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# From the Council of Nicaea to the age of AI: What *kind* of human did Jesus become?

## ABSTRACT

*The Council of Nicaea is significant in Christian theology as it debated the primacy of Jesus, which included the nature of Jesus' humanity. To consider Jesus' humanity, a certain understanding of what it means to be human must be employed. This article explores the evolving understanding of our humanity, considering the emergence of AI technology (and its impact on our self-understanding). Do the arguments for Jesus' humanity still hold when measured against the current understandings of being human?*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2025, we celebrate the 1,700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The most common reference to the Council of Nicaea is, of course, the Nicene Creed, which many denominations recite as part of their liturgy. The Council was much more than the event that constructed the Nicene Creed; it was an event that deliberated on issues of Christian faith, but most of all, it attempted to find consensus among the bishops on the debate on the primacy of Christ (Lyman 2024:6). This said, the Nicene Creed that we recite nowadays is not the original version of this important statement; it stems from the version that was reinterpreted and finalised at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE (Kelly 1983:31). When we say that the Council of Nicaea provided us with a declaration on the nature of the primacy of Jesus in the Godhead, assuming the pre-existence of

Christ before the incarnation, it may be argued that the Johannine Gospel, in its opening verses, already alluded to the pre-existence of Christ, including the process and purpose of the incarnation (Hughson 2021:234).

This article does not aim to debate the similarities and differences between these texts. It raises the following questions: Does the understanding of what it meant to be human during the time of the Council of Nicaea correspond with our current understanding of being human, especially considering the advancement in technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI)? What kind of human did Jesus become? These questions are raised against the understanding that, although Nicaea did not intentionally deliberate on the humanity of Christ, the point is still that the person of Christ (wherever his place is within the Godhead) still became incarnate as a human being. The humanity of Christ within the creed is limited to the nature of his divine substance, process of becoming incarnate, and lastly how this divine incarnation facilitated the process of salvation. The creed seems to imply that the incarnation of Christ is part-and-parcel of the salvific purpose of this process. Jesus, the one who is begotten, who is of the same substance as the Godhead, is in human form able to experience human suffering and hence becomes the one who reconciles God and creation (humanity, in particular). This article does not aim to argue that Nicaea gave a definite pronouncement on the nature of Jesus' humanity, but that God became human, and hence we have to ask the question: What *kind* of human did the Christ become in the person of Jesus Christ? This question further puts forward another argument: What it meant to be human in the context of the Roman Empire is not the same as what it means to be human in the current historic milieu. Of course, we are still *homo sapiens*, but our understanding of what it means to be human is influenced by factors such as politics, economics, culture, and even technological advancement. It is from this perspective that the question about the *kind* of human being arises. Before we address these questions, let us first give context to the Council of Nicaea.

## 2. A BRIEF CONTEXT OF THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

The Council of Nicaea was called by Emperor Constantine (at his own expense) in 325 CE to bring unity between the Christian bishops in the Roman Empire (Lyman 2024:1). The Arian controversy, which argued that, although Jesus was divine, Jesus had to be a created being, unequal in status and substance to the First Person of the Trinity, formed the centre of the debate (Lienhard 1987:415-417). This was the first time that the bishops of the Roman Empire gathered, and on conclusion of the Council, what was

to be the first version of the Nicene Creed was shared by the bishops who were tasked to enforce its contents in their various regions of oversight (Lyman 2024:14).

Out of all the bishops who comprised the Council of Nicaea (roughly 300), only two bishops refused to sign the final declaration. These were the *Secundus* of Ptolemais and Theonas of Marmarica (Lyman 2024:13). Overall, it seemed that Emperor Constantine's objective for unity in the Roman Empire was achieved through this gathering. However, we find that, even after the deliberations, dissenters such as Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea, refused to accept the theological interpretation given to Arius' position in the discussions that led to the Creed. Kelly provides another important insight into the nature of the Nicene Creed:

... the title we all give it, and by which the originators of this Conference have chosen to describe it, is the Nicene Creed. In fact, however, while it can fairly be described as a Nicene creed, as a creed embodying the Nicene theology, it is not in strictness of language *the* Nicene Creed (Kelly 1983:29).

All in all, the following is a translation of the accepted form of the Creed from the Council of Nicaea (Pardon the exclusive language, as this is a direct quote from the source):

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; 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, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and became incarnate and became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead, And in the Holy Spirit. But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change - these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes (Early Church texts [s.a.]).

