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Franklin, Patrick S. Review of *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, by Lewis Ayres. London: Oxford University Press, 2006. *Canadian Evangelical Review* 34-35 (2008): 91-94.

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, by Lewis Ayres. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. ISBN 9780198755050. Pp. xvi + 475. \$60.00 (Can).

Despite the renaissance of Trinitarian thought in modern theology, Lewis Ayres contends that contemporary theologians only superficially engage the fourth century Fathers that were crucial in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity. Ayres, a professor of Historical Theology at the Candler School of Theology, and author of *Nicaea and its Legacy*, chastises theologians for relying upon simplistic categorizations and unfounded distinctions, rather than conducting (or at least consulting) deep exegetical analysis of fourth century documents. In response, Ayres offers a ground breaking study of the development of what he calls 'pro-Nicene' theology. Building on the revisionist work of scholars like Michel Barnes and Joseph Lien-

hard, he sets out to provide a new, more nuanced and historically credible narrative of the emergence of Nicene Trinitarianism and its implications for theologians desiring to be faithful to 'pro-Nicene' thought. While his thesis is complex, it can be summarized as follows: The Nicene tradition involves far more plurality and complexity than is frequently depicted both by traditional historical narratives and by systematic theologians who use such narratives heuristically for their own constructive purposes. Thus, it is more accurate to speak of 'pro-Nicene' theologies, which were not univocal but shared a common "life of the mind." Ayres's intended audience includes students of Christianity (and late antiquity) and modern Christian theologians.

In the opening section of the book (the first of three), Ayres recasts the historical context of the Nicene debate by identifying the divergent streams of thought that preceded and occasioned the Creed of 325. His account challenges traditional narratives, which tend to characterize the controversy as a simple two-party quarrel between 'Nicens' (Athanasius and his followers) and 'Arians' (Arius and his followers). In contrast, Arius himself was a relatively minor figure in the fourth century debates. While his initial dispute with Alexander played a catalytic role in unleashing the subsequent 'Arian' controversies, it did not *cause* those controversies, nor did it greatly influence the thought of later '*homoians*' or '*homoiousians*'. Divergent trajectories of ideas were already operative and ripe for an imminent confrontation. These trajectories stem from the following four sources: (i) Alexander and Athanasius; (ii) the 'Eusebians' (Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Asterius, and Eusebius of Caesarea); (iii) Marcellus and theologians of the 'undivided monad'; and (iv) Western anti-adoptionism (Novatian, Lactantius, and Hilary). This section of the book narrates events up until 350.

In the second section, Ayres discusses the shaping of 'pro-Nicene' thought as it came to be distinguished from various contemporaneous anti-Nicene 'groups' (loosely defined—Ayres says we must not envision clearly distinct 'parties'). The '*homoians*' (e.g. Acacius of Caesarea, Eudoxius of Antioch) represented one such opposing group. *Homoians* rejected essence language in describing the Son's generation from the Father and promoted ontological subordinationism. For *homoians*, the Son is 'like' the Father but ontologically inferior to him. A second group, which Ayres calls the '*homoiousians*' (e.g. Basil of Ancyra), retained essence language but insisted that the Father and Son are of 'like' essence but not of the same essence (*homoousios*). They feared that the *homoousian* position of Athanasius would lead to modalism. A third group, the '*heterousians*' (e.g. Aetius and Eunomius), pushed the *homoian* doctrine further in order to emphasize the complete difference between the essences of the Father and the Son. They also clearly subordinated the Son, whom they regarded as being generated by the Father's will (not his essence). During the period of 360-381, the exchanges and debates between

these opposing streams helped to sharpen what became a clear (but not univocal) 'pro-Nicene' position. Important figures during this process included Athanasius, Hilary of Potiers, Ephrem the Syrian, and the 'Cappadocians' (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa).

In the final section of *Nicaea and its Legacy*, Ayres draws together dominant themes and implications of his revised narrative to reconstruct a consistent portrait of (pro-) Nicene theology. He argues that 'pro-Nicene' theology always employed three fundamental strategies. His selection of the word 'strategy' is significant, because while various 'pro-Nicene' theologians might have differed in their choice of words and emphases, their strategies nevertheless reflected a common "life of the mind" involving the reshaping of thought and imagination (pp. 274ff). These strategies concerned particular ways of speaking about: (i) divine unity and diversity (i.e., stressing divine simplicity and the inseparable operations of the distinct Trinitarian persons); (ii) Christology and cosmology (i.e., revealing the close connection between Trinitarian theology and sanctification, transformation in Christ, and 'participation' in the divine life); and (iii) anthropology, epistemology, and Scripture. The latter strategy reflects the 'pro-Nicene' practise of reading Scripture in order to reform and train the soul. A trained soul enables proper bodily action and facilitates appropriate contemplation of Christ's mysterious and transforming presence. Such contemplation continually reshapes one's understanding of God, self, and world.

*Nicaea and its Legacy* persuasively reinterprets the Nicene tradition in a way that both incorporates and goes beyond previous landmark works in the field (e.g., R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988). Its detailed narrative and careful analysis allows fourth century voices to speak forth with credibility and faithfulness to their original contexts and intentions. In addition, the book debunks several erroneous (and overly simplistic) ways of categorizing Nicene Trinitarian debates. Ayres helpfully transcends common fallacious distinctions, like Eastern versus Western starting points for Trinitarian reflection (threeness versus oneness respectively), an Arian conspiracy versus an original Athanasian orthodoxy, and political/pragmatic influences versus 'pure' theological ones (his discussion of the role of Constantine and his sons is refreshingly balanced). He accomplishes this by demonstrating the complexity of the various positions, the plurality of individual opinions within those positions, and the diversity of loyalties and allegiances within the same geographical areas. Furthermore, Ayres offers helpful summaries of the Trinitarian theologies of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, showing their mutual concerns as 'pro-Nicene' theologians.

In sum, Ayres is to be commended for achieving his dual aim of showcasing good historical research to students of antiquity, and encouraging modern

theologians toward serious engagement with Nicaea. Students and teachers of Trinitarian theology simply cannot afford to ignore Ayres's contribution. My only criticism of the book is that its portrayal of contemporary Trinitarian theologians as "shallow" is itself simplistic and somewhat high-handed in tone. One wonders if Ayres extends to contemporary theology the same charity and careful analysis he demands for Nicene theology.

—Patrick S. Franklin, *McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton*