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The concept 'light from light' in the Nicene creed: Is the metaphor still appropriate for Christian ethics today?

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From a classic Reformed theological perspective, two questions arise when reflecting on the metaphor 'light from light' in the *homoousios* formulas of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum of AD 381, especially within the domain of theological ethics. Firstly, what was the main classic interpretation of this metaphor; and secondly, is the metaphor still appropriate today considering the modern trend of 'low' Christologies as the key approach to Christian ethics? In these modern 'low Christologies', the divinity of Jesus and its relevance for theological ethics are questioned from the perspective of the ethics of immanent liberation rooted in the historical Jesus. In this article, the author reflects on these two questions. The central theoretical argument is that the classical understanding of the metaphor can enrich modern theological social ethics and broaden the concept of liberation into an all-encompassing vision of true humanity. To this end, the Greek and Latin texts of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum are first presented with a modern English translation, followed by a brief explanation of the historical context of the Council of Nicaea.

Contribution: The subsequent sections examine, with the Gnostic and Neo-Platonist roots of the metaphor, the biblical perspectives on Christ as the light of the world, and the relation between 'low Christology' and liberation ethics. In conclusion, the author ventures to indicate a way toward true humanity and moral agency flowing from the classic interpretation of the metaphor of the Son as 'light from light'.

Keywords: Nicean creed; light from light; kingdom of God; Gnosticism; Neo-Platonism; low Christology; high Christology.

Introduction

The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum Creed played an important part in the development of the mayor theological traditions over the last 1700 years. Read alongside the later Apostles' Creed and the Creed of Athanasius, the Niceaen Creed of AD 325 established the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as a pillar of the Christian faith throughout the centuries. Christian faith is all about the belief in one God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to the three ecumenical creeds, the Son and the Spirit are of the same substance [*homoousios*] as the Father. To describe this idea of consubstantiation, the Creed employs four ontological phrases (Stevenson 2003):

> And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *begotten from the Father, only begotten*, that is, from the substance of the Father, *God from God, light from light, true God from true God*, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father […] (p. 114)

The ontological metaphor 'light from light' (Greek: Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός; Latin: *lumen ex lumine*), used in the original Nicene text of AD 325, is retained in the slightly expanded text of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum of AD 381 but with no further explanation of its meaning. The phrase does not appear in the New Testament. However, the image of light as a way of describing the attributes of God the Father and of the Son appears in the biblical writings. For example, John the Baptist professed Jesus as: 'the true light that gives light to every man' (Jn 1:9). Jesus identified himself as the 'light [Φῶς] of the world' (Jn 8:12), probably alluding to Isaiah 9:1–2. He also refers to his followers as the 'light of the world' (Mt 5:14). Hebrew 1:3 touches on the metaphor of light with the expression: 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory'. Furthermore, Scripture associates light with unqualified good (Gn 1:3–5, 15–18; Ex 10:23; 13:21); light is used as a synonym for life (Job 3:20); and seeing the light is to live the true life (Ps 49:19). Conversely, darkness is viewed as a

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symbol of the evil heart, as well as of adversity, disaster, and death (Job 30:26; Is 8:22; Jr 23:12; Lm 3:2). Nevertheless, the metaphor, as it appears in the Creed, does not appear in the biblical text. Christensen (2023:262) argues that the absence of the phrase from the New Testament writings indicates that the expression was already well known in the theological vocabulary of the 4th century, probably due to the idea of 'light' in the Gnostic and Neo-Platonist philosophies.

From a classic Reformed theological perspective[1], two questions arise when reflecting anew on the concept 'light from light' – especially in the domain of theological ethics. Firstly, what was the main classic interpretation of this metaphor; and secondly, is the metaphor still appropriate for Christian ethics today, given the modern trend of using 'low' Christologies as a key framework? In these 'low Christologies', the divinity of Jesus and its relevance for theological ethics are questioned in favour of an emphasis on the historical Jesus and the relevance of his teachings and deeds for immanent liberation (see Welker 2013:261–276).[2] In this article, the author reflects on these two questions. The central theoretical argument suggests that the classical understanding of the metaphor can enrich modern theological social ethics and broaden the concept of liberation into a universal vision of true humanity. To this end, the Greek and Latin texts of the ontological phrases in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum are presented alongside a modern English translation, followed by a brief explanation of the historic context of the Council of Nicaea. The subsequent sections then deal with the Gnostic and Neo-Platonist roots of the metaphor, the biblical perspectives of Christ as the light of the world, 'low Christology', and liberation. In conclusion, the author ventures to indicate a path towards true humanity and moral agency flowing from the classical interpretation of metaphor of the Son as 'light from light'.

The Greek and Latin texts of the *homoousios* testimonies of Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum creed with a modern English translation

The Nicaean Creed was first drafted in an abbreviated form at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and later expanded by the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, when the Creed came to be known as the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum. However, the expression 'light from light' [Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός], translated to Latin as *lumen ex lumine*, remained unchanged. The full Greek and Latin texts of the *homoousios* testimonies, together with their modern English translations, read as (see Box 1):

BOX 1: The *homoousios* testimonies in the Greek, Latin and English translations.

