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By another's birth? A theological exploration of the rhetoric of natality

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This article explores the rhetoric of natality in the Nicene Creed by drawing on the American Reformed theologian David Kelsey's theology of birth and the Canadian feminist theologian Grace Jantzen's theology of natality. It is argued that a retrieval of the incarnation – as a central element in the creed's soteriological rhetoric – may shape not only our reception of the Nicene Creed in South Africa today, but also our articulation of what it means to be human and what it means to flourish as natals within a context marked by the abuse, exploitation, and death of women and children. As natals – those who are bodies and who have bodies – we live and flourish by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: God 'incarnate' and 'made human'. We live and flourish not only by another's death, but also by another's birth.

Contribution: Our response to the questions and dilemmas of our time may require that we read the creed beyond the creed, offering a deeper and more imaginative engagement with its symbolic of natality, and ultimately with its potential to shape a theological imaginary of human flourishing.

Keywords: Nicene Creed; rhetoric; human flourishing; salvation; theology of birth; theology of natality.

Introduction

> The lesson of history is that words, for all that the poets say of their durability, are more subject to change and chance than the institutions which purport to be founded on them. (Edwards 2021:156)

With the 1700-year commemoration of the first adoption of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the reception of this creed in various contexts – including South Africa – once again comes into focus. How does the creed shape our theological thinking and speaking, our ethical decision-making and acting? How might the Nicene Creed's 'brief verbal formulas' (see Kelsey 2009:49–50) continue to shape our theological grammars today?

Of all that the Nicene Creed offers – a confession of the Christian faith in a particular historical context, an articulation of specific theological positions, an intentional literary structure, and a rich reception history – it is the creed itself, its words, its intended and unintended silences, its rhetorical force, and its grammatical patterns that are perhaps most intriguing. Its most famous theological debate concerns a single word; and the use of *homoousios*[1] would not only lie at the heart of the Nicene controversy but also signal how deeply the grammar of confession was indebted to the language games of its time.[2]

1.This word does not, however, stand by itself but is embedded within a longer creedal formulation. The Greek reads ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί [of the same substance as the Father]. Although this expression does not appear to be quoted directly from a biblical text, it reflects a distinctly Johannine logic (as is evident, for instance, in Jn 1:1–3 and 10:30). The key term in this formulation is ὁμοούσιον, a compound of ὁμο and οὐσία, which would famously articulate the Council of Nicaea's stance – against Arius and his followers (see Williams 2002) – on the divine nature of Christ. The Latin version is particularly interesting. It reads *unius substantiae cum Patre* but then adds a brief line of commentary directly following this formulation (remarkably, within the creedal text itself), namely *quod graece dicunt homousion* [what the Greeks call *homousion*]. What the Latin text highlights is the centrality of this Greek term in the reception – even the early reception – of the Nicene Creed, as well as the significant role that a particular theological rhetoric would play in the creed's development.

2.As Williams (2002:1) observes, 'the crisis of the fourth century was the most dramatic internal struggle the Christian Church had so far experienced; it generated the first credal statement to claim universal, unconditional assent, and it became inextricably entangled with issues concerning the authority of political rulers in the affairs of the Church'. At the heart of the theological controversy lay the relation between the Father and the Son, writes Kelsey (2009:49–50). Yet '[*t*]he theological issues driving the conflict were [*also*] entangled with political and economic issues. The empire feared that division in the church threatened unity in the empire. The controversy was also entangled with long-standing political conflicts in Egypt … By imperial edict the emperor called an ecumenical council in AD 325 to meet at Nicaea to resolve the controversy'. The Nicene Creed's 'brief verbal formulas' did not resolve the conflict between Bishop Alexander and Arius; however, they did 'provide a textual focus – that is, a semantic and syntactic focus – for another five decades or more of controversies' (Kelsey 2009:49–50).

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 years: Reflections on doctrine, confession, and ecumenism', under the expert guidance of guest editors Nico Vorster, Sarel van der Walt, and Nadia Marais.

In this contribution I do not attempt to revisit what many other theologians have done far better than I can, including Orthodox theologian Anatolios (2011) in *Retrieving Nicaea* and Catholic theologian Ayres (2004) in *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. Rather, I am interested in the potential of the Nicene Creed's grammar, and in how a retrieval of the incarnation as a key element of its soteriological rhetoric[3] might shape our ways of speaking theologically today. What role(s) might confession of the Nicene Creed play in shaping our – those of us who confess and study this creed – grammars of salvation? How might the rhetorical impulses of this particular creed – its affirmations, rejections, and silences – continue to shape our articulation of salvation?

It would be easy, in this regard, to follow the familiar rhetorical cues of the Nicene Creed: 'only-begotten', 'same substance', 'consubstantial', for instance. Here, however, I am interested in what the creed's soteriological grammar offers us – 'for us humans and our salvation' – particularly in its affirmations concerning Christ as God incarnate. How does the creed speak about the humanity of Christ? What does it say about Christ's birth, in particular? Is it possible to discern a rhetoric of natality within this creed? How might its silences regarding Christ's natality – including Christ as the son of Mary, born of a woman – shape our soteriologies, if at all?

