section from Cyril of Alexandria's Third Letter to Nestorius (ratified at the Council of Ephesus), a letter incidentally dealing not with the internal relations of origin within the Trinity, but with the oneness of Christ's person and hypostasis.<sup>10</sup> Although Pawl explicitly says that he is not making a case for the Filioque in the early councils (whereby the Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son"), he uses Cyril's text, which speaks of a "pouring forth" (*procheitai*) of the Spirit from the Son, to do just that, claiming that the Conciliar texts espouse a theology whereby "the Spirit proceeds from the Father in a way that, *in some manner*, includes the Son."<sup>11</sup> However, it is hard to make the case for a *causal* relation between the Son and the Spirit on the basis of Cyril's text. The context shows that the eternal origin of the Spirit from the Son is not what Cyril has in mind, but the pouring forth of the Spirit through the one Son of God upon the apostles.

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<sup>10</sup> Pawl (2020, 104–5).

<sup>11</sup> Pawl (2020, 105).

For a firmer foundation, Pawl need look no further than the clause of the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed that is consciously repeated verbatim in the acts of each Council from Constantinople I to Nicaea II (perhaps misleadingly eliminated by ellipses in Tanner’s edition of the third to seventh Councils):

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets.

This is the clause that holds the weight of Conciliar Trinitarian doctrine on the Holy Spirit, not the line in Cyril’s letter. In fact, for the question of internal relations of origin, Conciliar Trinitarianism consistently speaks of the Spirit as proceeding from the Father. On two occasions in the documents of Nicaea II, the Spirit is said to “proceed from the Father through the Son” (*ek tou patros di’ uiou ekporeuomenon*), long an acceptable gloss in the Greek Christian East, but not raised to Conciliar status until then.<sup>12</sup> The latter gloss attempts to safeguard and express the positive eternal relation between the Son and the Spirit, but it is never articulated as a causal relation or relation of origin (the principle of origin in the Godhead for Conciliar Trinitarianism is always and in all senses the Father). Regarding the text from Cyril, this was indeed used in debates regarding the Filioque in the later medieval period. Nilus Cabasilas in the fourteenth century refutes its use as a Filioque proof–text on the basis mentioned above, that it refers to the economy rather than to the eternal procession of the Spirit. He adds that Cyril is using a different verb than the usual one to denote the Spirit’s eternal procession (*procheisthai* instead of *ekporeuesthai*), and further points out that in the Conciliar documents for Ephesus I (431), at which Cyril played the leading role, we find the following: “[the Spirit] is consubstantial with them [Father and Son] and pours forth or rather proceeds from God the Father as from a source (*pēgēs*), but is bestowed on creation through the Son.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the burden of proof falls on those who say that the Spirit’s causal procession from the Father includes the Son “in some manner.” Articulating the Spirit’s procession ‘through the Son’ is acceptable in the language of Conciliar Trinitarianism, but this is nowhere explicitly or implicitly understood as defining a causal relationship between the Spirit and the Son. In fact, the only instance in which the Spirit’s procession ‘through the Son’ is obliquely explained in Conciliar Trinitarian texts, it is understood to refer to the bestowal of Spirit on creation

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<sup>12</sup> *Concilium universale Nicaenum secundum* (787). *Concilii actiones I–VII*, 3.236, 10.960.

<sup>13</sup> *Concilium universale Ephesenum anno 431*. 1.1.4.60. For Nilus’ argument, see his *Orations on the Holy Spirit* 4.42.

“through the Son.” As mentioned in section 2 above, this state of affairs calls for engagement with texts beyond the Conciliar documents themselves if we are to clarify this and take the discussion further, but on the basis of Conciliar Trinitarianism strictly understood, the primacy of the Creedal clause and its various glosses (whereby the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father), must be upheld as the essential and consistent bedrock for articulating the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to re-iterate my appreciation for Timothy Pawl’s careful article on Conciliar Trinitarianism, particularly for its philosophical defense of the basic framework of post-Nicene Trinitarian Theology (that espouses neither a strict identity theory to explain the relationship between divine persons and divine nature, nor a strong instantiation theory), as well as its rejection of the claims of ontological subordination that are so often levelled at Conciliar Trinitarianism. Rather than question or further bolster these points, I turned my attention instead to the question of methodology, followed by two specific matters that arose from my reading of the article. On methodology, I suggested that if Conciliar Trinitarianism is understood as “the conjunction of claims about the Trinity in the first seven ecumenical councils,” then these parameters should be consistently used or, if not, good reasons should be given for venturing beyond these parameters. I suggested that two ways of legitimately extending these parameters would be to deal either with texts by figures directly involved in the Councils, or with texts that explicitly engage with and debate the Conciliar documents themselves. The two specific issues from Pawl’s article that I addressed beyond the question of methodology were the question of strict identity, and his treatment of the Holy Spirit. On the first matter, I argued that a further interesting line of inquiry involves not simply the question of the relationship between the divine persons and divine nature, but also the question of the relationship between divine nature or essence and divine power, will, and energy. This becomes a legitimate line of inquiry when we consider the relatively strong distinction between divine nature and divine will in Athanasius of Alexandria’s theology, as well as the preoccupation with the doctrine of Christ’s two energies and wills at the Third Council of Constantinople, even if the matter is not definitively decided in the Conciliar documents. On the second matter, I argued for the primacy of the Creedal clause when discussing the Conciliar position on the Holy Spirit, specifically the question of the Spirit’s relation of origin, rather than a debated line from Cyril’s Christologically-oriented Third Letter to Nestorius. In



sum, this brief foray into the realm of Conciliar Trinitarianism has, I hope, provided a modest supplement to Timothy Pawl's excellent article.

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