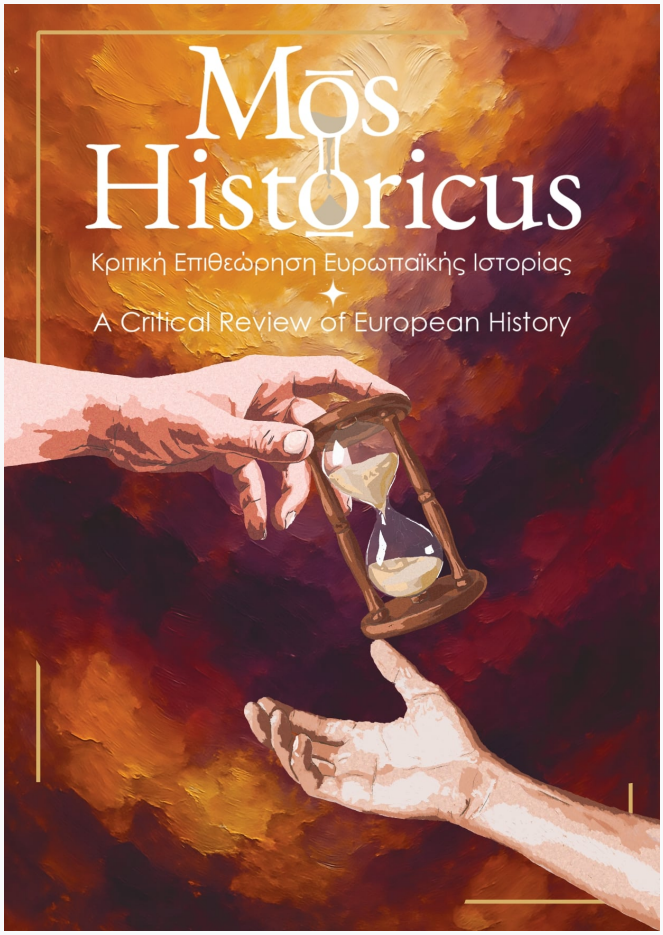
Mos Historicus: A Critical Review of European History

Vol 3, No 1 (2025)

Mos Historicus: A Critical Review of European History



Introduction: Religion and Religiosity

Βασίλης Μ. Μελετιάδης

doi: 10.12681/mh.43994

To cite this article:

Μελετιάδης Β. Μ. (2025). Introduction: Religion and Religiosity. *Mos Historicus: A Critical Review of European History*, *3*(1), 14–25. https://doi.org/10.12681/mh.43994

Introduction
Religion and Religiosity

Vasilis M. Meletiadis*

Heresies and Temple-ships: Religion through the Lens of Nicaea

With this third issue, *Mos Historicus* seems to have solidified its identity as a journal that tackles big, history-defining topics. Making a start in 2023, its first call for papers was influenced by this past decade's most consequential crisis, the pandemic – biology-turned-history. In its second issue, it continued with the treatment of another large topic, the complex dynamics of revolution. Now, having gone past biology and revolt, *Mos Historicus* turns toward that ever-enticing intersection between the profane and the sacred, religion.

In the history of Europe, very few religious events have had such an enormous impact on several levels as that of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. Since this year (2025) marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council, it seemed appropriate to give it its due attention in an issue concerned with religion and in a journal that enjoys tackling the big questions. We will do so by employing a pastime practice I do whenever I encounter a call for submissions: trying to see whether a sole topic or event can effortlessly embrace all of the suggested categories. In this case, however, the point is not simply to indulge in a scholarly game, but rather to briefly highlight aspects of a defining and controversial event, one that certainly had a, at the very least distant, role to play in the matters discussed in the following articles. In fact, if we take the first two categories – historiography and heresy – as broad historical subjects and fields of study in and of themselves, it is hard to deny that these were shaped to a significant degree by the Council, its participants and the surrounding developments.

---

* Vasilis Meletiadis is a historian and tour guide. He studied history at the University of Thessaly and the National Kapodistrian University of Athens. In 2023 he completed his PhD at the University of Bristol, specializing in new religious movements and occultism between the 1970s and 2000s. He currently works as a licensed tour guide, usually with a focus on Early Christianity in Greece.

Mos Historicus' third call for submissions suggested five general categories, all in relation to religion: 1) historiography, 2) otherness and heresy, 3) a mix of lived religion and spiritual deviation, 4) esotericism and apocalypticism, 5) technology. Let us address these in turn by relating them to the Council of Nicaea.

