

# Exploring the role of creeds in shaping religious identity and unity in a pluralistic society

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This article examines the historical development and significance of creeds across various religious traditions, highlighting theological debates and socio-political contexts that shaped their creation. It investigates the contemporary relevance of creeds, evaluating their scope, content and functions within modern faith communities. Through literature analysis, the study explores the interplay between tradition and modernity, revealing the enduring significance of creeds in shaping religious identity and fostering unity in a pluralistic society. The study implies that faith communities can benefit from revisiting and revitalising creeds to ensure their continued relevance. It advocates for a thoughtful integration of tradition and modernity, encouraging dialogue around the role of creeds in promoting unity, understanding and shared purpose. The historical development of creeds illustrates their adaptability in contemporary faith communities, underscoring their importance in shaping belief systems and communal identities. This study contributes to a refined understanding of creeds in today's diverse religious landscape.

**Contribution:** In reconnoitring the relationship between tradition and modernity, faith societies can re-enter and invigorate dogmas, certifying their significance and timbre in today's assorted spiritual landscape.

**Keywords:** creeds; identity; pluralistic; religious; society; unity.

## Introduction

In the complex and diverse religious landscape of the modern world, understanding the role of creeds in shaping religious identity and unity is more crucial than ever. Creeds, as doctrinal statements of faith, have been a cornerstone of religious traditions for centuries, providing a shared framework for belief and practice. However, the rapidly changing social, cultural and political contexts of contemporary society raise important questions about the continued relevance and significance of these traditional statements of faith. This study aims to explore the historical development and formation of creeds across various religious traditions, examining the vital theological debates and socio-political contexts that influenced their creation and evolution. Through analysing the evolution of creeds over time, this research seeks to offer an understanding of how these doctrinal statements continue to shape belief systems and communal identities in today's diverse religious landscape. As Hotchkiss and Pelikan (2003:4 see also Pelikan 2003:400) note, creeds have played a vital role in defining the boundaries of religious communities and providing a shared sense of purpose and identity. However, the challenges of modernity, including increasing pluralism and diversity, raise important questions about the continued relevance of these traditional statements of faith. Smith (1998:4) argues that the ability of religious traditions to adapt and evolve in response to changing social and cultural contexts is fundamental for their continued life and significance. This study utilises literature analysis to gather data, drawing on a range of sources, including historical and theological texts, as well as contemporary scholarship on the role of creeds in modern faith communities. In examining the interplay between tradition and modernity, this research seeks to give a comprehension of the role of creeds in shaping religious identity and unity within a pluralistic society.

## Literature review

The literature review explores the history of creeds in Christendom, examining the name and definition, origins of creeds, the authority of creeds in Protestantism, the value and use of creeds and the classification of creeds. Although there are numerous creeds in Christendom, a look at ecumenical creeds such as the Apostolic Creed, the Nicæan Creed, the Creed of Chalcedon and the Athanasian Creed is critical due to the nature and scope of this study.

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## Research methods and design

This study uses a qualitative research design, utilising literature analysis to gather data (Creswell 2013:2). This approach is appropriate for discovering the historical development and contemporary significance of creeds, as well as their role in shaping religious identity and unity. For data collection, the study draws on a range of sources, including primary sources in the form of historical creeds and confessions of faith. Secondary sources are drawn from scholarly articles, books and chapters that analyse the historical development and contemporary relevance of creeds. Last but not least, tertiary sources consider reference works, such as encyclopaedias and dictionaries, that provide an overview of creeds and their meaning. For data analysis, the study employs a critical discourse analysis approach, examining the language and content of creeds and related texts to identify patterns and meanings (Fairclough 2013:1). This approach enables the researcher to analyse the social, cultural and theological contexts that influenced the creation and development of creeds. Furthermore, the study examines the contemporary relevance of creeds by evaluating their scope, content and functions within modern faith communities. It also helps the researcher to explore the interplay between tradition and modernity through investigating how creeds continue to shape belief systems (Hotchkiss and Pelikan 2003:3) and communal identities in today's diverse religious landscape. All ethical considerations were addressed by seeking ethical clearance from the College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa.