Confessing the Nicene Creed

> The conceptual decisions the bishops made at Nicaea and at Constantinople were pregnant with changes in the way in which Christians understood God … in adopting the creed the bishops were not merely summarising Scripture's stories of God's ways of relating to reality other than God … by their creed the bishops were, among other things, giving broad hermeneutical guidance about how best to interpret Scripture. The bishops' decisions moved efforts to understand God Christianly in definite directions. (Kelsey 2009:60–61)[4]

The Nicene Creed offers much, particularly in its Christological affirmations, which constitute 'the most elaborated section of the creed, incorporating as it does important conceptual innovations', including the description of the Son as 'eternally begotten' by and 'of the same substance' as the Father (Kelsey 2009:60). For a reader attentive to the creed's soteriological language, there is rich material to consider: 'for us humans and for our salvation', certainly, but also 'suffered', 'rose again', 'ascended', and 'will come' – those verbs that enact the salvation described.[5]

One curious omission, however, is the phrase 'being born of Mary', which we do encounter in the Apostles' Creed.[6] In the Nicene Creed, by contrast, we find the formulations 'became incarnate' and 'was made human', alongside several references to being begotten: (1) 'begotten from the Father',[7] (2) 'only-begotten',[8] and (3) 'begotten, not made'.[9] Although the language of birth and being born – of 'natality', to invoke Hannah Arendt's term – is present in both the Greek and Latin versions of the Nicene Creed, it is employed exclusively in reference to Jesus's relationship to God the Father. It serves a very specific theological purpose: to clarify the relationship between the Son and the Father, and thereby to address specific concerns about Christ's divine nature.[10] A rhetoric of natality may thus be discerned within the creed's soteriological framing, yet how it appears and how it is presented may require more detailed rhetorical and theological analyses.[11]

3. Don Compier (1999:19) describes 'rhetoric' as 'the ancient art of persuasion' and argues, already in the preface to his book (p. ix), that 'no theologian can avoid involvement with the persuasive elements known as rhetoric'. According to Compier (1999:1), while '[*m*]ost students of theology have at least some familiarity with hermeneutics … few are conversant with the Western tradition of rhetoric, an important part of the cultural legacy of Greece and Rome … [*since*] the study and teaching of the oratorial art declined at the onset of the modern era'. He (Compier 1999:9–11) outlines seven characteristics of Roman oratory that may offer contours for contemporary rhetorical theologies: rhetoric is (1) practical; (2) public; (3) active; (4) contextual; (5) contingent in character; (6) polemical; and (7) holistic – concerned with human beings not only as rational but also as emotional, aesthetic, ethical, and volitional agents. An exploration of the rhetoric of the Nicene Creed is therefore a hermeneutical and theological task that contemporary interpreters can hardly avoid – particularly in the context of commemorating the creed and reflecting on its reception today.

4. David Kelsey employs the examples of 'begotten', 'proceeds', and '*homoousios*' to argue that none of these terms necessarily involved, in their scriptural usage, the theological meanings later ascribed to them by the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople. Indeed, Kelsey (2009:61) observes that, 'in controversies leading up to and following the council, that was one of the strongest arguments against … [*these innovations*]'.

5. The Greek version of the Nicene Creed, as well as the English translation used in this study, follows that of Edwards (2021:156).

6. The Latin phrase used in the Apostles' Creed is *natus ex Maria Virgine* [born of the Virgin Mary], which has a clear and strong etymological connection to the rhetoric of natality through its Latin root *natus*.

7. The corresponding Greek phrase used here is γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς, which finds textual resonance particularly in John 1:14 and 3:16. The key word in this formulation is the verb γεννηθέντα (from γεννάω), a term that can denote both begetting and being born. The Latin equivalent reads *natum ex Patre*. A rhetoric of natality is thus evident in both the Greek and Latin versions of the Nicene Creed at this point. Moreover, this formulation is echoed in later Christian creeds, such as that of the Council of Toledo (675), which confesses that the Son is begotten or born from the Father's womb (Marais 2019:13–15; see footnote 2 in particular).

8. The Greek word used here is μονογενῆ – which finds textual support in John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, and 3:18 – yet there remains debate regarding its proper analysis and translation. Traditionally, μονογενῆ was compound of two Greek terms (μόνος and γεννάω), but there are also scholarly arguments against this view. Instead, it is argued, μονογενῆ should be understood as a combination of μόνος and γένος [kind]. This would change the English translation of μονογενῆ from 'only-begotten' to 'one of a kind' or 'unique'. The implication for our argument is that natality language may not necessarily be present in the Greek text of the Nicene Creed at this point, but this conclusion might be complicated by a close reading of the Latin translation, which renders μονογενῆ as *unigenitum* – a compound of the Latin words *unus* and *genitus*, derived from the verb *gignere* [to beget or to be born]. Through *unigenitum*, the Latin text does include natality language, even if the Greek text is interpreted otherwise.

9. The Greek phrase used here is γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, which does not appear to quote a specific biblical text directly, but reflects an interpretation of John 1:1–3. The key term in this formulation is the verb γεννηθέντα from γεννάω, which can denote both begetting and being born. Interestingly, this particular verbal form does not appear to be used in this form anywhere in the New Testament. It may be of interest to note that the Latin equivalent reads *natum non factum*, thereby also reflects the language of birth and being born. A rhetoric of natality is therefore discernible in both the Greek and Latin versions of the Nicene Creed, in other words.

10. This includes one of the anathematised formulations in the Nicene Creed, namely καὶ Πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν [and before he was begotten, he was not] or [he was not before he was begotten], an inflected form of γεννάω. The Latin text reads *et ante quam nasceretur non erat*, where *nasceretur* also reflects a natality rhetoric. The creed thus rejects the claim that Christ did not exist prior to his birth. Here the allusion is not to the Son's begetting from the Father, but rather to his birth from Mary – even though Mary is nowhere explicitly named.

