

# On the Interpretation of Church Councils: A Response to Anna Zhyrkova's Conciliar Trinitarianism

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**Abstract:** In response to Anna Zyrkhova's contribution, this paper argues that we should not let a strong apophaticism govern our interpretation of Conciliar teachings on the doctrine of the Trinity. The paper distinguishes the material question of the divine nature and attributes - the kind of thing God is - from the formal question of the divine essence and persons as universal and particulars, as outlined by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. Apophaticism on the first does not mandate apophaticism on the second, as the example of the Cappadocians goes to show. Basil himself seems to have advocated an approach to conciliar hermeneutics that is flexible rather than prescriptive.

**Keywords:** Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Conciliar Trinitarianism, Apophaticism, Trinity

As Anna Zhyrkova rightly notes, conciliar statements—creeds, anathemas, canons, and the like—

were not self-sufficient, and were never intended to count as an exposition of comprehensive teachings relating to any particular theological question. Rather, they were signs on the road being travelled by theologians engaged in seeking the best possible way to explicate the theological truths received in and through revelation. (2020, 182)

As such, correctly construing conciliar statements 'requires their key': it requires the right interpretative tool. Zhyrkova finds such a key, in general terms, in the theological discussions that 'led up to the particular formulations... promulgated by the Ecumenical Councils'; and particularly, in relation to conciliar

Trinitarianism, ‘the ground rules concerning the very possibility of... speaking about God’. These ground rules were, in the case of the Trinitarian formulations of Constantinople I, those ‘laid down by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa’, according to which ‘the human intellect has no knowledge of God other than his existence’. And this knowledge, in turn, is derived from knowledge of ‘the actions and powers of God manifested through the creation’, ‘situated in the created realm, and thus differ[ing] ontologically from their source’. As Zhyrkova sees it, this strong apophaticism about the divine essence should be extended to the Councils’ Trinitarian locutions:

Thus, if it is accepted that one may speak about the Divine as something above and beyond any created essence and substance, the same custom ought certainly to be adhered to where the Trinity is concerned as well: when engaging in Trinitarian discourse one should keep in mind that the Holy Trinity is itself something above and beyond substance. (2020, 197)

Zhyrkova’s ambitious essay is wide ranging and richly textured. There is a great deal to be learned from it. Here I would like to focus on some of the ways in which it helped to come to a view on the matter that is at its heart, which is what we might call a ‘conciliar hermeneutics’: the principles one might or should use in interpreting the ‘terse formulations of the conciliar documents and decrees’. As a good scholastic, I will start with some distinctions that strike me as salient. The vast majority of Zhyrkova’s article is taken up with what we might think of as the *material* question of the divine essence and its relation to the divine attributes: ‘material’ because it involves substantive claims about the kind of thing God is (or is not), claims that are of necessity unique to God. The conclusion of Zhyrkova’s discussion—relating these issues to the Trinity—concerns what we might think of as a *formal* question: ‘formal’ because, irrespective of the kind of thing something is, we can reasonably ask, with respect to that thing, about the relation of what is common—here, the divine substance—and what is not common—here, the divine persons. We can indeed ask this question about any case in which we confront different things of the same kind. The issue is not kind-specific or type-specific. That is not to say that the answers in every case would be the same; merely that questions of the common and the particular (to use Gregory of Nyssa’s terms in *Ad Graecos*) arise in intelligibly related ways across the divide between the created and the uncreated. And this is so even if we accept the strongly apophatic Cappadocian view on the material question just outlined.

Both kinds of issue, material and formal, can be given ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ accounts. For instance, I take it that the apophaticism advocated by Zhyrkova as the correct hermeneutical tool for understanding the Trinitarian decrees amounts to a relatively ‘thin’ understanding of the material question of God’s nature: we do not know that nature, but merely the created divine activities. It is knowledge of these activities that allows us to refer to God successfully. A ‘thick’ understanding of God’s nature might allow something more cataphatic than Zhyrkova countenances. Perhaps we can have knowledge of God’s (uncreated) attributes, and perhaps thereby knowledge God’s essence too, as *ipsum esse subsistens*.