### Definition of creeds

A creed, also known as a rule of faith or symbol, is a formal statement of faith used in public contexts, outlining essential articles of belief deemed necessary for salvation or the well-being of the Christian Church (Schaff 1877:22). These statements can encompass the entirety of Christian doctrine and practice or focus on fundamental points, often in response to disputes. Creeds can take declarative or interrogative forms and vary in length and complexity, from brief and popular (like the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds) to more elaborate and theological (such as the symbolical books of the Reformation period) (Hotchkiss & Pelikan 2003:4). Each creed carries the mark of its historical context and reflects the theological and social circumstances of its time. The development of creeds has been shaped by biblical and theological knowledge, serving as milestones and guideposts in the history of Christian doctrine. They embody the faith of generations and the outcomes of religious debates, continuing to influence theological thought and public teaching in Christian churches (Schaff 1877:22). Creeds play a crucial role in defining Christian identity and fostering unity within the Church. While they may preserve sectarian divisions and antagonisms, they also reveal underlying agreements and point towards potential future harmony. The significance of creeds lies in their ability to shape and regulate theological thinking, providing a shared framework for belief and practice (Kelly 1972:3).

## The emergence and origins of creeds

Faith, by its very nature, seeks expression and confession. As Jesus said, 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh' (Mt 12:34), meaning to say the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. The desire to profess one's faith is rooted in the human experience of conviction and the need to share it with others. This instinct to confess faith is the foundation of Christian creeds (Semisch 1872:7). Creeds are not external impositions but rather emanate from the inner life of the Church. They are a natural response to the gospel and a means of professing faith in Christ. The Church has always had some form of creed, whether implicit or explicit, from the baptismal formula to the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. Creeds serve as a way to articulate the faith of the Church and provide a shared framework for belief and practice (Schaff 1877:24). The early Christian Church transmitted its faith orally, with the apostles preaching and teaching the message of salvation. As the Church grew, the need for written records arose, and the New Testament Scriptures were composed. Similarly, the confession of faith or creed was initially transmitted orally and professed by catechumens at baptism before being committed to writing. The *Disciplina arcani*, or discipline of secrecy, kept the summary of apostolic doctrine confidential among Christians (Geest 2018). However, as controversies emerged, formal expressions of faith became necessary to regulate public teaching and guard against error (Kelly 1972:5).

The first Christian confession or creed is found in Peter's declaration, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Mt 16:16). This confession became the substance of the baptismal confession, which eventually took a Trinitarian shape. Over time, creeds were expanded and multiplied, with various forms emerging, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Protestant churches also developed their own creeds, such as the Augsburg Confession (Hotchkiss & Pelikan 2003:8). A creed's authority lies not in its authorship but in its formal sanction or tacit acquiescence by the church or sect it represents. Creeds can be composed by individuals, synods or ecumenical councils, but their significance lies in their ability to articulate the faith of the Church and provide a shared framework for belief and practice (Augustine of Hippo n.d.:2).

### Authority of creeds in Protestantism

In the Protestant tradition, creeds and confessions hold a relative and limited authority, subordinate to the Bible as the ultimate authority on faith and practice. The value of creeds lies in their agreement with Scripture, and they are subject to revision and improvement as the Church's understanding of God's word grows. The Bible is the *norma normans* [norm of norms], while creeds are *norma normata* [normed norm] (Schaff 1877:26 see also Carl 2012:160). The distinction between biblical and creed authority is that the Bible has divine and absolute authority, regulating the faith and practice of all believers. In contrast,