11. This argument, however, requires some refinement, given that much depends on how one reads the respective Greek and Latin versions of the Nicene Creed. In the Latin version of the creed, two explicit references to natality language appear: *natum ex Patre* [begotten from the Father] and *natum non factum* [begotten, not made]. Both references allude to Christ being born or begotten from the Father – a description taken from the Greek version of the Nicene Creed. The Latin *natum* is an inflection of the Latin verb *nascor* [to be born] and closely follows the Greek version of the Nicene Creed in which the Greek equivalent of the Latin *natum* is γεννηθέντα, which is an inflection of γεννάω. The Greek γεννηθέντα, like the Latin *natum*, are passive forms of natality language that may be translated as either 'begotten' or 'born'. These two references therefore serve as strong indicators of natality language in both the Latin and the Greek versions of the Nicene Creed. Although Mary is not explicitly invoked in relation to natality language in this creed, it would appear that the creed is nevertheless carried by a rhetoric of natality through its echoing of the theological argument and rhetoric of the Gospel of John (particularly chapters 1 and 3).

In its earliest form, adopted at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and later expanded at the Council of Chalcedon in 381, the name of Mary – the mother of Jesus, from whom Christ was born – appears to be omitted. Later versions include reference to Mary,[12] yet not in a way that explicitly confesses Jesus Christ's birth, which the creed remains curiously silent about. The language of being born from Mary, Jesus's mother, is – perhaps understandably, given the concerns about the origin and nature of Jesus's divinity – largely absent from this creed, even though the language of birth and begetting is indeed used within the creed. A rhetoric of natality is arguably present in relation to Jesus's father, but not in relation to Jesus's mother.[13] The rhetoric of natality is, in other words, present in the Nicene Creed – though not necessarily in the way one might expect, particularly with regard to the incarnation and humanity of Christ.

Christ's incarnation lies at the heart of the Nicene Creed. Moreover, the incarnation is referenced not only once but described twice over, in both active and passive forms. The creed confesses that Christ 'was incarnate' passively; and that Christ 'was made human' actively. In the incarnation, the creed confesses, Christ takes on a human body and becomes a human person. At the heart of its Christology stands this affirmation: that Christ's body and Christ's person bear soteriological significance. These affirmations about the incarnation follow directly upon the rhetorical signal that we are dealing with salvation: 'for us and our salvation'.

Perhaps the distinctive manner in which the Nicene Creed employs a rhetoric of natality in describing Jesus's divinity, but not in confessing Jesus's humanity, can be explained by attending to the function of the creed itself. The Nicene Creed does not offer a comprehensive and mature doctrine of the incarnation. As Kelsey (2009:61) observes, 'Nicaea is a Trinitarian creed, not a Trinitarian doctrine of God', meaning that 'the creed functions meta-doctrinally, as a norm for assessing doctrinal proposals, not as a proposal in its own right'.[14] In this sense, the creed does not offer us a doctrine at all; a doctrine; rather, it fulfils a bigger theological function. Perhaps the role of the Nicene Creed is, in other words, altogether different. The expectation that this creed should include a clear confession of Christ's birth from Mary may therefore be misplaced. As South African theologian Naudé (2004:206) cautions, it is important 'to take into consideration the ambiguity of the text with both its limitations and potentialities to speak a liberating word beyond its own time'.

Even so, the creed performs more than a single function. According to Kelsey (2009:62), it fulfils at least three different roles: existential, rhetorical, and methodological. First, in its existential role, the creed employs 'expressive and commissive force' within Christian communities, especially in public worship 'in the context of the liturgy' (Kelsey 2009:62). Secondly, in its rhetorical role, the creed shapes 'the rhetoric appropriate to God's ways of relating to us' (Kelsey 2009:63). Thirdly, in its methodological role, the creed affirms that (1) understanding God as Creator has 'conceptual priority' over understanding God as Saviour; and (2) Christocentric understandings of God are 'decisively normative' for trinitarian understandings of God (Kelsey 2009:64–65). Across these roles, the creed shapes a particular theological language for speaking of the triune God.

The Nicene Creed is therefore itself shaped by hermeneutical and rhetorical distinctions forged in theological conflict over appropriate and inappropriate language for speaking about God – particularly about Jesus Christ, whom it confesses as the Son of God and (true) God from (true) God. Yet what kind of theological symbolic does this creed ultimately offer? Is its creedal language framed primarily by a symbolic of mortality, or by a symbolic of natality?

Being and having a body

> Like all human creatures … by virtue of God relating to him creatively, Jesus lives on borrowed breath. In his creaturely humanity, he lives in radical dependence on God's continual relating to him creatively. It is in precisely that respect that what he is in his finite creaturely human life simply is the glory of God … To be the glory of God is one aspect of how what he is, simply as a creaturely living human body, images God. (Kelsey 2009:1012)

For the American Reformed theologian Kelsey (2009), in his magnum opus *Eccentric Existence*, theological anthropology comprises three parts living on borrowed breath (God relating to create), living on borrowed time (God relating to draw into eschatological consummation), and living by another's death (God relating to reconcile). Human beings are images of Jesus Christ and therefore images of the image of God. As images of the image of God, we are those who live and flourish on borrowed breath, on borrowed time, and by another's death (see Marais 2023).

Yet are we not also those who live and flourish by another's birth? In his own reflection on the theological debates and

12.The Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381 warrants particular attention here, as it confesses that Jesus Christ 'was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and Mary'. The Greek reads σαρκωθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου, and the Latin *incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria virgine*. What is notably absent in both formulations is any explicit reference to Jesus Christ being born of Mary. The emphasis appears in both Latin and Greek versions to fall upon Mary's virginity rather than upon her motherhood.