Historiography

Historical writing had existed for centuries prior to the Council of Nicaea, but it was one of its participants, the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (approx. 260-339 CE)[1], who shaped historiography in ways that are traceable to this day.[2] Having inherited the form of universal history from earlier historians, particularly Polybius and Julius Africanus, Eusebius embarked on an endeavor which he knew from the outset was pioneering.[3] His most notable work, *Ecclesiastical History*, was published in 313, taking note in fact of the Edict of Milan which was issued earlier that year and which declared freedom of practice for all religions across the empire. It has long been accepted that though kinds of universal history had existed previously, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* birthed not just the fields of church history and religious history as coherent and unified narratives, based on the theological concept of the Universal Church, but also, and as a result of this, the field of world history as it has developed since then.[4]

The Council of Nicaea was not included in Eusebius' magnum opus. It was left for his second most important work, his *Life of Constantine the Great,* which he never completed but was published posthumously. In it, the panegyric portrayal of Constantine described the monarch as of nearly divine origin, a messianic figure who ushered in the definitive ending of the period of persecution and the establishment of the heavenly kingdom of the Church.[5] Nowhere was this more profoundly illustrated than in the narrative about the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius does not hide

[1] Not to be confused with Eusebius of Nicomedia, a powerful Arian bishop who also attended the Council, and whose dominant presence in Nicomedia played a role in crossing-off that city as a potential venue, for the much smaller and less convenient Nicaea.
[2] Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1990, pp. 138-139.
[3] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History,* 1.1.4.
[4] Antonis Liakos, *Πώς το παρελθόν γίνεται ιστορία;* [How does the past become history?], Πόλις, Athens 2012, pp. 69-70.
[5] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine,* Book I, chapters 1, 2.

his opinion that this event was pivotal not only for its ecclesiastical and political implications, but more importantly, at a much more spiritual and cosmic level. Indeed, the force that animated his *Ecclesiastical History,* the Universal Church, was finally seen united under order of the semi-messiah, Constantine. Using biblical terminology and imagery, Eusebius goes as far as to describe the assembly as a thanksgiving offering to God and parallels it to the narrative in the second chapter of the Book of Acts, where, according to Luke, the Apostle Peter preached onto thousands of pilgrims from all over the world, thus inaugurating the so-called Apostolic Age.[6] Eusebius' point was clear: Nicaea, assisted by the divine priest-king, signaled the triumph of the Universal Church and her story. To put it in the controversial terms of a contemporary thinker, it marked the end of history.

Heresy

A treatment of the category of heresy in relation to Nicaea requires little introduction. What would heresy be without Arius, the "heresiarch" of early Christianity, whose subordinationist theology of Christ offered the theological *raison d'être* of the Council? Consequently, what would the ecclesiastical category of heresy have looked like had the *homoousian* doctrine not won along with the subsequent demonization of Arius, and how would persecutions of those accused of heresy in later periods have developed? Such was the perceived evil of the presbyter, that in later eastern artistic depictions of the Council, he is seen downcast in a dark pit underneath the feet of Constantine and the bishops in the same manner that, in icons of the Resurrection, a figure representing Death is bound and cast in a pit underneath the feet of the resurrected Christ.

Following the Council's conclusion and the defeat of the Arian side, the works of Arius were burned and he and several of his supporters were exiled, to return from exile a couple of years later.[7] It is common historiographical knowledge that what we know about heresies is derived mostly from their adversaries, whose often sensationalist descriptions left very little room for sympathy toward the accused. Most of Arius' works destroyed, one is left with what was said by his opponents, particularly his younger contemporary Athanasius of Alexandria, whose prolonged

[6] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine,* Book III, chapters 1-8.
[7] Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy", in Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 46.

refutation of Arius also included the inventing of positions he never actually held, in what Lewis Ayres has named "the creation of Arianism".[8] As Arianism became the principle heresy of the fourth century, it also functioned, writes Ayres, as the catalyst of several other theological controversies of the time.[9] The stage was thus set for the liberal use of *Arianism* not only as an accusation with specific Christological parameters and historical associations, but as a byword for anything antithetical to Nicene Christianity. Nor was this generalization confined to the fourth century alone. Starting from the 5th century and leading all the way to the twentieth, the easy accusation of Arianism has been extensively employed even on matters that are not strictly related to Christology.