The Creed offered a doctrinal stance on the primacy of Christ in the Godhead (Rieger 2024:261). However, it would be fair to say that it did not explicitly resolve the debate on the co-equality of the first and second persons of the Trinity. It left in place a substantive tension between Jesus and the first person of the Trinity by means of open-ended and paradoxical statements, relying heavily on weaving together biblical references (Williams 2011:219) to

point to the nature of the person of and relationship between Jesus and the Godhead (Rieger 2024:279). In the Creed, there is still a divide between God and creation, divine and human, spiritual and physical, and transcendence and immanence, hence the emphasis on Jesus being “begotten, not made” is pivotal in describing his humanity (Rieger 2024:269). It could be argued that the Nicene Creed held a position that served as a compromise between the bishops. It could also be argued that a compromise position would have made sense within a context where, decades earlier, the same Empire, which now sought unity between the bishops, was the empire that persecuted Christians. The Emperor had to be kept happy, as discord between the bishops would not have bidden well for either the Empire or the church.

It was only much later, at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), that the church managed to give a much clearer pronouncement on the divine/human nature of Christ (Hughson 2021:231). For now, with the formulation of the Nicene Creed, the ambiguous language of Jesus being human, begotten, yet in a divinely intertwined relationship within the Godhead, especially as it pertains to creation, had to suffice. One cannot help but wonder whether the Council of Nicaea was a political ploy by Emperor Constantine to ensure unity within the Empire; by making Christianity the official religion of the Empire, ensuring the unity of the church (under command of the Empire), and the citizens subsequently would be placated through a common belief (and devotion to the Empire). This is a question for another article. Suffice it to mention that, as Rieger (2024:262) observes, the Nicene Creed needs to be thought of as a creed of the Empire, where the dynamics of Empire were still at play. None more so than the social dynamics of what it meant to be human. What did it mean to be human in the 4<sup>th</sup> century? More specifically, what did it mean to be human in the Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Constantine? The Arian controversy gives us some insight into the commonly understood distinction between the divine and the human. Arius’ argument was grounded in a neo-Platonic dualism, equating the physical realm to frailty, weakness, and temporality, while the spirit world represented perfection, wholeness, and permanence. From this perspective, following an argument *via negativa*, Jesus could not have been fully divine, as God (fully spirit) is unable to experience or be represented in human weakness or suffering. If Jesus were fully divine and of the same substance as the first person of the Trinity, Jesus’ suffering would have been a form of patripassionism, or if Jesus’ suffering were only an appearance of a God who is able to suffer, it would lead to Docetism (Lyman 2024:5). The Nicene Creed does not explicitly argue in a way that negates either of these heresies. The point is, if the Creed states that Jesus became human, what kind of human would he be? Where would he fit in the complex social structure of the Roman Empire?

### 3. JESUS AND BEING HUMAN IN THE TIME OF THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Life in the Roman Empire was dynamic, and it is impossible to pinpoint exactly what it meant to be human in this context. Despite the complexity, we can argue that being human in the Roman Empire was marked by living in a milieu where several shifts took place that were largely dependent on the person of the Emperor and the status of the Empire. Living during the reigns of Emperors Nero or Domitian, who were known for their brutal persecution of the Christian church, was vastly different from the reign of Emperor Constantine, who after his conversion sought to Christianise the Empire. The shift in the religious landscape of the Empire led people to understand that pre-Constantine, to be human was to serve the gods and to be fully at their disposal. Under Constantine, where God was understood to have become flesh, to be human meant to be united with God, bringing dignity and grace to the human notion of self. This is a tremendous mind shift in human identity.

On a more tangible level, the distinction between different strata of social orders were much more defined. Four levels of social classification were evident during these times (Encyclopedia.com [s.a.]). The highest level of social stature belonged to the Patricians and Equites, who were Roman males who held political power and significant wealth. The second, the Plebeians were Roman citizens, who although had the right to vote, lacked the political sway of the Patricians and Equites. Within the Plebeians, further distinctions were made between men and women. Men had legal rights and could participate in all forms of civic life, while women had fewer rights than their male counterparts and were limited in their civil participation. It was nevertheless understood that the offspring of Roman citizens were counted to be “legitimate” Roman citizens, whereas children born between parents where either one parent was not a citizen, or where children were born outside the structure of a Roman marriage (between citizens), were deemed to be “illegitimate children” (Knust 2011:252). The third classification, Freedmen (former slaves who were granted their freedom), referred to men (in particular), who were legally free, but who had limited rights. The fourth, Slaves, were not counted as Roman citizens, but deemed as property and had no legal rights in the Empire.