Greek	Latin	English
καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ ΠατροςΘεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ, **Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός,** Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ,γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί	*Et in unum Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum filium Dei, natum ex Patre unigenitum, hoc est, de substantia Patris, Deum ex Deo,* ***lumen ex lumine****, Deum verum de Deo vero, natum non factum, unius substantiae cum Patre, hos anathematizat catholica Ecclesia*	And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, **light from light**, true God from true God, begotten not made of, one substance with the Father

Source: Pelikan, J. & Hotckiss, V. (eds.), 2003, *Creeds and confessions of faith in the Christian tradition*, Yale University Press, London

Historic context

Within five centuries, Christianity had won the professed allegiance of an overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman Empire. In his seminal work on the history of Christianity, the historian Latourette (1953:65–111) describes the phenomenal growth of the Christian faith: from an age of persecution, to its declaration as the religion of the Roman Empire in AD 312 by the emperor Constantine, and then to its deep entrenchment in culture, politics, and social life from the 5th century onwards. The rise of Christianity across the Graeco-Roman world was astonishing. A first step in understanding the Creed in general, and the ontological phrases, in particular, is to understand the historical context of the Christian church in the latter part of the 3rd century and the early part of the 4th century. AD 312 marked a decisive point in time, because in that year all persecutions ceased, and Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the Empire. This date is indeed regarded as a turning point in the history of Christianity.

Although the earlier persecutions had prompted some defences of Christian theology by the apostolic fathers and the early apologists, the main doctrines were still in an embryonic stage when Christianity became the religion of the empire. The absence of creeds, together with the theological interplay between the various pockets of Christianity across the regions, also gave rise to several heresies and cults. However, the essential question at that stage concerned God and God's relation with Christ and the Holy Spirit (the trinitarian question). Arius (AD 256–336), a Cyrenaic presbyter, ascetic, and priest, held that Jesus Christ was not coeternal with God the Father but was rather created before time. In his *Thalia,* Arius (1998) maintained that, according to Athanasius[3]:

1.The concept 'classic Reformed perspective' refers to the early modernist Reformed theology as expressed in the three Reformed confessions as well as the Westminster Confession.

2.'Low Christology' as the concept is used in some modern public theologies deviates from any form of recognition of the divine nature of Christ. Krasevac posits that the question regarding 'high' and 'low' Christology should not be confused with the Christological concepts 'Christology from above' and 'Christology from below'. He (Krasevac 1987) argues that: [*A*] 'Christology from above' normally presupposes a 'high' Christology (the recognition of the full divinity of Christ), and makes it to be its *methodological* starting point, whereas a 'Christology from below' also presupposing such a 'high' Christology, should lead to it as its methodological conclusion. (p. 305) If a 'Christology from below' stops with the 'low' Christology in its modern meaning (a Christology which does not fully recognise the perfect divinity of Christ), it errs, because it fails 'to carry through consistently its own method to its full historical term' (Krasevac 1987:305). The primary purpose, again, of a 'Christology from below' is to understand the 'high' Christology of the mature Christian confession of faith in terms of its historical development. This article therefore refrains from using the terms 'Christology from above' and 'Christology from below' as synonyms of the 'high' and 'low' Christologies of the historical Jesus debate.

3.Not much of what Arius wrote is available. According to Stead (1978:20), modern scholars must rely on three main sources, namely three fairly short letters from Arius that are printed by Opitz in his edition of Athanasius (iii. 1) as Urkunden (1, 6, and 30.2), some remains of his dogmatic verse-composition called the *Thalia* or 'Banquet'; the first seven lines are quoted by Athanasius in c. Ar. i. 5, and Athanasius also presents a selection, amounting to over 40 more lines in *De Synodis*, 15, and some other short fragments or notices.

> He who is without beginning made the Son a beginning of created things. He produced him as a son for himself by begetting him. He [*the son*] has none of the distinct characteristics of God's own being. For he is not equal to nor is he as the same being as him (par. 6).[4]

Arius is traditionally regarded as the founder of Arianism, whose ideas provoked a controversy within the Christian church at that stage. The patriarch of Alexandrea, Athanasius (AD 269–373), together with his school, opposed the ideas of Arianism and affirmed that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit share the same divine substance. The Council of Nicaea adopted the same line of reasoning with the *homoousios* formulations, of which the 'light from light' metaphor was one.