The same goes for the formal question. A thin account might treat of the distinction between person and nature as merely a linguistic matter, or (a bit thicker) as a merely logical matter. An example of the former, linguistic, approach, might be found in Augustine, at least as read by Bernard Lonergan:

For Augustine, *persona* or *substantia* was an undefined, heuristic concept. He pointed out that Father, Son, and Spirit are three. He asked, Three what? He remarked that there are not three Gods, three Fathers, three Sons, three Spirits. He answered that there are three persons or substances, where ‘person’ or ‘substance’ just means what there are three of in the Trinity... Obviously, such an account of ‘person’ does no more than indicate, so to speak, the area to be investigated. It directs future development but it cannot be said to impede it. The only manner in which it could become outworn would be the rejection of the Trinity; for as long as the Trinity is acknowledged, there are acknowledged three of something.<sup>1</sup> (Lonergan 1974, 25)

But many theologians offer something far thicker and more robust than this. As Lonergan notes in the same passage,

The original [i.e. Augustinian] heuristic structure, while it has remained, has not remained indeterminate. It has been developed in different ways at different times. There was the stage of definitions, indeed, of the three main definitions contributed by Boethius, Richard of St Victor, and Thomas Aquinas. There was the Trinitarian

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<sup>1</sup> I do not say anything here about the correct interpretation of Augustine. For a different reading, see my “*Quid tres? On What Precisely Augustine Professes Not to Understand in De Trinitate V and VII*” (2007). Whether or not Lonergan’s reading is correct, the position he ascribes to Augustine is certainly a possible way of thinking about the theological question. For examples of the second approach, treating the question simply as a logical matter, see for instance Peter van Inwagen (1995); see too the attempt to demonstrate the syntactic consistency of a whole range of medieval treatments of the Trinity in Paul Thom (2012).

systematization that conceived the three persons as subsistent relations and based the relations upon psychologically conceived processions. If I may cite my own views, I have maintained... that the three Persons are the perfect community, not two in one flesh, but three subjects of a single, dynamic, existential consciousness. (Lonergan 1974, 25)

Here, then, we have increasingly thick accounts of the formal question. But setting aside Lonergan's rather western perspective presupposed in the passages just quoted, we might wonder where Gregory and Basil stand on this formal issue. Let me begin my noting Zhyrkova's account of the matter:

The Trinity... is not in actuality different from the Divinity, but rather identical with the latter—in spite of any differences with respect to the names for these or the meaning they convey. Thus if it has been accepted that one may speak about the Divine as something above and beyond any created essence and substance, then the same custom ought certainly to be adhered to where the Trinity is concerned... Someone holding that the notions construed by the human mind (e.g. substance, nature, hypostasis, or person) can be applied simply and directly to the Trinity... certainly adheres to the Eunomian heresy.

At root, what Basil and Gregory objected to in Eunomius's position was the claim that 'ungenerated' signifies the divine essence. Eunomius's view *ipso facto* excludes the Son from the divinity. The response: 'ungenerated' does not signify the divine essence, but is simply a privative term that tells us 'what God (the Father) is like', not what God is (see Basil, *Contra Eunomium*, I, 15). Now, the thrust of this discussion focuses on the material question outlined above, not the formal one. And it is the formal one, not the material one, that is the subject of Constantinople I.

Indeed, to turn to the question that I raised at the beginning of the previous paragraph, Basil and Gregory do indeed hold that notions such as 'substance, nature, hypostasis, or person' are directly and unproblematically applicable to the divine. This is perfectly consistent with their anti-Eunomian apophaticism on the material question, since the issues are quite distinct. In this context, Zhyrkova points to Gregory's *Letter 38, Ad Ablabium*, and *Ad Graecos*—all texts in which Gregory treats the divine essence as a universal, shared by the three persons. Gregory does not treat the universal-particular binary as a mere analogy or model. He thinks that creatures and God quite literally realize these notions in their unity and plurality. The difference, in *Letter 38*, is that the notions of Father, Son, and Spirit are mutually entailing in a way that the notions of particular instances of a

created kind are not; and, in *Ad Ablabium*, that the activities of the divine persons are necessarily inseparable in a way that the activities of particular instances of a created kind are not. But they all alike realize the notions of universal and particular.