13.In his commentary on the Toledan Creed of the 7th century, Moltmann (1992:22) reflects on this later creed's employment of a rhetoric of natality: 'If the Son has come forth from the Father alone, then this process must be imagined both as "begetting" and as "birth". But that fundamentally changes the image of father: a Father who both begets and gives birth to his Son is not just a "male" Father. He is a motherly Father. He cannot be understood to have a single sex, masculine, but must be understood to be bisexual or transsexual. He is the fatherly Father of his only begotten Son and he is at the same time the motherly Father of his only born Son. It was the orthodox dogmatic tradition which made its boldest statements at this point. According to the Council of Toledo in 675, "We must believe that the Son was not made out of nothing, nor out of some substance or other, but from the womb of the Father, that is, he was begotten or born from the Father's own being"'.

14.Kelsey (2009:61) elaborates on this important distinction as follows: 'A doctrine – say, of the Trinity – is an effort to explain discursively an understanding of God as triune. To be sure, the creed has also been used didactically by Christian communities as the basis for instruction of religious inquirers or of persons seeking to join the community for baptism. The instruction takes the form of at least informal doctrine – that is, explaining and elaborating the creed, not just repeating it. The Nicene Creed has been used that way because of its more basic and proper use: as part of an act of public worship of God, it is a community's confession of faith in the triune God cast in terse verbal formulas … There is an indefinitely large number of possible Trinitarian doctrines of God. That is, there may be an indefinitely large number of possible ways in which to explicate, coherently interrelate, and elaborate on the affirmations made by the creed. Regarding such doctrines of God, the Nicene Creed has traditionally functioned as the norm by which to assess relative adequacy of proposed Trinitarian understandings of God'.

figures that shaped the language adopted at the Council of Nicaea, Kelsey (cf. 2009:48–66) describes the incarnation as 'a distinctive and conceptually very odd understanding of one way in which God relates to us: God comes among us as one of us' (p. 58). In Kelsey's project, 'incarnation' is a key element of the third part, which deals with reconciliation, or God relating to reconcile. Indeed, incarnation is '[*t*]he unenlightening conceptual tag for this strange way God relates to us as our reconciler' – a relation that begins with the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is born of Mary (Kelsey 2009:58). The confession that Jesus Christ is God incarnate does not supplant but rather necessitates additional claims that God relates to us as our Creator and Consummator (Kelsey 2009:58).

For Kelsey (2009:694), the triune God relates to human beings 'in the mode of incarnation to reconcile estranged creatures', enabling us to 'flourish by another's death'. Salvation – or reconciliation, to use Kelsey's preferred term – is possible because of 'God's reconciling incarnation', which includes '*the* moment of Jesus' birth' but is also embedded within the 'longer narrative' of 'Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection'. It is the incarnate God – 'God's incarnation among us' – that makes it possible for us to 'not only live but flourish' (Kelsey 2009:694). God relates 'incarnationally' to reconcile all that is not God to God (Kelsey 2009:695). For Kelsey (2009:702), 'incarnation' therefore encompasses more than just Jesus's birth; it 'defines who we are' and describes 'the concrete way in which the triune God goes about actively relating to estranged humankind to reconcile them to God'. As he explains (2009):

> [*I*]ncarnation does not refer to a single moment in the life of the concrete, particular human personal body named Jesus, the son of Mary – say, his conception or his having been born. It refers to the entirety of a life constituted by all that Jesus did and underwent in the context of a longer story of God's interactions with the children of Abraham, and all that has a distinctive plotline. (pp. 702–703)

It is by this God relation – which David Kelsey describes as being 'in Christ' – that humankind is reconciled to God. Being 'in Christ' is 'none other than the relation constituted by the incarnation … to estranged human personal bodies as one among them in reconciling them to God' (Kelsey 2009:732).[15] The incarnation itself is governed by a logic of love, for it is by God's love for estranged humankind that human beings are drawn into this particular God relation (Kelsey 2009:733).

This, however, is only one part of how David Kelsey tells the story of the incarnation. Admittedly, the incarnation lies at the heart of soteriology – of God relating to reconcile. It is by the incarnation that we live and flourish by another's death. Yet without Christ's birth – without Christ taking on a human body and becoming a human person – there could be no suffering, no death, and no resurrection. God relating to reconcile is dependent upon God relating to create, as Kelsey himself observes, as Christ – and all human beings – must be born prior to the work of reconciliation. Stated somewhat differently, creation logically precedes reconciliation and eschatological consummation in Kelsey's account, since prior to creation there is nothing to reconcile.

This means affirming that we also live and flourish on borrowed breath. A theology of birth plays a significant role in Kelsey's (2009:242) account of human creatureliness. Here Kelsey (2009:242) draws on wisdom literature, offering a meditation on Job 10, where Job's birth is narrated in two ways: as 'having been born a living body' (v. 10) and as 'being given a living body' (vv. 11–12). In this story, argues Kelsey (2009:242), we encounter not only the story of Job's birth but also 'the story of the birth of every human person'.[16] This involves both active and passive natality: the story of being born as a living body and of being given a living body by God (Kelsey 2009:270). As Kelsey (2009) explains regarding Job's birth:

> [*I*]n the first way of telling the story, God was directly involved in Job's having come to be born as a living body so that Job is a living body; in … [*the*] second way of telling the story, God gives a living body directly to Job so that Job has a living body. (p. 270)

First, we are those 'having been born', who exist apart from our mothers but not independently of one another (Kelsey 2009:246). For Job – and for each of us – a living body is 'at once utterly ordinary and a mysterious gift' (Kelsey 2009:246). For Kelsey, this constitutes the first key affirmation of a theology of birth: as those who have been born, we are living bodies. 'Having been born' is, moreover, 'a continuous process'[17] which is concluded only when a baby is 'delivered from its mother's body and able to live outside her body' (Kelsey 2009:247). The narrative of Job's birth, Kelsey (2009:246) argues, is shaped by God's intimate involvement in the entire process 'from conception to gestation to birth'.