Lane (2006:26–31) explains that the Nicaean Creed and the later Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum divided the church into two major groups. On the one hand were the adherents to the Nicaean Creed, mostly situated in the West. The school of Antioch and others in the East, such as Athanasius, had a clear conception of the full deity of Jesus Christ but were less clear concerning the eternal trinitarian nature of the Godhead. On the other hand, there was the school of thought that followed the teachings of Origen. They strongly defended the trinitarian doctrine but were less clear and less convinced regarding the deity of Christ as expressed in the *homoousios* formulations. The second group were not Arian, because they did not consider Jesus Christ to be a creature created from nothing, as Arius claimed. Rather, they perceived him to be *inferior* to the Father. The Nicene party did not deny the distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but they did not state it with the same enthusiasm as the Origen followers and therefore appeared to the latter to be Monargian. Conversely, the Origenist school of thought appeared Arian to the Nicene party. Lane (2006:26–31) reasons that these two perceptions were a classic instance of two half-truths confronting one another: on the one hand, the belief in the full deity of Jesus Christ (Nicaea), and on the other, his eternal distinctness from the Father (Origen). This division, caused by the Arian controversy and the *homoousios* formulations of Nicaea, determined the development of the doctrine of Christology for many centuries, as re-interpretations and even reformulations of the classic material followed (see Christensen 2023:256–257; McGuckin 1994:8–9).

Gnosticist and Neo-Platonist perspectives

The classic interpretation of the metaphor 'light from light' was shaped by two philosophical schools, each of which used the concept of derivation (deduction, radiation) from a higher to a lower realm within their specific epistemology and moral theory. These were Gnosticism and the influential Neo-Platonism of Plotinus (AD 204/205–270).

4.See also Athanasius (1890:448–486). Taking into consideration a thorough investigation of Athanasius's quotations of Arius in *De Synodis*, Stead (1978:38) argues that some of these quotations are irregular and should be rewritten by modern scholars. However, this quotation from Arius's *Thalia* seems to be a central idea in Arianism and was interpreted as such by his contemporaries and by the Church Fathers afterwards.

The Gnostic perspective

The theology of Gnosticism and its influences on the Christian church is difficult to define strictly given its divergence into many groupings, such as Marcionism, Manichaeism, and the Mandaeans. Jonker (2014) warns that various phenomena have been labelled as Gnosticism since antiquity. Two well-known works of Christian Gnostic theory are the Apocryphon of John and the Gospel of Thomas, which received renewed and intense scholarly attention following the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection in 1946. Over the years, scholars have attempted different methodologies to examine the Gnostic pattern of reasoning. Considering the different methodologies, interpretations, and definitions, and while recognising nuances, a broad portrayal of the Gnostic conception of light is nevertheless possible. In this respect, the brief article of Nagel (2001:417–421) is worth reflecting on.

Various Gnostic schools and movements emerged in the first three centuries AD, led by leaders and theorists such as Simon, Menander, Dositheus, Basilides, Valentinus, and others. Two principal schools were the Syro-Egyptian and the Iranian, each with its own understanding of the dualism between light (good) and darkness (evil). These views influenced both 'pagan Gnostic' and 'Christian Gnostic' trends at the time of Constantine's elevation of Christianity to the status of state religion. Nagel (2001:417–418) posits that, in philosophical terms, 'Gnostic' meant knowledge [*gnosis*] of supernatural realities and objects that the apprehender could encapsulate through understanding [*nous*] and reason [*logos*]. Within the religious realm, *gnosis* came to mean the redeeming knowledge of divine mysteries expressed in myths, systems, and teachings, as well as in the messages of agents of the divine idea. This redeeming knowledge sheds light on humanity in its quest to escape from the evil world and in its pursuit of virtue and freedom.

The quest for revealed knowledge was founded on the belief in two cosmic realities, distinguished by 'an infinite, lofty and transcendent world of light, remote from everything earthly and this present material and evil world of darkness' (Nagel 2001:418). At the helm of the world of light is an a-cosmic spiritual deity that radiates the light through its agents [*aeons*] to those in need of redemption from an earthly realm of darkness, created by a demiurge, equated with the Creator God of the Old Testament and its helpers [*archons*]. Human beings are entombed by the material world, yet they possess an imitation or 'spark' of light within. This 'spark' of light is the psyche [*pneuma*], which enables humans to accept the message of divine revealed knowledge that eventually liberates them from the evil material world. In the Christianised version of Gnosticism, the radiated light of the a-cosmic spiritual deity is Christ, the created aeon of the God of redemption.

In Gnostic terms, light is the characteristic of the spiritual world, while darkness marks the characteristic of the evil reality in which humanity exists within the created world. To escape the evil, light should be radiated to the entombed reality, igniting the sparks of light (*gnosis*) within people. In this way, humanity

can grasp the higher spiritual life, establish a relationship with the God of goodness, and leave the evil behind. The condition, however, is clear: light must be radiated from the spiritual realm to the realm of darkness (evil), encapsulated by its agents to kindle the sparks of true knowledge within humans and to lead them out of their captivity in the evil realm. To gain redeeming knowledge is to seek and to live by the light [*aeon*] from light (God). In this light, a human being may escape the evil world and discover a life of decency, virtue, liberty, and peace. The main goal in life is thus to search for the enlightening light from light. In this Gnostic sense, 'light from light' seems to have been a popular philosophical dictum in the cultural context in the formation of the Creed.

