Introduction

*Credo*

The *raison d'être* of this work is to extend the previous discussion of general philosophical language in theology as laid out in *15 Minute Theological Philosophy*. In that way it is reliant upon the framework of all the previous *15 Minute* works and as such really cannot stand alone. Yet the work we condensed in *15 Minute Theological Philosophy* merely began the journey of the movement from intellectual, philosophical, and anthropological speculation into the realm of Judeo-Christian mystery and Revelation and our human, speculative attempts to understand it. Examining Creeds is the next step in a deeper exploration of that revealed Truth. This work is not an apologetic or attempt to convince the non-adherent but to explore the Truth as it stands and has been passed on.

*Mysterion*

While we will examine creeds in general, the final goal will be the examination of what is popularly called the *Nicene Creed*, the de facto standard for Christians of several denominations’ profession of Faith. In that form, the creed begins with a statement of belief in God. So, let us wander back to the basic concept at the heart of this exploration which is God and the understanding that the word for “*God*” rises from a much broader notion. We fathom, at a visceral level, that there is something other than us. We are able to know of God from the world around us and our innate Nature. In the previous work we gave this concept the name ‘the Sacred’. We are now moving forward in this work to directly address the ‘the Sacred’, which has been revealed as “God”. As also has been discussed in the past we know God to be the ‘*first cause*’ (*causa* *prima*). As the ‘cause of itself’ (causa *sui*) and of all things, God is now not just the one unquestioned assumption we have but is its sole focus. Theology is not a journey into *if* there is a God: it is the *study of* and *human speculation about* “God” – that which is totally other than us and which we know only because that other has revealed knowledge about the Other to us. We can know *of God* through our own faculties but we can only *know God* through His Revelation. Creeds then are the statements, not of human *belief* but of the *Revealed Truths*, i.e., Faith; the Truths which are beyond all human understanding, i.e. *Mystery*.

Creed

That said, let us embark and define our basic term. The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe” and is tied to the naming convention of using the first words of any statement to ‘name’ the text. Hence things like the “*Our Father*” that come from the first two words of the Latin Scripture passage (“*Pater Nostra*”) and “*Creed*” from the first word of that statement, “*Credo*.” Basically a creed is an attempt to codify, in authoritative language, a brief statement of the *tenets* or the basis of religious belief. It really has two forms, a broad one which points to the understanding of all the beliefs held by believers, and the sense we are looking at here, as the summary of the principles of that Faith. A creed is also sometimes referred to as a “*symbol* of Faith” signifying a "token" by which others of shared belief recognize fellow believers.

The attempt to put revealed mysteries (such as “God is three in one”) into words is difficult. It requires a language which is sufficient to express (not necessarily explain) the inexpressible. Creeds are the repository for such language, and therefore, while not self-defining, are both the basis of and the end result of the discussions about the nature of God and Revelation. In the end, historically at least, the purpose of a creed is the emphasis of “orthodox” (Greek for “*right-teaching*”) beliefs in opposition to the non-standard speculations that are being taught at the time of their creation. That is to say, the earliest creeds are “teaching” creeds but at the same time are statements of orthodoxy. The Apostles' Creed, composed during the first or second century, heavily emphasizes the true humanity of Jesus, since that is what the early heresies of the time denied. The Nicene Creed, promulgated in the 4th century, adds the companion affirmation of the divine nature of Christ, because the Arians denied it saying that Christ was created and therefore not fully God. The creedal statements of the Council of Trent or statements like the Augsburg Confessions, which came about in the 16th century, codified those beliefs that Roman Catholics and Protestants groups were arguing about at the time.

So creeds address both substantial and insubstantial things. The stabilities of empires and spiritual communities depend on both the everyday and the esoteric. Everyone has to know where they stand. So, we will also touch on the idea of “certainty” inherent in creeds, in terms of knowledge and in terms of belief. As spoken of elsewhere, ‘knowledge’ in this sense is understood as more of a rational perception than a scientific proof or certainty; an understanding rather than a foregone conclusion. The insight that this kind of knowledge exists is somewhat based in rational speculation. This is not to say there is no degree of certainty, but that it is not a certainty in a secular, modern scientific sense. Mystery implies a connection to something that we do not fully understand yet of which we are aware and can acknowledge and seek, and so, as per Aristotle it must be something which is ‘real’ (having *substance*) and therefore something of which we can have a type of knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-1) We might think of it as we think of the scientific theories of relativity or black holes. We did not have, for many years, certain ‘proof’ of black holes, except speculative, logical, or rational mathematical ‘proof’, i.e. enough certainty to act upon.