Kelsey (2009:250; see also pp. 250–270) ultimately identifies nine characteristics of being a living (natal) body: a human body is (1) a gift that is (2) actual and (3) creatively related to by God, (4) genetically human, (5) constantly developing, (6) capable of various powers, (7) finite, (8) mysterious (or inexhaustibly complex), and (9) good (by virtue of God's relating to it). Our living and flourishing on borrowed breath are inseparable from our living and flourishing as natals – as those who have been born, as those who are living bodies.

15.In the incarnation, Kelsey (2009:732–733) continues, Jesus '[*enters*] into solidarity with them in their estrangement from and resistance to God, at once taking on himself the full consequences of their drift toward ultimate nonbeing in consequence of their estrangement from God and placing them within the relation Jesus has with the One he called "Father"'.

16.Kelsey (2009:245–246) explains more fully: 'There are two indistinguishable ways in which Job tells this story of his having been born. They are wound together in such a fashion that no inconsistency exists between them. One account tells the story of Job's birth from a human mother, his coming to be a living body, though not without God's involvement. The other tells the story of Job's being given a living body by God. The difference is not that one tells a story about entirely natural processes effecting a particular natural outcome, and the other tells a story about God supernaturally doing something. Rather, the difference lies in the way God is involved in each'.

17.This includes what Kelsey (2009:247) describes as 'natural childbirth' as well as 'any and all medical procedures by which a pregnant woman is helped to give birth to a live newborn'.

A second key affirmation in Kelsey's theology of birth is that, as those given a body by God, we have living bodies. Kelsey (2009:270) identifies 'some distinction between Job and his living body', necessary for understanding Job's protest against God amid suffering that he has endured. The gift of receiving a body from God renders Job 'response-able' ('able to respond to God') and 'account-able' ('he is not only capable of responding to God, but also of being held accountable for his response') (Kelsey 2009:271). Here the language of natality recedes somewhat but does not disappear, as is evident from the implications Kelsey draws from this second telling of the story of Job's birth.

Kelsey (2009:242) traces three implications of having a living (natal) body: firstly, that we are unique and not substitutable in our responsibility and accountability before God and to one another[18]; secondly, that we possess human dignity that is eccentric and therefore safeguarded outside of ourselves (p. 275)[19]; and thirdly, that acknowledgement of human dignity demands both positive and negative responses – respect and the avoidance of violence (p. 279).[20] Our living and flourishing on borrowed breath as natals thus shape our relationships with God and with one another: as those given living bodies, we are capable of responsibility and accountability.

For Kelsey, living on borrowed breath is also the reality shared by Jesus Christ by virtue of his incarnation. Living on borrowed breath means living not only an eccentric existence but also a natal existence: as one who has been born and as one who has been given a living body. It is as a natal, in other words, that Jesus Christ saves. We, in turn, live and flourish not only by another's death but also by another's birth. A theology of birth, in which the language of natality features centrally, may therefore play an important role in contemporary reception of the Nicene Creed – particularly in reconsidering its Christological affirmations, where a direct and explicit reference to Christ's birth from Mary is curiously absent.

Perhaps this is precisely why we must reflect on how and why we speak the language of natality at all, and why Christ's being born of Mary may hold significant theological implications for our soteriological grammars. Should the silence of the Nicene Creed be accepted uncritically, or might that silence itself invite renewed reflection on how bodies and bodiliness feature in our confessions of faith? How might we receive the creed's preference for 'begotten' rather than 'born' – understandable as it is within its historical context – today? And how might the creed both enable and limit our capacity to speak the language of natality?

Speaking of natality

> Birth is the basis of every person's existence, which by that very fact is always already material, embodied, gendered, and connected with other human beings and with human history. These are not inconsequential details about us … they are constitutive of who we are. If anyone will become divine, it will be as an embodied, gendered, situated self: there can be no other selves than selves of a woman born. (Jantzen 1999:141)

The Canadian feminist philosopher and theologian Jantzen (1999), in her publication *Becoming Divine*, argues that much of Western culture – including philosophy of religion and theology – is 'preoccupied with violence, sacrifice, and death' (p. 2), and suggests that natality, rather than mortality, may offer new ways of imagining and speaking of 'becoming divine'.[21] For Jantzen , it is unthinkable to speak not only of being human but also of being (or becoming) divine without any reference to being born.[22] Indeed (Jantzen 1999) asks:

> [*W*]hat if we were to begin with birth, and with the hope and possibility and wonder implicit in it? How [*might our language look and feel*] if we were to treat natality and the emergence of this life and this world with the same philosophical seriousness and respect which had traditionally been paid to mortality and the striving for other worlds? (p. 2)

In developing what she calls 'a feminist symbolic of natality', Jantzen (1999:2) argues that not only the labour of modern feminist scholars but also that of 'medieval mystical women' have '[*kept*] alive the hope of flourishing embedded in natality' within 'a context dominated by death and violence' (p. 5). Natality is presented as an alternative not only to a preoccupation with mortality but also to necrophilia – the love of death (1999:8). In contrast to necrophilia, natality stands for far more than birth alone; it involves 'the opening of new possibilities' (Jantzen 1999:8).