The Neo-Platonic perspective

The idea of derivation of knowledge and goodness from a higher to a lower realm was also present in the influential school of Neo-Platonism during the time of the early church and classic Christian theology. The well-known thesis of Plato (428/427 BC–348/347BC) on the ideal and real realms, and its bearing on metaphysics, ethics, and knowledge exercised a profound influence on ancient thought. His ideas have re-emerged in many adapted forms throughout the history of philosophy up to the present. Platonism asserted that knowledge and experience are in constant flux and therefore needs the guidance of fixed ideas that do not change. For this purpose, there are prototypes and models [*archëtapoi*]. For every experience in the real world, there is something fixed [*ousia*] in the ideal world (higher realm) serving as a plan to develop knowledge and morality in the lower, earthly realm. The real fluxing world has its foundation in the immovable ideal realm. The immutable, invisible, and incorporeal idea influences knowledge, norms, and experience in the real world (see Graeser 2005:235). Through the process of participation [*methexis*], the world can shape its models into fixed principles and can escape the shadowy character of the real world. Participation is possible, because the ideal can be perceived due to its casting of the prototype into the human mind.

The Neo-Platonist, Plotinus (204/205–270 CE), incorporated Plato's distinction between two realms, which he typified as the Intelligible and Sensible Worlds, and reflected, inter alia, on the means of participation between the Ideal and the Real. The Ideal is the 'One' from which the intellect and the soul can be derived. Opposing the Gnostics, he denied the idea that the material world is evil. Rather, in his view, humans possess the innate desire to deduct the Ideal and to act as cognitive agents, who could enrich life, but if they fail to fulfil the desire and remain non-cognitive agents, they themselves become the source of evil. According to Graeser (2005:257), Plotinus paid special attention to the process of derivation and explained that the Ideal has a distinctive dynamic, and that reality must be expounded in terms of process and regress. This is how the reality of evil should be comprehended (see also Gerson 2018). This dynamic entails a constant radiation from the Ideal to the Real world, from the prototype to the material, and from the immovable to the movable. Humans can participate in this radiation and thus progress to a higher form of existence (in knowledge, morals, and experience). Platonic and Neo-Platonic epistemology argue, with some alterations, that the Ideal Realm (archetype, One, complete, unmovable) radiates the possibility of true knowledge to the cognitive agents, who may then transform the Worldly Realm in either a progressive or a regressive way.

These ontological perspectives of Gnosticism, Platonism and Neo-Platonism shaped the ways in which the formula 'light from light' in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum was interpreted by the different, and sometimes opposing, theological schools of thought.

Theological perspectives

In view of the Gnostic and Neo-Platonist perspectives, Origen and Arius formulated their views on the deity of Christ in the pre-Nicaean period. McGuckin (1994:9) argues that, in this earlier logos theology, the unity of the Godhead was secured mainly by the person and will of the Father, whose power and will were exercised in his Son and Spirit. The Son and the Spirit tended to be understood as being progressively extrapolated from, and thus declining from (derived from), the initial and absolute cause. He concludes that 'a subordinationist' theology of the Son and the Spirit was part and parcel of the whole conception. By the end of the 3rd century, this outline of thought led inevitably to the Arian dispute. Arianism applied the philosophical reasoning of higher and lower essence to the nature of Christ. Christ was created by God and elevated above humanity, but he was not of the same essence as the Father.

This subordination theory prepared the stage for what is now termed a 'low Christology'. It has resurfaced repeatedly in the history of Christology when attention shifted from the resurrected Christ to the historical Jesus of Nazareth. As mentioned earlier in this examination, Lane (2006:26–31) indicates how such shifts were already evident by the late Medieval period. However, it was modern liberal Protestantism that gave potent new impetus to the quest for the historical Jesus. Welker (2013:55–103) offers a good survey of these quests, demonstrating how the quests produced several models of how Jesus might be presented to modern audiences, such as a 'political revolutionary', a 'magician', a 'Galilean charismatic', the 'Galilean rabbi', the 'proto-Pharisee', the 'Essene', and the 'eschatological prophet' (see also Piper 2007:305). Prominent in the recent quest for the historical Jesus behind the text of the Gospels, are the research and contributions of Schüssler-Fiorenza (1983) and Crossan (1992), with their respective portrayals of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and his significance for Christian faith, and especially, Christian ethics today.

The subordination theory of Arius, his contemporaries, and the tradition he introduced into the history of Christianity was rejected by Athanasius. Due to his influence, the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum addressed this idea through the four *homoousios* testimonies. The Father and the Son do not represent a higher and a lower realm, respectively; rather, they are of the same substance. The metaphor 'light from light' does not indicate a radiated or deducted light from a higher source

to a lower one. God is 'light', and this same light is in Christ without deduction or derivation. Athanasius' interpretation paved the way for an understanding of Christology as a 'high Christology' in the history of Christianity. The imagery of light became a popular topic not only in explaining the sameness of God, the Son, and the Spirit but also to explain the quality of God's creative and sustained work. In an illuminating article, Tanner (2012:122–130) explains the meaning of the light imagery within Christian theology.