Zhyrkova argues eloquently that we should not take Gregory and Basil at their word here. But that seems to me to infer some kind of formal apophaticism from the Cappadocians' material apophaticism. And making this inference, it seems to me, goes beyond what is warranted either in logic or in the Cappadocians' texts.

My point thus far is specific, not at all general. It is that if we were to look for a 'key' to interpret the Trinitarian Councils, we should look not to the Cappadocians' material apophaticism, but to their formal cataphaticism (in the senses of 'material' and 'formal' used above). But there is a more general question that arises from all of this: whether, and to what extent, we should look for a key to interpret the Trinitarian Councils, or, indeed, councils more generally. This hermeneutical question itself, like the material and formal questions I raised above, itself comes in thick and thin versions. Zhyrkova's account of the 'epistemological and logical premises of Conciliar Trinitarianism' is an instance of a thick conciliar hermeneutics: we should be guided by the substantive theological positions of the principal thinkers involved in the council, or at least of those theologians clearly in the background of the council's deliberations (recall that Basil died shortly before Constantinople I). An instance of a thin conciliar hermeneutics might be one that would take the fundamental purpose of a council to be the exclusion of error, and that would read the council without adverting too studiously to the established theological positions of its principals.

One can of course combine these various approaches. For example, Zhyrkova adopts a thick conciliar hermeneutics and a thin account of both the formal and the material theological questions. Someone adopting a thin account of the formal question—perhaps treating the essence–person distinction as simply a matter of rules governing linguistic usage—would be very likely to adopt a thin conciliar hermeneutics. The opposite association, however, need not hold: one could adopt a thin conciliar hermeneutics and yet a thick account of the formal question. Adopting a thin conciliar hermeneutics, after all, does not entail abandoning metaphysics. But it allows that, as a matter of history, a number of different technical theories have been developed to explicate the formal question of the distinction between universal and particular, for instance, even where what unites these theories is merely agreement about the problems to be explained (for example, in the case of universals, the common resemblance of items of the same kind, and their distinction from each other).

Where do the Cappadocians stand on the hermeneutical question? Both the Creed of Constantinople I and the writings of Basil offer some highly illustrative paradigms that might enable us to hazard an answer. In reference to the clause of the Creed which reads 'who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and glorified', the observations of J. N. D. Kelly, first made over seventy years ago, still seem germane:

A feature of this article about the Spirit which is at first sight somewhat puzzling is the comparative mildness of its tone... The clause we are studying scrupulously avoids the term *homoousios* and contents itself, apart from the mention of the worship and honour due to the Spirit, with biblical phrases which, however unexceptionable if pressed, could be accepted by the Macedonians in their own sense... The aim of Theodosius in summoning the council was genuinely conciliatory, and he had insisted on including a quota of Macedonian bishops in his invitation... At the same time it must be remembered that not all in the orthodox ranks felt completely easy about the frank description of the Holy Spirit as God and as consubstantial with the Father and the Son which was becoming *de rigueur*... St Basil, in particular, practised a diplomatic caution which was sometime sharply judged in more uncompromising circles, and even in the *De Spiritu sancto*, while in effect pleading for the doctrine of consubstantiality, had desisted from using the term. (Kelly 1950, 342–3)

What is striking here is that both Basil's writings and the Creed itself (though not, admittedly, other parts of the Council's deliberations) prefer ecumenical pragmatism over theological nicety. Even if this does not provide irrefragable evidence in favour of a thin hermeneutics, it is nevertheless highly suggestive. This does not imply the attitude of someone likely to be particularly prescriptive about the interpretation of the Councils, or likely to see the need for a definitive exegetical key. *Au contraire*, it suggests the attitude of someone willing to tolerate a considerable degree of hermeneutical flexibility in the service of an irenic ecumenism.

If this reading of Basil is correct, he would adopt the following combination of views: thick formalism, thin materialism, and a thin conciliar hermeneutics. And now we can fruitfully contrast his view with that of Zhyrkova, whose position, if my analysis is right, would amount to thin formalism, thin materialism, and a thick conciliar hermeneutics. Appeals to tradition, then, as a guide to conciliar exegesis, are perhaps more complex than they may at first sight appear.

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