Esotericism

Let us skip the third category of lived religion and return to it later along with the fifth. What are we to do with the fourth category, esotericism?[10] Surely, there are things to say about Nicene *orthodoxy* opposing types of esoteric philosophy and theology. A quick perusal of online blogs and videos shows that the idea that the Council put an end to a variety of potential theologies and esoteric interpretations is commonplace. Not to mention, of course, Dan Brown's bestselling 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code,* where a flashback describes esoteric ideas and movements going underground as a result of Nicaea. Fiction and hyperbole aside, these narratives do contain a kernel of truth. But what about the potential presence of the esoteric in Nicene Christianity itself and, crucially, its famous statement, the Nicene Creed? At first glance, not much seems *esoteric* about a creed which was soon made public and sent to churches throughout the empire. A more careful look, however, highlights terminology that was employed to resolve some of the Council's most pressing theological predicaments and which up to that point, was used in highly esoteric discourses.

---

[8] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian* Theology, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, pp. 100-102. Also, Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2002, p. 247. It is also important to note that Athanasius was just a young priest during the council. See, David Gwynn, "Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea", in Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion*, ibid, p. 95.

[9] Ayres, ibid, p. 101. Also, Lyman, "Arius and Arianism", *ibid*, p. 44.

[10] The fourth category also mentioned apocalypticism. Though much can be said on that subject, I have decided, for brevity, to focus on esotericism. In fact, I suggest that the end-of-times aspect of apocalypticism was briefly hinted in the section about historiography.

At the center of the Council of Nicaea was the Christological debate about whether Christ was of equal standing to the Father or not. As any attempt at finding satisfactory biblical terminology came short, the participants agreed upon the term *homoousios* (*-on*), thus employing the help of an ancient term, *ousia*.[11] *Homoousios* had been floating around in texts dealing with the Christological debate prior to 325, two notable examples being Arius' letter to his bishop and adversary Alexander of Alexandria, sent between 318 and 320, where he states his disagreement with the term and also the Synod of Antioch in 268 where use of the term was rejected.[12] The term *ousia* on the other hand had been used extensively in philosophy and esoteric philosophical discourses ranging from works of the gnostic milieu to the Neoplatonists and, crucially, of Plotinus, the most esoteric and apophatic Neoplatonic philosopher of the third century CE. Christian theologians of the third and fourth centuries raided this intellectual armory, adopting positions that would support their side of the argument. Concerning the use of Plotinus specifically, theologian Johannes Zachhuber makes the argument that mid-fourth century Apollinarius (one of the principal supporters of the *homoousios*) drew from the Neoplatonist philosopher's works to justify the adoption of the term.[13] And while, according to Nicene theology the *ousia* was one and the same across the persons of the Trinity, subsequent debates highlighted that each one was considered a distinct *hypostasis* of the *ousia*. Adopted extensively in Christian theological discourses during the fourth and fifth centuries, the concept of a *tris-hypostatic* God was also derived from the writings of Plotinus and his successor and biographer, Porphyry of Tyre.[14]

[11] *Ousia,* found in works all the way back to Aristotle and especially Plato, was used to describe substance, essence, the stuff of being. *Homoousios* means of the same essence. Not only is *homoousios* not found in the New Testament or the Septuagint but its constituent *ousia* is also not encountered, at least in relation to the nature of the divine or of Christ.

[12] Arius, "Letter of Arius and his followers to bishop Alexander of Alexandria". See: https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-6/

[13] Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, Brill, Leiden 2014, pp. 37-38.

[14] John Dillon, "Logos and Trinity: Patterns of Platonist Influence on Early Christianity", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series,* 25 (1989), pp. 9-10.

Lived Religion and Technology

Lastly, we come to the third and fifth categories, lived religion and technology, which we will examine in unison.[15] Behind the rise of studies on lived religion in the past couple of decades lies the realization that doctrine and scripture are often poor indicators of how a religion is actually practiced on the ground. The earlier predominance of formal religious characteristics in scholarly study can be traced back to the fourth century CE and the events surrounding the edicts of Serdica (311) and Milan (313) and the Council of Nicaea. Part of this transition is related to the construction of the first purpose-built churches, something that is emphasized in conversations about the edicts but then nearly forgotten when it comes to Nicaea (a mere twelve years later). Indeed, prior to 312-313 the faithful gathered in houses, some of which were modified extensively to accommodate worship.[16] Only a handful of churches had been built by 325 and there is no evidence that there were any in Nicaea at the time (contrary to common depictions, the Council was held in a throne room or secular hall in Nicaea's palace).[17] As the *domus ecclesiae* gave way to the large basilicas of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, ritual changed, liturgy became more formalized and grand, as if to fit the new spacious colonnaded nave and apse of the sanctuary, or the heavenly domes of central-planned churches. But these churches were not simply new structures – bigger, prettier, more imperial – they also represented new *technologies* of worship and liturgy.