She (Tanner 2012:122–130) explains that the imagery of light was used, particularly in the Patristic and Medieval periods, to provide three analogies: firstly, for the relationship between the Father; secondly, for the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit; and thirdly, for God's creation and God's presence in the world.

Athanasius made use of the metaphor of 'sun' and its 'radiance' (Tanner 2012:125). Just as the ray of the sun is still the sun, so Christ, as the 'light from light' is of the same substance as the Father and nothing less – neither subordinated, nor 'lower' than the Father. Furthermore, God's light is also revealed in creation, although not in the sense that creation is divine or of the same substance as God. God did not create in the same way as an artisan. An artisan uses tools and effort to rework or reshape pre-existing materials. However, a light source creates light immediately, without reliance on pre-established materials or external aids.

> Produced from nothing preceding it, the whole of the world, not just part of it, is created by God in the way the whole of a ray of light is emitted by a light source. (Tanner 2012:127)

The metaphor also portrays the presence of God, which is illuminating for humans. In this respect, Tanner (2012) quotes Augustine, who, in his *City of God*, wrote:

> [*I*]t is quite appropriate to speak of the illumination of the immaterial soul by the immaterial light of the simple Wisdom of God, in terms of the illumination of the material atmosphere by material light. (p. 128)

Ware (2012:131–159) likewise points to the importance of the metaphor in the mystical theology of the Greek fathers, referring to Psalm 36:8, which indicates that we can behold the light in the light of God.

Krasevac (1987:300) explains the hypostatic union in terms of the concepts 'from above' and 'from below'. The 'above' refers to God's actions in the incarnation, and the ontological result of that action (in the hypostatic union), whereas the 'below' refers to the process through which the understanding of that action developed. As a process, the incarnation from above holds absolute priority over the process from below. In his opinion, the Christology of John and of Chalcedon represents a 'high' Christology', while the Synoptic tradition argues from the 'low Christology' of Jesus of Nazareth, expressed in his words, actions, manner of prayer, and message – all located within their original social, cultural, and religious contexts (Krasevac 1987:302). He (Krasevac 1987) acknowledges that the latter could be reconstructed by the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, but both approaches ultimately point to a Christology of incarnation. 'High' does not exclude 'low' and vice versa; they feature as two sides of the same coin. Modern theologians, such as Welker (2013:55–103), argue that the distinction between 'high' and 'low' must not be applied in absolute terms, because what is sometimes described as a 'low' Christology may, in fact, display many traits of a 'high' Christology.

Taking all these perspectives into account these, the discussion now turns to an evaluation of the modern trend of doing ethics from the perspective of a 'low Christology' by following in the footsteps of the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

Low Christology and moral agency

The discussion of the moral agency of a 'low' Christology in this article takes liberation theology as its example and manifestation in Africa, focusing particularly on moral agency in the struggles against colonialism in South Africa. It must be acknowledged, however, that the struggle in South Africa was not pursuit solely from the perspective of a 'low Christology'. Christians representing the full spectrum of Christological interpretations were active in the struggle (see De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005). Furthermore, African indigenous Christianity nurtured additional insights rooted in a 'high Christology'.[5] In a recent thought-provoking and informative article, Mouton and Smit (2009:247–273) investigated four of the dominant discourses on Jesus in contemporary South Africa. This author (Vorster 2013: 310–326) has engaged with Mouton and Smit's findings in another article, offering additional analysis. Their findings are therefore only summarised here to indicate the manifestations of a 'low Christology' in South Africa and its subsequent moral agency.

During the colonial history of South Africa, a certain 'high' Christology was promoted through the missionary zeal of foreign missions as well as the pietism of the settlers. An evangelical spirituality emerged among the slaves and indigenous communities of the Cape Colony. It may be described as the worshipping of the 'spiritual Jesus' – a Jesus detached from social life and the injustices of slavery and colonialism. In preaching, he was portrayed as the saviour of souls who provides spiritual fulfilment (Gestner 1997:26). This view of Jesus was carried into the interior by the Calvinist '*trekkers*', who were confessionally driven by the piety of the 'nearer Reformation' in the Netherlands and the '*Reveil*' in Switzerland (Davenport 1997:56–57). A further impetus for the Christology of the 'spiritual Jesus' came from the revivals