creeds have ecclesiastical and relative authority, guiding the public teaching of church officers. Assigning higher authority to creeds would be un-Protestant and akin to Romanising tendencies. Overemphasising creedal authority can lead to an unhealthy reverence for human documents, potentially stifling critical thinking and promoting rationalism (Müller 1890:xv). In contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church claim absolute and infallible authority for their creeds and councils. The Eastern Orthodox Church limits infallibility to the seven ecumenical councils. At the same time, Roman Catholicism extends it to include the Council of Trent and subsequent papal decisions, culminating in the dogma of papal infallibility proclaimed by the Vatican Council in 1870. This claim of infallibility is problematic, given the contradictions between the two traditions on key issues, such as papal authority (Hotchkiss & Pelikan 2003:7). The differing views on creed authority reflect fundamental ecclesiological and epistemological commitments. Protestantism emphasises the primacy of Scripture, while Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism attribute greater significance to tradition and ecclesiastical authority. For Cameron (2013:341), the tensions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Byzantine society were not a fixed or monolithic entity, but rather a dynamic and contested concept that was subject to interpretation and negotiation. Furthermore, the ambiguous character of orthodoxy has significant implications for our understanding of early Christian society and the Byzantine Empire. Orthodoxy played a crucial role in shaping identity and community in the Byzantine Empire. However, the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were often blurred, leading to complex and mixed identities. Orthodoxy was closely tied to power dynamics, with the church and state often exercising control over the definition and enforcement of orthodox beliefs. Last but not least, the development of Christian discourse was influenced by cultural exchange and borrowing from existing traditions. This exchange contributed to the richness and diversity of Christian thought and practice. Understanding these differences is essential for appreciating the distinctives of each tradition (Schaff 1819–1893:35).

### Value and use of creeds

Creeds, when properly subordinated to Scripture, hold significant value and utility. They provide concise summaries of biblical doctrine, facilitate sound understanding and foster unity among adherents. Creeds also serve as public standards, safeguarding against false teachings and practices. In catechetical form, they are handy for instructing children and promoting substantial religious education. Historically, creeds have played a crucial role in distinguishing the Church from external influences and heresies. They have also served to define denominational distinctives. In these respects, creeds remain valuable and indispensable in contemporary Christianity. Just as secular societies require organisation and governance, churches benefit from creedal statements that guide doctrine and practice (Muller 1991:115).

Debates surrounding the binding force of creeds and the nature of subscription have been ongoing. Some groups, such as Socinians, Quakers, Unitarians and Rationalists, have rejected the authority of creeds altogether, arguing that they impede biblical interpretation, theological progress and individual liberty. Critics also contend that creeds can lead to hypocrisy, intolerance and sectarianism (Schaff 1877:29). While these criticisms have some merit, particularly in contexts where creeds are prioritised over Scripture or dissenting voices are suppressed, creeds themselves are not inherently problematic. Like Scripture, creeds can be misused, but this does not negate their potential benefits. Experience shows that even sects without formal creeds often operate under implicit authorities or traditions, which can be just as divisive. Eventually, neither creeds nor the absence of creeds can guarantee the purity of faith and practice. Churches, regardless of their creedal stance, can decline or be revitalised by the Spirit and the Word of God. The enduring significance of creeds lies in their ability to articulate and preserve the faith of the Church while acknowledging the primacy of Scripture.

### Classification of creeds

The creeds of Christendom can be categorised into four main classes, reflecting the major divisions of the Church: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant and their shared roots. These creeds demonstrate a progressive development of theology in different directions. When we analyse the ecumenical symbols of the ancient church, one can see that these creeds, shared by all Christian traditions, focus on the orthodox doctrines of God and Christ, particularly the Trinity and Incarnation. They form the foundation for later creedal statements (Hanson 1985:147). Be that as it may, when viewing the symbols of the Eastern Orthodox Church, one concludes that these creeds distinguish the Eastern Orthodox faith from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. They were formulated in response to attempts to Romanise or Protestantise the Eastern Church. Key differences with Roman Catholicism include the procession of the Holy Spirit and the papacy (Young 1992:10–11). The symbols of the Roman Catholic Church from the Council of Trent to the Vatican Council (1563–1870), Roman Catholic creeds solidified distinctive doctrines opposed by Reformers, such as papal authority and justification. The Vatican Council's proclamation of papal infallibility in 1870 completed the system (Denzinger 2012:21).

On the other hand, symbols of Evangelical Protestant Churches' creeds dating from the Reformation era build upon ancient Catholic symbols while incorporating Augustinian views on sin and grace. Protestant creeds, in turn, are divided into Lutheran and Reformed traditions, which agree on core theology but differ on predestination and sacraments (Müller 1890:xv). Furthermore, later Evangelical denominations, such as Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists, acknowledge Reformation doctrines while differing on specific articles. Their creeds often modify or abridge earlier Protestant symbols rather than expanding them. Succinctly, the creed-making period concluded mainly

by the mid-17th century, except for the Roman Catholic Church's recent additions. Future creedal development, if any, should ideally promote unity and concord among Christian denominations.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences\_ CREC (No. Rec-240816-052).

## Results and discussion

### A critical discourse analysis of the ecumenical creeds

The ecumenical creeds, including the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, are foundational statements of faith that unite various Christian traditions. They outline essential Christian beliefs, such as the Trinity and salvation, and are rooted in early church controversies. While different churches emphasise these creeds to varying degrees, they remain essential expressions of shared Christian doctrine. The Apostles' Creed is particularly significant, often used in catechisms alongside the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. Churches like the Lutherans and Anglicans have formally recognised these creeds, while others may focus on specific aspects or use them more informally.

#### The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is a revered summary of Christian doctrine that, while not directly written by the apostles, captures the essence of their teachings in harmony with the New Testament. This creed is a foundational expression of faith, outlining essential Christian beliefs in a simple, scriptural manner. Its structure follows the order of God's revelation, from creation to eternal life, and emphasises the Trinity (Carl 2012:160). Additionally, it stands out for its clarity and effectiveness in conveying Christian doctrine. It serves as a profession of faith, focusing on key events and truths rather than abstract concepts. Its liturgical and catechetical value endures, making it an integral part of baptismal and membership rites. The significance of this creed extends across Christian denominations and generations (Carson 1992:175). Its language and structure make it accessible to both children and scholars, allowing it to remain a unifying force in Christendom. The Apostles' Creed continues to hold a special place in Christian worship and education, conveying timeless truths with freshness and depth.

While the Apostles' Creed is a practical summary of Christian doctrine, its simplicity and conciseness limit its ability to regulate public doctrine in more advanced theological contexts. As a foundational statement of faith, it provides a framework for further exploration and development of Christian doctrine (Carl 2012:160). Later creeds, such as the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, offer more detailed expressions of doctrine in response to specific theological

controversies. The Apostles' Creed originated from the early Christian Church's baptismal practices and confession of faith. It evolved over time, shaped by the Western Catholic Church within the first four centuries (Parson 2012:30). Although not directly written by the apostles, it reflects their teachings and is a product of ecclesiastical inspiration. This creed has been used in various contexts, including baptismal services and public worship. Its significance lies in its ability to unite Christians across denominations and generations. The Apostles' Creed remains an essential part of Christian tradition, serving as a foundation for further theological exploration and development.

A critical discourse analysis of the Apostles' Creed in modern theology is often seen as a foundational document in Christian theology, but its authority is not universally accepted. Some view it as a product of early Christian tradition, while others see it as a later development. This ambiguity raises questions about its role in shaping modern Christian doctrine. Regarding inclusivity and language, the creed's language and structure have been critiqued for their masculine-centric language, which can be perceived as exclusionary. Some theologians, such as Oduyoye (1996) and Ruether (1983), argue that this language perpetuates patriarchal understandings of God and limits the creed's relevance in contemporary contexts. Additionally, there seems to be some theological complexity where the Apostles' Creed provides a basic outline of Christian doctrine, but its simplicity can be seen as limiting in addressing complex theological issues. Modern theologians may find it necessary to expand upon or reinterpret the creed's statements in light of contemporary challenges and debates.

Despite these limitations, the Apostles' Creed remains an important document for ecumenical dialogue and unity among Christian denominations. Its widespread use and recognition make it a common ground for discussion and cooperation. In terms of contextualisation and interpretation, the creed's meaning and significance can vary depending on the interpretive context. Modern theologians must consider the historical, cultural and linguistic contexts in which the creed was written, as well as how these factors influence its interpretation and application today. The Apostles' Creed continues to hold liturgical and catechetical value in many Christian traditions. Its use in worship and education helps to convey core Christian beliefs and practices, making it an essential part of Christian formation and discipleship.

#### The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is a foundational statement of faith that emerged from the Eastern Church, reflecting the theological debates of the Nicene era (Leith 1982:1). It provides a more detailed and explicit affirmation of Christ's divinity and the Holy Spirit's divinity compared to the Apostles' Creed. The creed's language, such as 'coessential' and 'begotten before all worlds', was shaped by the Council of Nicaea's efforts to counter Arianism (Johnson 2003:3). The Nicene Creed has

undergone development, with its original form being adopted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and later expanded upon by the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Eastern and Western Churches have distinct forms of the creed, with the Western version including the Filioque clause, which asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (Carl 2012:161). This addition has been a point of contention between the Eastern and Western Churches. The Nicene Creed holds significant importance in Christian tradition, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. It continues to be used in liturgical contexts and is incorporated into catechisms, serving as a unifying element across Christian denominations.