Mystery and proof may seem at odds, and are often put there, but mystery is the very human trait of accepting things we cannot directly rationally grasp, see, smell or touch. Quantum physics is all about accepting things which seem at odds with physical science’s facts.

Professions And Confessions

On that note, before we go any further and to sweep some of the overgrowth of time out of the way, let us go ahead and examine up front a couple more of our main terms. Creeds as we know them are “*professions of faith*” but they also involve “*confessions*” about certain beliefs.

To confess is to “make known or admit” things that are known internally; to profess is to declare openly and in this case to openly declare one’s Faith. Confession does not have to be a public event. In the case of the Sacrament, it can be done within the heart or within the privacy of a confessional (although public confessions are practiced today and were not unknown within the early Church).

They are *public*. This is probably the prime aspect. Professions make something widely known. We as a body of believers profess the truths we know together within the larger group.

As profession involves certainty, confession involves a certain amount of confidence, not bravado but as in a confidence in the faithfulness or mercy of God, per our previous statement. When I confess my sins, I confess my trust in God’s forgiveness; when I profess the creed, I profess external Truths. “…*for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved*.” (*Romans* 10:9-10)

So very basically, one confesses as an individual and professes as a group. Confession divulges the depth of the heart, profession is an external statement which guides the heart.

Creeds profess revealed truths and are not a summation of human beliefs; we confess belief in individual truths. God reveals, we believe. So while creeds are statements creeds are also prayers, in that they are professions of this intimate encounter with God.

A History Of Creeds

The earliest written creedal statements come to us from Scripture. The most basic of these (for Christianity) come to us in the epistles of Paul, most of which were written between the early 50's and the mid to late 60's AD. That fact means that there is approximately twenty years between the death of Christ and these earliest of Christian writings. Until then much of what existed was oral Tradition, that is, stories about Jesus, the Apostles, and their teachings. Paul is not afraid to build theologically on these existing oral and community beliefs, hymns, as well as other writings. As such the epistles of Paul contain copies of early Christian creedal statements which can possibly date from as early as 35 AD, approximately two to five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A prime example of this is *1 Corinthians* 15. This epistle is chock full of creedal statements, and in fact are the “*gospel*” which Paul “*preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand*.” (15:1) We also see in *Philippians* 2:6-11 his reuse of a hymn which contains creedal statements. Finally we see them in more codified forms within the later epistles like 1 Timothy “*Undeniably great is the mystery of devotion, Who was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed to the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory*.” (3:16) The next written construct, the gospels, also contain statements in the form of sayings as in *Matthew* 16:16 with Peter’s statement “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*.” or statements within the Prologue of John’s very late 1st century gospel “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God*.” (1:1-2)

While most modern creeds are “declarative” (“*I believe…*”), in the post-Apostolic period we see “interrogatory” (question and answer) creedal statements often used in Baptisms with content approaching the more familiar later formal creeds. “*When the person being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say: ‘Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?’ And the person being baptized shall say: ‘I believe.’ Then holding his hand on his head, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say: ‘Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?’ And when he says: ‘I believe,’ he is baptized again. And again he shall say: ‘Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?’ The person being baptized shall say: ‘I believe,’ and then he is baptized a third time.*” (Hippolytus, early 3rd century)

They also had a more practical reason, as Irenaeus (~ 130-200) [in what is known as his “Rule of Faith” that was developed to preserve the ancient tradition for those without access to written Scriptures] (in this case the word “rule” simply means a standard by which something can be tested, and the ‘rule of faith’ means that it is something that serves as its norm or measure). “” (*Against Heresies*)

All that said the more formal and familiar creeds are listed below:

**The Apostles' Creed:** The Apostles' Creed, considered the earliest official profession of faith, is basically a concise statement of the fundamental Christian beliefs. While at one point it came to be considered to have been written by the Apostles, it is merely a compilation of apostolic teachings, which is the actual origin of the name.

**The Nicene Creed:** The best-known of all of the creeds, the Nicene Creed was adopted at the Council of Nicea (a city in present-day Turkey, close to Constantinople/Istanbul) in 325, in response to the Arian heresy but the final form we recognize developed over time.

**The Athanasian Creed:** The longest of the creeds, the Athanasian Creed focuses heavily on the doctrine of the Trinity.

**The Chalcedonian Creed:** The fourth ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), returned to the question of whether Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man. The Chalcedonian Creed affirms that Christ is one Person with two natures, human and divine.