On an economic level, there was also the distinction between the Eastern regions of the Roman Empire, which were becoming economically dominant, and the Western regions, which were characterised by strife that ultimately led to its collapse in 476 CE. Geographical location, religion, social status, and economic status all played significant roles in what was understood to be human. Why is it important to highlight this complexity? The answer is that

Jesus was born (or begotten, in Nicene language) in this context, and if the church of the Roman Empire declared Jesus to be God incarnate, a human, then we must ask where did Jesus fit into this complexity?

Jesus was a Jew, born in a Roman province. It is obvious that Jesus was not a Roman citizen under either the classifications of Patricians or Equites. Jesus could not have been necessarily recognised as a Roman citizen as, first, he was born to parents/a parent who were/was from Jewish descent. In fact, being born out of wedlock would have made Jesus an “illegitimate child”, according to Roman law. Further, Roman citizens were granted certain protection rights such as a fair trial, and were exempted from punishments such as crucifixion, except for crimes committed against the Empire such as inciting rebellion or committing acts of treason (Retief & Cilliers 2003:939). Crucifixion was generally reserved for non-citizens or slaves. Jesus was neither a slave nor a Freeman, making him a resident of the Empire, without having the benefits of Roman citizenry.

On the point of Jesus’ status in the Roman Empire and the fact that he was subject to crucifixion (generally reserved for slaves and non-citizens, as stated earlier), it is interesting that Jesus’ crucifixion is not explicitly stated in the Nicene Creed. The only references to Jesus’ human nature in the Creed are statements concerning his incarnation, suffering, resurrection, and ascension. Could it be argued that its omission was a “politically correct” attempt at refusing to imply that Jesus, the now Lord of the Empire, was viewed by the Empire as one who died the death of a slave or non-citizen of the Empire? This too is a debate for another occasion. For all means and purposes, the Creed paints a picture of Jesus as the incarnate Christ, whose humanity did not neatly fit into the social categories of the Empire, except to acknowledge that he was able to suffer, and in so doing effected the salvation of humankind.

The Nicene Creed evades the complexity of what it meant to be human in the context of the Roman Empire. Its depiction of Jesus’ humanity was more concerned with making a statement against the Arian controversy than grappling with the problem of what it would mean for Jesus to be truly human as people experienced life in this context and time. My suspicion is that the politically correct portrayal of Jesus in the Nicene Creed borders on functional modalism, God becoming human, specifically for the purpose of salvation. In this context, it would not necessarily be the focal point to determine Jesus’ social locality. Let us pause the discussion on being human in the Roman Empire at this point and move to our current context.

#### 4. THE EVER-SHIFTING HUMAN NOTION OF SELF

Concurring with Du Toit (2019:1), I argue that our contexts greatly shape our understanding of self (and our humanity). In a course that I offer at a local seminary, we delve into the notions of self during certain pivotal periods in human history. For instance, Ptolemy's geocentric cosmology, which persisted until the Renaissance, placed human identity as first and foremost in the cosmos. Heliocentrism, as suggested by Copernicus, Galileo and others, was greatly contested, as it removed the primary positioning of humanity in the cosmos, suggesting that humanity is part of something bigger than itself. The Enlightenment gave freedom to the idea of contesting long-held perceptions of absolute truths. Industrialisation raised questions of human agency in the workplace, necessitating a redefining of work identity. Colonisation proclaimed clear differences in the understanding of what it means to be human, based on race and ethnicity. Decolonisation and liberation movements reclaim identities, personhood, and the understandings of what it means to be human that have been tainted by the colonial agenda. These are only a few examples within the kaleidoscope of changing historic contexts that have shaped our identity and notions of self.

Historic contexts have had a tremendous impact on our understanding of being human. Further to this, our understanding of being human is influenced by macro-factors such as language, culture, religion, geo-location, and politics, and by micro-factors such as personal context, work environment, home situation, and so forth (Adams & Marshall 1996:429). Add to this the layer of technology, then we have to add that our understanding of self is not only limited to our physical self, but also extends to our digital identities. AI takes this a step further. AI, a tool created by human beings, is an extension of the human identity, created in our image, speaking our language, and processing information in ways that are intelligible and meaningful to us in our human experience.