5.A good example of such thought can be found in the presentation of the sub-Saharan African scholar, Agyarko. Agyarko (2017:10, 26) asserts that the most popular Christology in Africa today is the belief of Christ as 'the divine conqueror of the spiritual world'. Christ is *'Christus Victor'* over the spiritual world, which includes the 'spirit of poverty'. He construes that this belief is popular because in his view; it resonates with the African worldview. He poses that this African Christology has the same ethos as modern 'low' Christology, but it is more akin to a 'high' Christology and is, according to its adherents, deeply rooted in the *homoousias* of the Nicaean creed. See also the contribution of Ogunlano and Akona (2022:310) about Christology in Africa.

that took place in England and the US, which deeply influenced the missionary enterprises in Southern Africa (De Gruchy 1997:155). The Holiness Movement and the revival following the Azusa experience in Los Angeles spilled over to South Africa through the Pentecostal movement. They promoted a spirituality of divine healing, enthusiastic worshipping, and a comforting and 'soul-searching Jesus', yet one with no social relevance in the impoverished post-Anlo-Boer war context (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1991:267). In the latter part of the 20th century, the belief in the 'spiritual Jesus' was further reinforced by the worldwide charismatic movement. Mouton and Smit (2009) conclude:

> Religiosity in South Africa takes on many different forms, often deeply contradictory to one another – New Age inspired spirituality, American style televangelism, diverse expressions of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity and many forms of success spirituality or prosperity religions. (p. 263)

This Christology showed little concern for any form of social ethics in a context marked by racial oppression and other forms of violations of human dignity. However, in this modern environment, characterised by a merely spiritualised Christianity and social upheaval arising from the struggle against colonialism and the racism of apartheid, the idea of a 'political Jesus' embedded in a 'low Christology' emerged in South Africa. This movement resulted from the 'Theology of Revolution' that swept across the globe after the influential 1968 conference of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The 'Theology of Revolution' employed the social analysis of the neo-Marxist, Herbert Marcuse, to develop a strategy of change aimed at overthrowing oppressive systems, whether capitalist or communist. Marcuse's analysis (1971:19ff.) engages the idea of one-dimensional societies as inherently oppressive and flawed by structural violence that could only be transformed the agency of those promoting deep-rooted social revolution, potentially involving counter-violence. This social analysis, strategy of change, and violent agency entered the theology of the WCC by way of the influential presentation by Shaull (1968:23–28) before the 1968 WCC conference in Geneva. This theology perceived the church as an agent of socio-political change operating alongside other agents engaged in the field of the revolutionary change of oppressive systems. The revolutionary church was modelled on the figure of the political Jesus – a revolutionary who opposed the oppressive Romans and Jewish systems of his time. Following the initial input of Shaull, the Theology of Liberation became relevant due to the impact of the work of Cone (1970), Boff (1980), Mofokeng (1983), and Gutierrez (1985).[6]

Liberation theology portrays Jesus as a historical champion of political liberation. This movement perceives him as a liberation fighter against the Jewish and Roman institutions of his time. According to this view, he was associated with the struggling zealots in the desert. The teachings of the Gospels introduce him as a freedom fighter, and it was for this reason that he was executed by the Jewish establishment. He was killed because he sided with the poor and criticised the ruling powers. Sharing in the sufferings of the marginalised, he himself became the victim of suffering (Change to Institute for Contextual Theology [ICT] 1985:5). In this way, Jesus and his teachings became the compass for the liberation struggle in South Africa. The 'low' Christology of liberation theology remonstrated against the concept of a socially evasive 'spiritual Jesus' that determined Christology in a large part of South African theology over the years. The theology of the 'spiritual Jesus' claimed to represent a 'high Christology' but in fact limited the richness of Reformed Christology. Liberation theology ventured to present a socially active Christology but also fails to present the richness and wide-ranging effect of the 'high' Christology of the Nicaean tradition.

In recent years, theology in South Africa has also engaged with the liberal Protestant experiment of the Christology of the historical Jesus. A movement, identifying itself as the New Reformation (Muller 2002), shifted the full meaning of Christology to a conviction that Jesus was merely an ordinary human being to be regarded as the example of a fruitful and moral life whose ethics is worthy of imitation. The message of the historical Jesus was merely a message of love and peace. Following this Jesus is the bridge to a fulfilled and moral life, because it is a life of compassion, sharing, caring, and communion with others. According to this view, Jesus's ordinary message was clouded by the Christology of the ancient councils, which led to mysticism and to a faith no longer credible in a modern world with a modernist worldview. Using modern science as an angle of approach to understand Jesus, they regard it as clear that all his miracles, the belief of his resurrection and ascension, as well as the expectation of his second coming, must be regarded as inventions of the early churches to motivate people to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. For them, Christian moral agency finds its sole purpose in the active imitation of the loving and caring Jesus. Jesus offered nothing more.