The International Herald-Triune

Ecumenical Councils are meetings of all of the world’s bishops, and they bring with them not just the overall pressing questions but also those of their local churches. While they deal with the persistent questions of the times in which they are held, the structure of the creeds reflects the most basic beliefs of the Church as well as a certain hierarchy of revelation about the nature of God [Father, Son, Spirit, Church, Salvation].

The concept of God, as it comes to us through the Judaic tradition, is of ONE GOD. But as we have discussed in the past, even that concept was an evolution based in the ability of the Israelites to understand the Revelation given to them. Still it is a major stumbling block in the early relationship between Jews and the “Jesus Sect”. It was one of the arguments against Christianity being part of Judaism and therefore not subject to protection under the Roman laws on ancient religions.

The Jewish development of understanding about God is seen in several aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). The names of God, the Tetragrammaton (“YHWH”) and “Elohim”, speak to different characteristics of God. One seems to come from an understanding of God as filtered through a warrior vision, the other through a farmer’s lens. The Jews themselves constantly struggled with having just their God versus all of the other gods. “*For the LORD is the great God, the great king over all gods.*” (*Psalm* 95:3) The prophets constantly rebuke them for straying from God to follow other gods.

Genesis starts with a statement of Creator, Spirit, and Word. Christians seized on these distinctions and pointed to the further revelation as explaining their triune distinction.

It comes down to a simple question: “*If God is ONE, how can He be THREE?*”

*The Cult Of Personality*

God as three in one, three persons in one God. This simple idea made in a series of statements within the Creed, relies upon the definition of “person.” We will explore this idea later but realize now that the word “person” that we us today has a different connotation than the theological term “person.”

*The Godhead*

This section may sound like the name of an Indie band or the title of a gangster movie, neither is the case. This is the term for “God”, as Father, Son, and Spirit in unity. As we might say “God the Father”, “God the Son”, and “God the Spirit”, so we might say Godhead for “God the Trinity” or “the One God.” It is a later theological term invented by John Wycliffe in his early English translation of the Bible (for which he got into a lot of trouble – but that is a later discussion). He uses it in an encompassing way where we might use the word “deity”, or “divinity”, or “divine nature”, but which we usually just translate as “God.” It can be useful when distinguishing the idea of God from the idea of each Person in the Trinity.

Putting It All Together

The subject of God is not for the faint-hearted.

Judeo-Christian theology has a specific purpose, milieu, and language. It is bound up in human thought and experience, but it speaks of an experience which is beyond human thought and experience. We will use the framework of metaphysics to structure our arguments but an idea not spoken of here – that of ‘economy’ – plays deeply into our theological journey; it is the canyon of our theological river. Economy it this sense has nothing to do with the exchange rate in Heaven, but is more about ‘how something is accomplished’. The ‘economy of Salvation’ talks about how salvation happens, what means and vehicles contribute to and facilitate the action of God to repair the fall. Just like the study of monetary economics, it is the game board on which we want to understand the dynamics and causes as well as the outcomes.

*“To show that a faith or a philosophy is true from every standpoint would be too big an undertaking even for a much bigger book than this; it is necessary to follow one path of argument; and this is the path that I here propose to follow. I wish to set forth my faith as particularly answering this double spiritual need, the need for that mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar which Christendom has rightly named romance. For the very word "romance" has in it the mystery and ancient meaning of Rome. Any one setting out to dispute anything ought always to begin by saying what he does not dispute. Beyond stating what he proposes to prove he should always state what he does not propose to prove. The thing I do not propose to prove, the thing I propose to take as common ground between myself and any average reader, is this desirability of an active and imaginative life, picturesque and full of a poetical curiosity, a life such as western man at any rate always seems to have desired. If a man says that extinction is better than existence or blank existence better than variety and adventure, then he is not one of the ordinary people to whom I am talking. If a man prefers nothing I can give him nothing. But nearly all people I have ever met in this western society in which I live would agree to the general proposition that we need this life of practical romance; the combination of something that is strange with something that is secure. We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland without once being merely comfortable. It is this achievement of my creed that I shall chiefly pursue in these pages.”*

**G. K. Chesterton,** *Orthodoxy*

1. Most modern thinkers, while embracing his methods, would reject the metaphysical side of Aristotle’s thought by putting it down to his overall ignorance of the world. This is a baby and the bathwater problem though, following the formal logical fallacy of the “undistributed middle” where if one part is wrong all must be wrong, ironically given that Aristotle is the founder of logic. [Ideas do not have expiration dates. The soundness of an argument or correctness of a statement has nothing to do with its age or the relationship to other ideas.] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)