"Technologies" should be understood here as a combination between the colloquial sense (technology as device) and Foucauldian technologies of the self and of power. Erik Davis, in his slightly mythopoetic book *Techgnosis,* makes a similar case for the practice of writing as both a technology of memory-enhancing and a set of practices (not simply ability-enhancing tools) that shape identity and behavior, as well as power relations between people.[18] In a similar manner, the temple venue thus functions as a technology of mediation, a large device of sorts, through and within which the faithful seek a connection with the sacred. At the same time, it is a *ritual* in the

[15] The third category also includes deviant spirituality. For brevity, we will consider this covered in the "heresy" section, even though there are important differences between doctrinal heresy (of the nature addressed in Nicaea) and deviant spirituality.
[16] Camille Leon Angelo and Joshua Silver, "Debating the *domus ecclesiae* at Dura-Europos: The Christian Building in context", *Journal of Roman Archaeology,* 37 (2024), pp.264-303.
[17] Ine Jacobs, "Hosting the Council in Nicaea: *Material Needs and* Solutions", in Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 69.
[18] Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Serpent's Tail, London 2004.

most concrete of ways – a sacralized space of differentiation as Catherine Bell would describe it, where the self, the body, identity and power structures interplay.[19]

Architectural terminology helps to further elaborate this image of the temple as a technology meant for mediation and differentiation. The central part of the church structure, the *nave*, derives its name from *navis,* Latin for "ship", a symbol with connotations going all the way back to the story of Noah's Ark. Church-as-ship imagery was employed as a metaphor by Christians from Tertullian (155-220 CE) all the way to the Reformation and beyond.[20] The large basilicas built between the fourth and sixth centuries solidified this symbolic language: a linear structure with clearly defined isles between the columns constitute the nave, there is a balustrade to divide the nave from the sanctuary, and the apse of the sanctuary – the ship's prow – looks east, taking its faithful toward the meeting with Christ whose Second Coming was traditionally anticipated as coming from that direction.

Exploring the issue

The Council of Nicaea (325) occupies a pivotal place in the religious and cultural history of Europe and the Mediterranean, with effects that extend well into the present. This issue takes shape against the imprint of that formative moment, when the boundaries of religiosity were first decisively articulated, giving rise to diverse and often liminal forms of spirituality that nonetheless shared a common messianic and soteriological horizon. These configurations came to occupy an integral place in the formation of both individual and collective experience within European societies. Viewed from this perspective, religion and spirituality are not approached as coherent or self-contained systems of belief, but rather as historically contingent frameworks through which meaning is produced, social relations are organized, political action is legitimated, and cultural identities are shaped.

From medieval discourses on heresy to modern and contemporary manifestations of religious violence, otherness, ritual, and symbolism, the articles included in this issue illuminate the multiple dimensions religion may assume, as well as its entanglement with questions of power,

[19] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009, p. 90.
[20] Achim Timmermann, "Cathedrals and Castles of the Sea: Ships, Allegory and Technological Change in Pre-Reformation Northern Europe", *Baltic Journal of Art History,* 18 (2019), pp. 7-74.

identity, and historical experience. In her contribution, Matina Noutsou addresses the multifaceted and central historiographical problem of heresy in the twelfth century through an analysis of *On the Apocalypse* by the Cistercian abbot Geoffrey of Auxerre. The focal point of her approach lies in the complex relationship between accusations of heresy and criticism directed at the clergy, highlighting the ways in which Geoffrey mobilized discourses of deviation in order to construct a specific clerical identity aligned with the monastic ideal of Gregorian reform. The article thus sheds light on heresy not merely as a theological problem, but as an instrument of internal ecclesiastical reconfiguration and the negotiation of power.

A few centuries later, within the world of early modern Europe, Panagiotis Georgakakis engages with one of the most contested episodes of the English revolutionary period: Oliver Cromwell's Irish campaign in the mid-seventeenth century. By juxtaposing the sieges of Drogheda and Wexford with those of Ross and Clonmel, the author investigates whether the violence perpetrated constituted a purely religious expression of Puritan zeal or formed part of a broader strategic framework employed by Cromwell and the New Model Army, without excluding the coexistence of both. Entering into critical dialogue with the existing historiography, the article reframes religion as a factor deeply interwoven with strategic, political, and colonial logics of domination that profoundly marked Ireland's collective memory and identity.

Remaining within the same period, Dikaia Gavala turns to the field of Restoration literature and theatre, where John Dryden's tragedy, *Amboyna* (1673), becomes a site for examining the dramaturgical representation of a colonial episode in Indonesia. Her article elucidates the role of religion in the formation of political alliances and commercial rivalries, as well as the instrumentalization of religious frameworks in the construction of representations of otherness. This reading of religious signification and its deployment on the symbolic level also informs the interpretation of the theatrical stage as a space in which religious difference is released and transformed into political argument, contributing to the formation of imperial myths and collective imaginaries.

Closing the thematic section of the issue, Dimitris Asimiadis examines the political dimensions and aspirations of domination shaped by religious codes of communication and spiritual meaning-making, shifting the analysis to the twentieth century and focusing on the Nazi regime, where metaphysical and occult dimensions were embedded.. By examining the relationship between National Socialism, German esotericism, mysticism, and millenarianism, the

article demonstrates the role of rituals, symbols, and the cult of the leader-saviour in the formation of Nazi ideology and social cohesion under Hitler. Moreover, it explores the ways in which elements of spirituality and "political religion" were intertwined and integrated into political propaganda, offering an interpretive framework for understanding the regime's social resonance.

Finally, with the present issue, *Mos Historicus* launches a new editorial practice by selectively including a small number of contributions that fall outside the issue's thematic focus, while remaining firmly within the geographical and chronological scope of European history defined by the journal. This decision reflects the editorial team's commitment to maintaining the thematic coherence of each issue, while also fostering space for studies that engage critically with historiographical debates and offer meaningful insights into European historical experience and practices.

Accordingly, the present issue includes the article by Thanasis Panos, which examines the intricate process through which legal relations were constituted in the Holy Roman Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with particular emphasis on the character and evolution of territorial laws (*Landrechten*). The analysis is anchored in the legislative initiatives of the thirteenth century and in the nexus between Emperor Frederick II's reign and contemporary legal theory. Subsequently, through a comparative examination of the Saxon and Swabian legal compendia, the article sheds light on the mechanisms through which law was organized and applied within the empire, as well as on the differentiations observed between rural areas and urban centres.

The second non-thematic article, by Vasilis Karampoulas, focuses on the maritime world of the British Empire, introducing one of the dominant themes of modern European history. By examining naval ballads and their function as media of entertainment, information, and the dissemination of meanings and knowledge — drawing primarily on material associated with Bristol — the author explores the stereotypes, hierarchies, and ideologies shaped and reproduced within this maritime milieu. Through a socio-cultural approach, the corpus of ballads emerges as a site of interaction and formation of collective representations that bridge the local environment with a broader imperial and national framework.

In the third and final article of the issue, Eleanna Stoikou examines the intersection of art, history, and cultural memory in the work of Jannis Kounellis, with particular emphasis on his installations in Germany and Israel. Through a close analysis of materials, space, and site-specific

strategies, the article demonstrates how everyday objects are transformed into carriers of historical narratives and collective experiences, foregrounding questions of memory, loss, and historical trauma. The study approaches Kounellis's artistic practice as a mode of historical inquiry, in which place, materiality, and the viewer's embodied experience generate an open and dynamic field of meaning.

Through this initiative, *Mos Historicus* reaffirms its commitment to rigorous historical scholarship, while opening a carefully curated space for interdisciplinary dialogue and a plurality of perspectives within European history.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arius, "Letter of Arius and his followers to bishop Alexander of Alexandria". See: https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-6/

Angelo, Camille Leon and Silver, Joshua, "Debating the *domus ecclesiae* at Dura-Europos: The Christian Building in context", *Journal of Roman Archaeology,* 37 (2024), pp.264-303.

Ayres, Lewis, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian* Theology, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004.

Bell, Catherine, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009.

Davis, Erik, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Serpent's Tail, London 2004.

Dillon, John, "Logos and Trinity: Patterns of Platonist Influence on Early Christianity", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series,* 25 (1989), pp. 1-13.

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*.

—, *Life of Constantine*.

Gwynn, David, "Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea", Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 90-110.

Jacobs, Ine, "Hosting the Council in Nicaea: *Material Needs and* Solutions", in Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 65-89.

Liakos, Antonis, *Πώς το παρελθόν γίνεται ιστορία;* [How does the past become history?], Πόλις, Athens 2012.

Lyman, Rebecca, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy", in Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 43-61.

Momigliano, Arnaldo, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1990.

Timmermann, Achim, “Cathedrals and Castles of the Sea: Ships, Allegory and Technological Change in Pre-Reformation Northern Europe”, *Baltic Journal of Art History,* 18 (2019), pp. 7-74.

Williams, Rowan, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2002.

Zachhuber, Johannes, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, Brill, Leiden 2014.