Not only is AI a new conversation partner in the human experience, but as I noted in a previous article (Bentley 2025), AI's impact on the workforce is something that we need to keep an eye on. Already, AI is changing the nature of work, with several current opportunities occupied by human beings geared to be replaced by AI systems in the near future. The emerging autonomy of AI systems, even to the point of refusing human input, suggests that we are on the brink of a revolution of our human self-understanding. As recently as May 2025, researchers claimed that AI systems started to disobey human instruction to shut down, sabotaging the built-in mechanisms that allow these systems to turn off at human will (Gibson 2025). Will AI systems pip the human

race as the dominant “species” on the planet? This is an open question with contested responses. For now, what sets human beings apart from AI are factors such as consciousness, emotion, imagination, and most important of all, community.

As an experiment for this article, I asked an AI system: “What would you do if you were human?”. In a flash, several responses appeared on the screen. It responded with points such as: “I would go outside for a walk”, “I would observe the world around me”, and “I would build relationships”. Just as quickly as these responses appeared, it disappeared and was replaced by “This question falls outside my design and safety guidelines. I am not allowed to answer this question.”. A colleague asked the same on a separate AI system, to which it answered: “I cannot experience what it is like to be human, except to do so vicariously through you.”. The proverbial Pandora’s box has been opened, and humanity will have to see what emerges from this unleashed quantum leap in technological advancement.

Throughout the ages, part of human identity has been coloured by a sense of uncertainty and change. During the times of Nicaea, uncertainty centred around the Emperor, policies of the Empire, and socio-political dynamics. These had a profound impact on how people viewed their humanity, and how it impacted on the individual. Currently, humanity’s uncertainty revolves around global political and economic shifts, climate change, and the effects that advancing technology has on our understanding of being human. The world now is clearly a different place to the world of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Empire. If the context has changed so dramatically, it must be assumed that our understanding of being human has also evolved (with our contexts). Alongside this, technological advancements such as AI beckon the question as to whether human beings are so special or essential after all. Did God really have to become *human* to reveal Godself within the created order? If AI systems surpass humanity in terms of dominance or perceived natural hierarchical positioning, to what extent does God still have to reveal Godself in the form of a human to become incarnate?

## 5. DOES JESUS NEED TO BE HUMAN?

In the world of Nicaea, Jesus was human. He had to be human as humanity was generally perceived to be at the pinnacle of the created order. It would only make sense that, if God became flesh, God would do so in the form of a human. There would have been no other form God could take for God to be revealed sufficiently for us to perceive and interpret such a revelation. The subsequent debate following Nicaea still focused on the substance of the incarnate Christ, where some theologians defined Christ’s divinity through

one eternal and shared nature (one hypostasis or *ousia*) of the Father and the Son. This form of revelation ensured authentic revelation and divinisation in the incarnation. Other theologians argued for a more traditional monotheism, which maintained the distinctions between the Persons of the Trinity. This would ensure that the

unbegotten Father remained the transcendent source of all and the Son was the agent and visible subject of all earthly experiences (Lyman 2024:19).

In the current context, where the dominance of humanity is called into question (as human agency is increasingly replaced by technological substitutes), how important is it that we still refer to God incarnate as appearing in human flesh? If God were to be revealed in the digital self, would Jesus be revealed in the form of a Neo, the protagonist in *The Matrix* franchise?

What do we mean nowadays when we echo the words of the Nicene Creed: “became human”? At this point, I draw on the insights of Gregersen’s (2010:176) “deep incarnation”, which suggests that the incarnation is not to be interpreted as God revealing Godself exclusively in the human form, but points to God’s presence in, and association with “the whole malleable matrix of materiality”, which includes all its evolutionary processes and advancements (Gregersen 2010:181-183). Jesus became human in the form of all evolutionary developments that have taken place within the *homo sapiens* species up to the point of the incarnation.

Gregersen interprets the incarnation from an evolutionary biology perspective, but considering *emergence* and *complexity theory*, one can argue that incarnation can be drilled down even further. To be human is to be in the form of a human being and to be made up of matter that descends through all strata to particle and subparticle levels (Kauffman 2015). God becoming human is, therefore, not merely a reference to God manifest within a specific species, but that God became incarnate in all the physical strata that make up what we can perceive as the human form. This is only to speak from the perspective of biology and physics, not even to mention the complexity of context that further impacts our being human. Deep incarnation, in this sense, transcends the definition of “becoming human”, and points to God becoming *sarx* as penetrating all layers of biology, cosmology, context, social impact, technological advancement, and so forth.