From a critical discourse analysis of the Nicene Creed, one can deduce the aspect of language and power where the Nicene Creed's language reflects the theological and political power dynamics of the early Christian Church. The creed's affirmation of Christ's divinity and the Holy Spirit's divinity was a deliberate attempt to establish orthodoxy and exclude opposing views. Furthermore, debates regarding the creed's Christological formulations, such as 'homoousios' (of one substance), were crafted to counter specific heresies. This climaxes the creed's part in determining Christian doctrine and the unending deliberations surrounding Christ's nature. Be that as it may, the Nicene Creed's Trinitarian language has had a reflective bearing on Christian theology. However, the creed's inventions have also been subject to interpretation and critique, predominantly concerning the scope of the Trinity and the relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. About its ecumenical implication, the Nicene Creed is broadly recognised across Christian denominations, making it a unifying document. However, differences in interpretation and emphasis have led to ongoing debates and divisions.

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) had a dual impact on African Christian thought and practice because it provided a unifying, orthodox Christological foundation through the Nicene Creed, which affirmed Christ's divinity. This was a crucial step in defining Christian doctrine globally, including in Africa. On the negative side, it also set a precedent for imperial involvement in church affairs and theological enforcement that created division and tension, particularly evident in the Alexandrian context where Arianism had strong roots (Orobator 2025:415). While the council's decisions helped consolidate core Christian beliefs like the Trinity and the nature of Christ, its enforcement under Emperor Constantine began an entanglement of church and state, fostering new conflicts and power struggles within Africa and beyond.

For its liturgical and doctrinal importance, the creed's liturgical use reinforces its importance in Christian worship and doctrine. Its recitation serves as a declaration of faith, affirming core Christian beliefs and uniting believers across traditions. The visible unity remains a central ecumenical goal in the quest for Christian unity. The turn towards holistic

ecumenism seems to help address those who shun institutional ecumenism, without forgetting the Trinitarian and Christological theological basis and the institutional dimension (Karttunen 2025:1). Furthermore, the Creed was formulated within a specific historical context, addressing the theological controversies of the time. Understanding this context is vital for interpreting the creed's language and significance. Last but not least, the creed's affirmations have far-reaching theological implications that shape Christian understandings of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Its language and formulations continue to influence Christian doctrine and practice.

### The Creed of Chalcedon

The Creed of Chalcedon, adopted in 451 CE, affirms the Nicene Creed's doctrine of Christ's divinity and adds clarity on the relationship between Christ's human and divine natures (Leith 1982:2). It rejects Nestorianism, which posits two separate persons in Christ, and Eutychianism, which confuses or merges the two natures (Schaff 1877:54). The creed outlines key Christological principles. The following are the key philosophies: a genuine incarnation of the divine Logos in human form; a distinction between nature (essence) and person (self-conscious subject); Christ as one person with both divine and human natures and the duality of natures, with divine and human aspects remaining distinct yet interconnected and a personal union between the divine and human natures, constituting one life and agency. The Chalcedonian formulation has faced criticism and challenges in reconciling Christ's full humanity and divinity. Nonetheless, it provides a foundational framework for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ, as well as navigating the complexities of his divine-human nature (Hanson 1985:150).

A critical discourse analysis of the Creed of Chalcedon shows Christological formulations, affirming Jesus Christ as 'the same Son... acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation', reflect a deliberate attempt to balance the divine and human aspects of Christ's nature. The creed's language was shaped by the theological debates of the time, particularly the controversies surrounding Nestorianism and Eutychianism. This context highlights the creed's role in establishing orthodoxy and excluding opposing views. Additionally, the creed's affirmation of Christ's two natures, divine and human, raises questions about the relationship between these natures and the nature of their unity. This has led to ongoing debates and interpretations regarding the creed's Christological formulations. The Creed of Chalcedon has played a significant role in shaping Christian doctrine across denominations. However, its acceptance and interpretation vary, reflecting ongoing differences in Christological understanding.