As natals, as those who 'come into the world through birth' (Jantzen 1999:146), we are each and every one born defenceless and dependent, yet also unique and unpredictable

18.As Kelsey (2009:273–274) explains, 'we each are called to respond faithfully in the presence of, and in company with, our neighbors, to the faithfulness of God's creativity. None can respond to God in place of another. No one is accountable for another's response to God. It is in being responsible and accountable, to the extent that we are capable, that we are each unsubstitutable by any other human living body'.

19.For Kelsey (2009:275), '[*h*]uman beings' inherent accountability for their response to God provides the theological basis on which the peculiar dignity of human creatures is to be understood. Dignity inheres in human creatures' concrete actuality by virtue of the fact that the triune God has directly related to them as their creator … Human dignity is thus ex-centric, grounded and centered outside human creatures'.

20.He continues (Kelsey 2009:279–280): '[*A*]cknowledging the dignity of human creatures … involves two broad types of intentional action, one positive and one negative. Positively, respecting the dignity of human creatures involves taking actions to nurture the well-being of such capacities and powers as they may have for their own accountable response, with their neighbors, to God who gives them living bodies and to the neighbors with whom they share proximate contexts through which come God's call to act wisely for their well-being. Negatively, it involves avoidance of violence. That is, it involves avoiding actions that in some way violate the capacities for accountable response, and violate the dignity and unsubstitutability, of any human creature. Therewith, it also involves actions to protect human creatures from such violation'. See also Marais (2013).

21.Jantzen (1999:6) draws on the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray for the expression 'becoming divine'. Jantzen (1999:6) explains that, for Irigaray, 'our fundamental moral obligation is to become divine; and the task of philosophy of religion must be to enable that becoming, or else it is ultimately useless … According to Irigaray, the wisdom that women and men in the postmodern world most require is the wisdom of becoming divine, without which we "shrivel and die"'.

22.Jantzen (1999:4) acknowledges that her theological argument is shaped by the work of Hannah Arendt and other feminist thinkers – including Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Adriana Cavarero – but she also argues that she develops her own distinctive position, particularly in her appropriation of the concept of 'natality'. Since others have provided thorough theological analyses of Arendt's use of 'natality' (see Biss 2012; Bowen-Moore 1989; Körtner 2007; Totschnig 2017), this contribution focuses primarily on Jantzen's deployment of a rhetoric of natality, including her own engagement with Arendt's use of the concept, particularly as developed in Arendt's doctoral dissertation on Augustine (see Arendt 1996; Jantzen 1999:145–155; Scott & Stark 1996). I therefore do not attempt a further independent analysis of Arendt's use of the concept here.

in our capacity to introduce 'new beginnings' (p. 147).[23] We possess the potential to reshape our world – politically, as Hannah Arendt suggests in her use of the term 'natality', but also theologically, as Jantzen argues in her own use of the concept 'natality'. Jesus Christ himself is after all confessed to be a natal. All of us, as natals, belong to what Jantzen (1999:146) calls 'the maternal continuum' – a term she borrows from Adriana Cavarero – given that we all are born of a woman. A symbolic of birth or natality thus establishes 'our connection with one another through the maternal continuum', writes Jantzen (1999:146–147), thereby beckoning us toward theologies of flourishing and toward all that is required to make such flourishing possible, including justice.

For Jantzen (1999:17), the incarnation of Jesus is central to the development of what she calls 'a new religious imaginary which will enable … the flourishing of our natality'. Here she (Jantzen 1999:17) follows Luce Irigaray closely, for whom bodiliness is central to the incarnation, which she describes as 'the idea that Jesus was God made flesh'. The incarnation of Jesus may enable the divine becoming of women and men precisely insofar as it is 'an event of the body', encompassing 'conception and birth … fasting, healing, and wedding festivals, suffering, and death' (Jantzen 1999:16).

For Jantzen (1999:17), as for Irigaray, 'unto us a child is born' means that incarnation lies at the indispensable heart of salvation and that Jesus's incarnation 'leaves room for other incarnations' (or 'intercarnations').[24] This arguably has important theological and ethical implications for how we view bodiliness in general but also the potential of diverse bodies to 'become divine' (Jantzen 1999:17, footnote 7).[25]

Within this framework, the creeds may be central but are not always necessarily helpful, Jantzen (1999:78) contends.[26] Whereas '[*i*]n late antiquity Church councils solemnly debated questions of heresy and true belief, and formulated creeds – the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed – which served to demarcate the boundaries of Christianity' (Jantzen 1999:78) beliefs alone do not necessarily create space for passion, desire, or the capacity for new beginnings.[27] A symbolic of natality, however, offers the possibility of addressing some of the most vexing theological problems – such as the problem of evil – in new ways (Jantzen 1999:146).[28]

Natality, therefore, extends far beyond birth and babies; it speaks to the uniqueness of each human being and to the narrative that each human life unfolds (Jantzen 1999:148).[29] Human stories are birthed from natality, for it is from our embodied existence as natals that 'concrete events are set into a narrative to form a meaningful whole' (Jantzen 1999:148). Moreover, 'natality means that we arrive into the world as strangers, but strangers who are welcomed into a whole "web of human relationships"', observes Jantzen (1999:149).