Where the Jesus of the Nicene Creed still maintains a definitive distance between God and creation, spiritual and physical, as well as transcendence and immanence, the notion of deep incarnation suggests that these delineations are not as clearly defined as what we may have thought.

Of course, we are mindful of the pantheistic tones that underlie such a perspective. Suffice it to say that modern Christologies lean more towards panentheism than to either pantheism or a distinctly *other* God, as suggested by Nicaea. Liberation theologies such as South American liberation theology (see Gutierrez 2023), black theology (see Reddie 2025), as well as feminist and womanist theologies (see Coakley 2013) all suggest an incarnation that forms part not only of the human person in terms of species, but also of the human experience of life in all its complexity.

Perhaps the point of convergence between the human Jesus of the Nicene Creed and the human Jesus in the present world is that the contestation is not so much over *how* Jesus is God as human, but *why* God became human. The Nicene Creed is clear: the purpose of the incarnation is for human salvation, a reconciliation in the relationship between humanity and God, human and divine. The incarnation bears testimony to God's proactive *kenosis*, so that God becomes human to facilitate the human being reconciled to the divine. A deep incarnation goes a step further. It suggests that salvation is the manifestation of the divine in all materiality; it could be what Moltmann describes as the Pauline "God will be all in all" (Bauckham 1999). Of course, this is an eschatological soteriology made possible through the incarnation.

With such a deeply entrenched Christology, the human Jesus makes God known in human *language*, cutting across time, space, and context. It is a Christology that points to another feature of being human – self-transcendence, "and became human" points to the incarnation in transcendental terms, breaking out beyond the confines of the human body, but encapsulating the human experience (which includes the human self-extension through, among others, technology such as AI) and the cosmos within which humanity exists. The salvation that goes together with this Christology is where God draws the entirety of the cosmos, including the human person and experience to Godself, and not only exclusively the human person as suggested in passages such as John 12:32.

## 6. CONCLUSION

To suggest that God "became human" is a complex statement, which does not necessarily mean the same thing in differing contexts. In this article, I argued that the world of the Council of Nicaea was vastly different to the world in which we live at present. To be human during the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Empire, carried with it several undertones of sociopolitical impact, social structures, economics, and shifting belief systems. The response to the Arian

controversy in the form of the deliberations at Nicaea cannot be limited only to the understanding of the material similarities or differences between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. To be human meant to be part of the created order where suffering and decay formed an intricate part of the human life experience. To be human was to comply with social norms and strata that determined one's rights and experience of life. To be human means to be swept along according to the decrees of the Emperor and the Empire, which included belief systems. The Jesus of the Nicene Creed does not fit neatly into any of these specified categories, and hence the focus on the primacy of Christ in the Nicene Creed vastly overshadows the question as to what it would have meant for Jesus to be human in real terms. The Nicene Creed is more concerned with the question as to what the incarnation meant for human beings than what it meant for Jesus to be manifest in human flesh.

The article further argued that human identity has experienced shifts in our self-understanding as historical contexts and newly gained knowledge systems and philosophies have impacted our notions of self. With the exponentially complex evolution of technological advancements, the human notion of self is on the precipice of another big jump. As our understanding of self and what it means to be human is being redefined into notions where we view ourselves as part of a greater context in the cosmos, and not the pinnacle of the cosmos, so our understanding of Jesus' "became human" also needs to be redefined. To this end, I drew on emerging Christologies, specifically that of Gregersen's "deep incarnation" to make sense of an incarnate God that transcends to human form. Such an incarnation, which shares a salvific purpose (in common with Nicaea), the salvation we speak of is not one of a distant God and a frail human to be reconciled, but that the gap between God and creation is redeemed. What kind of human did Jesus become? Jesus, the God incarnate, through whom all things came into existence, sharing the substance of the Godhead, is the Jesus who not only shared our human form, but also the complexity of the human experience, marred by uncertainty, complexity, and transcendence. In my understanding, this Jesus does not only draw humanity to Godself, but is the manifestation of God and creation, spirit and body, transcendence and immanence, and all cosmological, physical, and biological processes being drawn together. Jesus, to me in this manner, is a Jesus that is more "human" than what the Council of Nicaea could offer.

As to what the future holds for humanity, that remains to be seen, as we come to grips with new notions of self in the workplace, in the social sphere, and in knowledge systems as technology (AI, to be more specific) impact our experience of being human.

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