

THE DIALECTICS OF DIVINE SIMILITUDES: NICAEA AND THE END OF THE THEOLOGIES OF LIKENESS AND UNLIKENESS

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Abstract

The theology of likeness was prevalent in the Greek-speaking Eastern part of the Roman Empire during the Christological debates of the fourth century. Except for Arius and Aetius, who advocated for a radical unlikeness, all the non-Nicene authors promoted a theology of likeness between the Father and the Son, contrasting with the Nicene theology of the identity of substance. Developed as a reaction against Modalist Monarchianism (or Sabellianism), the theology of likeness described the Son as a divine individual hypostasis and the Trinity through the concept of agreement (symphonia, i.e., ontological likeness). It rejected the notion of homoousios for its Gnostic materialistic undertones and assumed that the divine realm includes ontological degrees. The Council of Nicaea fostered a theology of identity, which culminated in the Council of Constantinople in 381, marking the end of the theologies of likeness and unlikeness. It replaced intra-trinitarian symphony with consubstantiality and removed the idea that the divine realm could include ontological degrees.

Keywords: Nicaea, likeness, consubstantiality, identity, pre-Nicene Christology

Two widely admitted concepts in modern Christian theology are divine consubstantiality and the idea of a simple divine realm without ontological degrees. However, these concepts were not always accepted. They gradually evolved over time, beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and being imposed after the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. This development followed a century of notable theological controversies.

During the fourth-century debates, most of the non-Nicene theological authors and alliances primarily adhered to a theology of likeness, which viewed the Father and the Son as similar or alike. In contrast, the Nicene perspective advocated a theology of identity, asserting that the Father and the Son share a common substance. Additionally, Arius and Aetius proposed a third position,