Theological implications show that the creed's Christological formulations have far-reaching implications for Christian theology, influencing understandings of

salvation, the person of Christ and the relationship between God and humanity. The creed's language and formulations have been subject to critique and reinterpretation, particularly regarding the potential for Nestorian tendencies or the limitations of the two-nature framework. These critiques highlight the ongoing debates and challenges in Christological formulation.

### **The evolution and theological debates surrounding the formulation of creeds in religions**

The evolution of creeds in Christianity is a rich and complex topic that spans centuries. At its core, a creed is a statement of faith that summarises the essential beliefs of Christianity (Keith 2024:6). The earliest Christian creeds were simple affirmations of faith, often used in baptismal rituals (Kelly 1972:1). One of the earliest and most widely used creeds is the Apostles' Creed, which dates back to the 2nd century (Hanson 1985:28). This creed affirms the basic tenets of Christian faith, including the Trinity, the incarnation and the resurrection. As Christianity spread and evolved, so did the creeds. The Nicene Creed, formulated in 325 CE at the Council of Nicaea, was a response to the Arian controversy, which questioned the divinity of Jesus Christ (Bray 1984:102). This creed affirmed the *homoousios* (same substance) of the Father and the Son, establishing the orthodox understanding of the Trinity (Young 1992:10–11).

The development of creeds was not without controversy. Theological debates surrounding the nature of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit led to the development of various creeds. For example, the Athanasian Creed affirmed the coequal and coeternal nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while the Chalcedonian Creed affirmed the dual nature of Christ as both human and divine (Bray 1984:106). The process of developing creeds was often linked to baptismal practices. In the early Church, baptism was preceded by catechetical instruction, and the creed was viewed as a concise summary of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. The Rule of Faith, a concept that emerged in the 2nd century, referred to the common faith possessed by the true church and was often used to guide the development of creeds (Keith 1997:8). Throughout history, creeds have played a significant role in shaping Christian theology and practice. They have been used to establish orthodoxy, to distinguish between different Christian traditions and to provide a common language for expressing faith.

In a nutshell, the evolution of creeds in Christianity is a complex and multifaceted topic that reflects the ongoing development of Christian theology and practice. From the simple affirmations of faith in the early church to the more complex and nuanced creeds of later centuries, creeds have played a vital role in shaping the Christian tradition.

### **The role of creeds in shaping the religious identity**

Creeds have played a significant role in shaping the religious identity of Christianity throughout its history. As earlier indicated by way of definition, a creed is a statement of faith

that summarises the essential beliefs of Christianity, and it has been used to establish orthodoxy, to distinguish between different Christian traditions and to provide a common language for expressing this faith. One of the primary ways in which creeds have shaped the religious identity of Christianity is by establishing a standard set of beliefs that all Christians share from the Global North to the Global South. The Apostles' Creed, for example, is one of the earliest and most widely used creeds in Christianity, and it upholds the rudimentary beliefs of Christian conviction, including the Trinity, the incarnation and the resurrection (Kelly 1972:7) as indicated elsewhere in this study.

The Nicene Creed defines the boundaries and content of the Christian faith in accordance with Scripture and also functions as essential identity formation (Pauling 2023:2). Creeds have also been used to distinguish between different Christian traditions. The Nicene Creed, for example, was formulated in 325 CE at the Council of Nicaea, and it affirmed the same substance [*homoousios*] of the Son and the Father, creating the traditional empathetic of the Trinity (Kelly 1972:7). This creed was used to distinguish between the orthodox Christians and the Arians, who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. In addition to establishing orthodoxy and distinguishing between different Christian traditions, creeds have also been used to provide a common language for expressing faith. The Athanasian Creed, for example, is a creed that affirms the coequal and coeternal nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and it has been used in various Christian traditions to express the doctrine of the Trinity (Kelly 1972:8). Creeds have also played a significant role in shaping the liturgical practices of Christianity. Many Christian denominations incorporate creeds into their worship services, often reciting or singing them as a means of affirming the community's faith (White 1992:4). Indeed, creeds have played a significant role in shaping the religious identity of Christianity throughout its history. They have been used to establish orthodoxy, to distinguish between different Christian traditions and to provide a common language for expressing faith. As such, creeds remain an important part of Christian theology and practice. The year 2025 marked a common celebration of Easter and Pentecost by Eastern and Western Christianity, reinforcing the aspiration of the Council of Nicaea to find a common date to celebrate the risen Lord (World Council of Churches [WCC] 2024).