As such, natality conflicts with patriarchy and misogyny – not least because natality affirms that '[*t*]he other is the same as I am: the same, that is, in not being the same as anyone else, being utterly unique' (Jantzen 1999:152). Natality affirms that without this reception into human community – beginning with the mother from whose womb we are born and who first welcomes us into this strange and potentially dangerous world – we cannot survive (Jantzen 1999:149). We need others and we are needed by others. Indeed, 'it is through birth that we are connected with every other human being, past, present, and future', writes Jantzen (1999:150).[30] Natality thus shapes our human relationships and communities while also situating us within the broader web of life and our relationships with other living beings (Jantzen 1999:151).[31]

As those engrafted onto the maternal continuum – together with 'all others who have been born' (Jantzen 1999:150) – we share not only in the gift of human relationship but also encounter Christ, born of Mary, within this maternal continuum. God is not a spectator of the 'maternal power' that is infinitely

23.In Arendt's (see 1958:178) words, as quoted by Jantzen (see 1999:146–147), 'with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world'.

24.'Intercarnations' is a term developed by Catherine Keller (see 2017:1–2). Keller (2017:1–2) explains, in her juxtaposition of the concepts 'incarnation' and 'intercarnation', that 'intercarnations' offer an alternative to an 'obsession with the singular guy incarnate', insofar as the focus shifts instead to being 'preoccupied with just about everybody else', namely, 'theological bodies female, animal, vegetal, mineral, religious, irreligious, cosmic, and cosmopolitan'. In short, for Keller (2017:2), the use of 'intercarnations' signals 'one more verbalization of the disunified communion of a boundlessly entangled materiality'.

25.Jantzen (1999:17, footnote 7) points out that the 'sexual incarnation' or 'gendered incarnation', as well as the 'racial incarnation' of Jesus, are what she calls 'partial incarnations' ('as any human being must be'), insofar as 'this leaves room for other incarnations' (in which other sexually, gendered, and racially specific bodies can become divine). Feminist theologians such as Keller (2017) and womanist theologians such as Turman (2013) have likewise drawn attention to the significant implications of the incarnation for how we view not only human bodiliness but also how our theological imaginings of salvation – including whom they may suggest is included or excluded –are shaped by the racial and gendered particularities of the incarnation.

26.Jantzen (1999:78) discerns in the emphasis on belief a serving of 'dominating interests that expressed themselves in colonialism, racism, and sexism'. Belief, in other words, is not a neutral or innocent emphasis but stands in service of the prevailing powers of the day.

27.'What might happen', asks Jantzen (1999:86), 'if we were to relinquish the preoccupation with the rational justification of beliefs and the evaluation of truth-claims and try to follow the path of desire for the divine?' In a section entitled 'the opening of desire', this is precisely what Jantzen (1999:86–88) herself attempts: to trace desire in the conceptualisation of the divine.

28.Grace Jantzen also offers reflections on how such a possibility might take shape. She argues that, rather than 'working out intellectually how a good God could permit [*suffering*] to happen', a symbolic of natality would be primarily concerned with 'putting a stop to suffering' (Jantzen 1999:146). Indeed, '[*a*] focus on birth and concrete embodiment impels concern with the material conditions of people's lives', she (Jantzen 1999:146) writes, and therefore '[*a*] symbolic focused on birth' redirects theological attention towards 'material justice'.

29.Jantzen (1999:148) writes that '[*n*]atality indicates that each life is special and to be affirmed and celebrated; about each life a story can be told … This story is not the story of the soul, but of an embodied life, situated in material conditions which shape experience and subjectivity and are also shaped by them'.

30.A longer quotation may be helpful here: 'It is in respect of this connection with all other human beings that an imaginary of natality would be at fundamental variance with misogyny. This is not a matter of a romantic exaltation of women as mothers; still less is it a reduction of "woman" to the function of mothering. Rather, it … recognizes that the weaving of the web of life which each person enters in virtue of our natality means that we are connected with all other persons, female and male. Our sexuate selves, born of women, are the basis both of our similarity to and our difference from other sexuate selves, the foundation both of empathy and of respect for alterity. This connectedness with others, while allowing for great diversity, can therefore be recognized as the material basis of ethical responsiveness' (Jantzen 1999:150).

31.Again, it is worth quoting Jantzen (1999:151) more extensively here: 'Another result of focusing on natality rather than death is the recognition that our interconnection in the web of life includes not only other people but also animals and ultimately the whole physical world … This kinship with animals, and awareness of our place in the web of life, is an antidote to the alienation that is so much a part of the technological culture of modernity … [*as well as*] the Christian emphasis on immortality, which worked against a sense of connection in the web of life and taught people to be homeless in the world'.

extended to form the maternal continuum but an active participant within it (Jantzen 1999:150). For Jantzen (1999:152), the incarnation implies that '[*b*]ecoming divine is not a matter of escape from the world but of finding it our home'.

Drawing again on Hannah Arendt, Jantzen suggests that natality calls forth not only respect for the other but also love. This 'loving respect' for the world and for fellow natals 'constitutes the imperative for action' (Jantzen 1999:152–153). Love means allowing the other not only to exist but to live and flourish (*Amo: Volo ut sis* [I love you: I will that you be]) (Jantzen 1999:153).[32] Such love does not deny death but affirms life, extending beyond 'our individual lives … [*to encompass*] the life of the world and the lives of those to come for whom it will be a home' (Jantzen 1999:152).