Another South African example of a 'modern' Christology could be found in the contribution of Van Huysteen (2008:495), who argues from the perspective of modern evolutionary biology. He offers a Christology from the perspective of palaeoanthropology and evolutionary ethics. Although he claims by implication that this indeed represent a 'high' Christology, his emphasis on the person of Jesus 'who can be followed in faith' tends rather to present another version of a 'low' Christology, although not in the same sense as proponents of the historical Jesus within the historical-critical school of thought in South Africa. Van Huysteen (2008:495) contends that ethical behaviour is indeed a product of our biological evolution, but an evolutionary account of ethics does not support any specific moral code (also see Vorster 2013). From this premise, he attempts to find a bridge between ethics and Christology by revisiting the Christology of Schleiermacher. He argues that perfect God-consciousness in Jesus Christ can be equated with 'divinity', precisely because Christ's God-consciousness functions as the human 'organ through which

6.Fierro (1977) provides a valuable analysis of the philosophical meta-theories and main paradigms of these theologies, especially their views on Christology, their social analysis, and strategies for change.

God's activity embodies in Jesus' (Vorster 2013). For Van Huysteen (2008:500), the significance of Jesus lies not merely in his God-consciousness per se, but in the fact that this consciousness is the means through which God's being manifests as the pure activity of love, of Jesus as the historic repetition of this activity, and of Jesus's work as a repetition of his person (Van Huysteen 2008:500). He asserts Jesus can be seen both through the eyes of faith as well as through the eyes of evolutionary biology (Van Huysteen 2008:505). Such a viewpoint corresponds with Darwin's understanding of the evolution of morality. However, this view also maintains that Jesus's life and teachings existed at a time when they would find maximum societal impact – first transmitted within the in-group of Jesus's disciples and later carried forward through a vast history of ongoing critical evaluation and theological and ethical reinterpretation (Vorster 2013).

The various manifestations of a 'low' Christology in the South African theological reflection in recent years have culminated in a moral agency concerned with the search for the common good. However, this attempt is not successful, because it resonates with all other modernist and secular moral agencies in which the agents use a merely deontological, rules-based ethic to effect social change for the better. This ethic leaves the agent unchanged, because morality is driven by a set of rules excavated from philosophical and religious sources and practices, often in pursuit of some kind of ulterior motive. It is exactly at this point that the 'high' Christology of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum becomes decisive. From this perspective, we may argue that the 'light from light' is itself transformative and transforms the moral agent into a light in the world by executing and accomplishing a transformative ethic.

The transforming Christ and transformative ethics

The *homoousias* expressions of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum and the affirmation of Jesus's humanity, suffering, resurrection, and ascension into heaven is concluded by the following expression: 'His kingdom will never end'. The idea of both an imminent kingdom and a future reign was central to his preaching and teachings. His theology was of the kingdom of God – a kingdom that has come near and will entail comprehensive and all-encompassing transformation flowing from the cross and the resurrection. Welker (2013:209) describes the reign of Christ as a threefold *gestalt*, comprising kingly, priestly, and prophetic dimensions. Christ is a transformer of the entire creation, devastated as it is by evil, and his reign that will never end, is transformative. Theron (2000:293) affirms that Jesus is not merely a social reformer; he is the crucified King who himself reigns from the heavenly throne. With this assertion he implies that Christology and kingship are closely linked in biblical theology. Earlier exponents of this idea include Bright (1962:7) and Ridderbos (1969:xi), with their respective influential contributions on the idea of the kingdom and the claim that a 'high' Christology constitutes the central belief of biblical theology.

Teachings from both the Old and New Testament about the concept of the kingdom of God support and justify such a conclusion. Although the expression does not feature in the Old Testament, the idea of God's kingship over his people and the plight of the nations is a continuous theme in the Old Testament. It surfaces repeatedly in the preaching of the prophets, who proclaimed God's plan to redeem his people and to transform creation to its former glory. Biblical teachings in the Old Testament testify to the coming of the Servant of the Lord, the future eternal King of his people, and to the blessing of the Holy Spirit, who aimed to transform and renew. In their sufferings, Israel could rejoice and embrace the promises of new and better things to come under the reign of an exalted and eternal king.

The salvation history of the New Testament consistently draws attention to the theology of the kingdom (Guthrie 1981:419). Various phrases are used, such as 'kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 3:2; 4:17; 5:39; 18:1, 4), 'kingdom of God' (Mt 6:33; Lk 12:31; Mk 1:14), 'kingdom of Christ' (Lk 22:30; Col 1:33), 'kingdom of God and of Christ' (Eph 5:5), 'kingdom' (1 Cor 15:24; Ja 2:5; Rv 1:9), and 'kingdom of the Father' (Mt 13:43; 26:29; Lk 12:32). All these concepts share a common denominator: the kingdom concerns the active present and future reign of God. The Old Testament teaches the reality of God's rule over the nations and over the whole creation. The New Testament proclaims this rule as it becomes manifest in the coming of Christ and in the formation of the people of God. The kingdom is present in human history, but it will manifest in its completeness at the end of time. The kingdom is therefore best described as a futurist-presentist eschatology (Küng 1992:56). Both the present kingdom and the future Kingdom carry profound significance for human existence and especially moral agency (Conzelman 1976:114).