### **How does the Nicene Creed foster unity in a pluralistic society?**

The Nicene Creed is a fundamental statement of faith in Christianity. Despite being written in a different time and context, the Nicene Creed continues to play a vital role in fostering unity in pluralistic societies. It does so in so many ways: The Nicene Creed provides a common language and framework for understanding the Christian faith. Through confirming the Creed, Christians from various backgrounds and traditions can express their shared faith and values (Kelly 1972:6) without feeling inferior and unfit in any society. The Nicene Creed articulates the core doctrines of

Christianity, including the Trinity, the incarnation and the resurrection. In upholding these doctrines, Christians can find common ground and unity in their shared faith (Pelikan 1971:11). The Nicene Creed has played a substantial part in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. Furthermore, Pelikan highlights the ecumenical significance of creeds, demonstrating their relevance for Christian unity and dialogue across denominational boundaries (Pelikan 2003:400). On the other hand, Kingzig (2024:12) demonstrates the ongoing relevance of creeds for Christian unity and ecumenical dialogue. Many Christian denominations and traditions have acknowledged the Creed as a statement of faith, thereby maintaining unity and cooperation across denominational lines (Braaten 1990:9). It also surpasses cultural and linguistic barricades, thus promoting unity among Christians. The Nicene Creed has been translated into numerous languages and utilised in diverse cultural contexts. This has enabled Christians from diverse backgrounds to affirm their shared faith and values, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers (White 1992:3). Furthermore, it promotes theological literacy. The Nicene Creed provides a framework for understanding the Christian faith and its core doctrines. Through studying and affirming the Creed, Christians can develop a deeper understanding of their faith and its implications, promoting theological literacy and unity (Webster 1998:4). There is no doubt that, the Nicene Creed plays a vital role in fostering unity in pluralistic societies by providing a common language, shared doctrine, ecumenical significance, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers and promoting theological literacy. The WCC, a global fellowship of churches working together to fulfil unity, justice and peace, is commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 2025, from 24 October 2025 to 28 October 2025, in Wadi El Natrun, Egypt, focusing on the theme 'Where now for visible unity?', a pivotal moment in Christian history that shaped the faith and unity of the church. Furthermore, this gathering aims to bring together church leaders and theologians to discuss faith, mission and unity. Additionally, the WCC organised webinars and produces publications on the significance of Nicaea and its legacy, exploring its relevance for today's church and its role in promoting ecumenical understanding (WCC 2025). The 2025 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity focused on the Nicaea commemoration, and Faith and Order collaborated with other WCC units and the churches (Beardsall 2023:173).

## Conclusion

The article examines the historical development and contemporary relevance of creeds in Christianity. Creeds are formal statements of faith that outline essential articles of belief. The study utilises literature analysis to explore the significance of creeds across various religious traditions, emphasising their role in shaping belief systems and communal identities. Key findings from the definition and purpose discussions revealed that creeds serve as foundational documents that articulate core Christian beliefs, providing a shared framework for faith and practice.

In its historical development, the evolution of creeds reflects theological debates and socio-political contexts, with significant creeds including the Apostles', Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds. Examining its authority and value, it has been discovered that creeds hold relative authority, subordinate to Scripture and serve as guides for public teaching and doctrine. In its unity and diversity, creeds foster unity among Christians while also reflecting denominational distinctives and ongoing debates. In conclusion, the study reveals that creeds continue to play a vital role in shaping religious identity and fostering unity within a pluralistic society. Through exploring the interplay between tradition and modernity, faith communities can revisit and revitalise creeds, ensuring their relevance and resonance in today's diverse religious landscape. The Nicene Creed, in particular, provides a common language and framework for understanding the Christian faith, promoting ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. Finally, creeds remain essential documents that articulate core Christian beliefs, providing a shared foundation for faith and practice.

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### CRedit authorship contribution

Peter Masvotore: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Investigation, Project administration, validation, writing original draft and writing-review and editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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### Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

### Disclaimer

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