Finally, 'the imaginary of natality' entails acceptance of limits, finitude of finite life. 'We came into being at birth, before which we did not exist', writes Jantzen (1999:156), and '[*t*]here is nothing terrible in that recognition'. She critiques theologies which draw on traditional concepts of God in which 'only the infinite could be divine',[33] arguing that the 'valorisation of infinity' must be reconsidered because '[*f*]initude is not evil' and natality itself requires acceptance of finitude (Jantzen 1999:155).

Much here resonates with the language of the Nicene Creed. Alongside its affirmations of Christ's sharing in the same substance as the Father, being begotten and not made, through whom all things came into being, the creed also speaks of God drawing near – becoming 'a finite creaturely human life' (Kelsey 2009:1012), a God who takes on finitude: a God who 'became incarnate' and 'was made human'. Ultimately, '[*a*]n imaginary of natality … suggests a symbolic of flourishing' (Jantzen 1999:157). A theology of birth and natality may therefore play an important role in shaping our theological imaginings and our language of what it means to flourish.

It is not possible to develop an imaginary of flourishing without the women of the salvation story. As Grace Jantzen (1999:141) argues, 'there can be no other selves than selves of a woman born'. The God who draws near on the maternal continuum is the God of Mary – but not only the God of Mary. This God is also the God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba – the women of Jesus's lineage without whom it would be impossible to confess: we believe in Jesus Christ, born. Without them there would be nothing to confess, for they bear the humanity of Christ. The logic of natality thus recentres the women on Jesus's maternal continuum as key participants in the Christian story of salvation. A theology of natality alerts us to the vital role that Jesus's foremothers play in shaping an imaginary of human flourishing, formed as it is by the 'maternal continuum'.

We flourish as natals, by another's birth – or not at all.

Conclusion

Both the imaginary of death and the imaginary of natality find natural, if unequal, expression in the traditional theology of Christendom – in the doctrines and vocabulary of salvation and flourishing, respectively (Jantzen 1999:157).

If we confess that Christ is born or begotten, we have a range of theological possibilities to work with, including a theology of birth and a theology of natality. The Nicene Creed's silence about Christ being born of Mary does not, however, mean that a rhetoric of natality is altogether absent from the creedal formulation – only that it is not necessarily present where and how we might expect it to be. Perhaps this perceived asymmetry itself can be approached as an invitation to consider the theological implications of speaking this language: not only because it offers a rich soteriological grammar, but also because natality may possibly be a worthwhile language to speak in our context today.

What might this look like in a context – as in South Africa and across Africa – that continues to carry a high maternal mortality rate, and in which giving birth may also mean risking death, for both mothers and babies? What might an imaginary of natality mean for the flourishing of women and children in a context rife with gender-based violence, femicide, and infanticide? How do we speak of the gift of being a body, and the responsibility of having a body, where women and children are trafficked, sold for their bodies, and reduced to the economic and transactional value their bodies may hold for others? How do we confess the good news of Christ's incarnation in the face of widespread abuse, torture, rape, and the killing of babies and children – often at the hands of parents or close family members?

The Nicene Creed, of course, does not speak to these realities directly. Perhaps this means that it ought to be considered irrelevant to South Africa, and that Nicaea therefore has nothing to do with Africa. Yet there may be another possibility: perhaps what the Nicene Creed invites us into here is a deeper engagement with – and perhaps even a retrieval of – the living language of the incarnation within our soteriological grammars.

As Jantzen (1999) argues:

> Jesus could be seen as the one who manifests what human flourishing can be, passionate for justice, full of humour and wisdom and insight, with the integrity of compassion taken to its furthest extent. (p. 163)

After all, Jesus is also a fellow natal, whose body stands at the very centre of our soteriology. Without the gift of bodiliness – which Jesus received through birth from his mother – the theological meaning of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension ultimately disintegrates. With Nicaea, we can affirm that at the heart of the good news stands both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Moreover, when we

32.Jantzen (1999:153) also borrows this from Hannah Arendt (see Arendt 1978:136).

33.Within this logic, only a God who is omnipotent ('infinity of power'), eternal ('infinity in relation to time and change'), omniscient ('infinity of knowledge'), omnipresent ('infinity in relation to space'), and incorporeal ('since bodies are by definition finite') can be an infinite God, Jantzen (1999:155) argues.

attend more closely to the humanity of Christ in particular, we encounter not only the mortality of Christ but also the natality of Christ. Jesus manifests human flourishing as a natal.

Perhaps, then, with the creed and from the creed, we may reconsider the body – being and having a body – in our languages of salvation; and perhaps beyond the creed we are invited to speak the language of natality in our imaginings of human flourishing. Perhaps we need to find new ways of articulating what salvation is and means when faced with the deaths and dying – the suffering, abused, traumatised bodies – of women and children in South Africa. Perhaps our creeds can help us speak a gendered, life-giving truth in places that know only a symbolic of death and dying. Perhaps this might be one way in which the Nicene Creed can indeed help foster, in the words of South African theologian Smit (2002:94), 'the ability to speak anew in ever-changing contexts'.

Moreover, perhaps there might even be a kind of grace in some of our words – even our most serious, embattled, authoritative, and well-intentioned words – sometimes not enduring, sometimes indeed changing, to articulate the good news of the gospel in new and life-giving ways. Perhaps this is the way – the only way – in which we are able to speak about Christ's ascension, death, and birth: until further notice (see Smit 2009); until we find that our words say too little or too much; until what our grammars of faith have been largely silent about is voiced, or voiced anew. And perhaps a commemoration of a creed or confession offers precisely this opportunity, among many others: to reconsider how we speak about who we are, what we believe, what the good news is, and for whom, today.

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