The theology of the kingdom of God illuminates the transforming Christ of a 'high' Christology. A good example is the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2, which expresses the multi-faceted character of Christology within the confines of the concept of the kingdom, where the King became a servant and set the example of an attitude of transforming servanthood. The hymn celebrates the way in which the divine and human nature of Jesus constitutes major ethical norms that direct the transformative work of Jesus and his followers. The foundation of these norms lies in the *kenosis* theology, which indicates that Jesus humbled himself from his heavenly glory to take the nature of a servant and to perform the work of a servant. He did not abandon his divine nature but condescends to come in the flesh – fully human (Martin 1999:171). He became human and humane: entering human life to be among humans, suffering with and for humanity, and he identifies himself with sinners and the marginalised of society. Scripture calls upon the followers of Jesus to be 'in him' and to imitate him. His attitude is to shape the attitude of people who find their true nature 'in him' and by transforming them, he transforms society.

How do people become humans 'in Christ'? Not by merely following him as a good example of a moral life but by embracing in obedience to God the sacrificial, atoning deed of the crucified Christ, seeking solace in his resurrection, and receiving guidance in his reign as the right hand of the Father. Becoming 'in Christ' needs an act of conversion from a self-directed life to a new life of self-denial under the reign of God. Becoming a follower of Christ entails, firstly, self-transformation through crucifixion 'with Christ' and resurrection 'in Him' – an act of self-sacrifice and becoming a new self. It means transformation from loneliness to being 'in Christ'. The route to this deep-routed, all-encompassing transformation is faith. Only through true faith can human beings understand the true nature of Christ, follow him, imitate his attitude, exert his love, and transform the pockets of evil encountered along their journey through history. Being a moral transformer means: (1) to be transformed by the transforming Christ of a 'high' Christology; and (2) to be a light in the world is to be enlightened by the 'light from light' of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum.

Being enlightened and enlightening requires the energy of the Spirit of God. A 'high' Christology and transformative moral agency cannot be comprehended without pneumatology. The ecumenical creeds move from the confession of the two natures and two states of Christ's existence to the gift of the Spirit and the extent of the work of the Spirit of God – from the establishment of the church (Ac 2:37–40) to the communion of believers (Ac 2:41–43), the forgiveness of sins (Jn 3:22–36), and the hope of everlasting life (2 Cor 51–10). The Spirit empowers moral agency by granting gifts to people (1 Cor 12) and enabling them to bear fruit (Gl 5:22–36). Christ, the 'light from light', transforms humanity and guides them from darkness into light, ignites within them the flame of new life through the 'blessing' of the Spirit of God. Then they become the 'light of the world' (Mt 5:14).

The theology of the kingdom of God has become an important paradigm in contemporary Reformed theology. The biblical theme of the kingdom of God unveils the depths and width of Christology as essentially a 'high Christology', because the re-creating and transforming Christ stands at the centre of God's salvific plan for humanity and the creation in its totality. The exalted Christ as the 'light from light' is the kingpin of God's all-encompassing transformative recreation and renewal of all things. The 'high' Christology of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum enriches human moral agency by placing both the moral agent and Christian morality within the realm of God's all-encompassing and eternal reign. While the 'low' Christology claims a rational choice to follow the historical Jesus as a social reformer, the confession of Jesus Christ as the 'light from light' transforms the whole person, enlightening human reason, human spirit, and human life, together with all the dimensions of human activity and endeavours. The age-old Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum thus still reminds Christians that their moral agency is not limited to time or context but functions within the immanent and transcendent reality and presence of the imminent reign of God.

Conclusion: 'Light from light' to transforming humans, to transforming moral agents

The problem statement of this research may be expressed as follows: Firstly, what was the main classic interpretation of the metaphor 'light from light' in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum; and secondly, is the metaphor still relevant today in the field of Christian ethics, considering the modern trend of 'low' Christologies as the key for Christian ethics as posited by modern liberal Protestantism? In these 'low Christologies', the divinity of Jesus and its relevance for theological ethics are questioned from the perspective of immanent liberation, driven by the historical Jesus. In the opinion of this author, the 'low Christology' idea of a merely historical Jesus, as it features in many circles of liberal Protestantism, cannot be reconciled with the *homoousias* expressions of the Creed, especially the 'light from light' metaphor. By linking the doctrine of Christ with the concept of the eternal reign of God and the transformative work of the Spirit, the Creed renders a 'low Christology' and a moral agency in the footsteps of a historical Jesus obsolete.

The classic reference to a 'high' Christology in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum implies a transformative Christ who transforms the complete human person, shaping them into a transformative moral agent within the constantly renewing, immanent, and transcendent reign of God. As the 'light from light', Christ transforms his followers and their moral agency so that they themselves become the light of the world. The 'high' Christology of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum could and should still be regarded as especially significant and relevant for Christian ethics in our modern secular age.

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