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AC

 AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY BYZANTINE ERA



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EARLY BYZANTINE ERA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

From Mithras to Jesus: Ritual Dynamics of
Christmas

Mark Beumer

9

Constantine and Christmas: More Counter-
arguments

(from Byzantium's point of view)

Vanya Lozanova-Stancheva

23

Early modern Protestant resistance to
Christmas and its repercussions

Mark Elliot

30

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ in the Early
Christian Creeds

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Christmas Carols in Byzantium
by Chrysa Sakel

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ in the Early Christian Creeds

György Papp*

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I try to summarize the doctrine about the incarnation of Jesus Christ as it appears in the great Creeds of Christianity, but to see the trajectory of its development I will begin my presentation with a couple of snapshots from the world of the earliest Creed-like statements of the post-Biblical era.

Keywords: incarnation, Jesus, creeds

Incarnation is one of the deepest mysteries of Christian Theology. This doctrine states that “God became flesh, that God assumed a human nature and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity.”¹ As a narrative, we find it in the canonical and extra-canonical gospels. Its first interpretations are to be found in the Gospels and in the apostolic letters. In the post-biblical era, the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologetes have continued to develop the theology of incarnation, they have clothed it into philosophical terms, and they have included within their writings its summary in the form of so-called *regula fidei* statements, that could be considered the predecessors of the later Creeds.

A Creed, as a formal/official statement of Christian beliefs that guide and influence someone's actions, generally is aimed to answer the questions in debate and to give a short summary about the essence of a theological question, for catechumens. On account of the earliest trinitarian debates Creeds have developed (in comparison with the creed-like statements and *regula fidei*) a tripartite structure, dividing their content into three distinct sections: the first section of these creeds affirms belief in God the Father, the creator of everything, the second section affirms belief in God the Son, Jesus Christ, as the Saviour of humans, and the third section affirms belief in God the Holy Spirit and His works. The place of the passage concerning the incarnation is within the first part of the second section. The passage on incarnation can be divided into several sub-units, aiming to answer questions like:

- the name of the Son and his epithetons;
- the origin of the Son;
- the nature of the Son and the purpose of his sonship.

Creed-like statements from the pre-Creedal era

Ignatius of Antioch, a very prominent representant of the so-called Apostolic Fathers, around the turn of the first and second centuries CE (or in the first decades of the second century), testifies several times about the incarnation of Jesus in his letters written to the Churches in Asia Minor, during his journey to Rome as a captive sentenced to meet his martyrdom among lions in the arena. In his letter to the Ephesians, he confesses with touching poetical words the incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ:

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“For there is one physician, both fleshly and spiritual, born and unborn, God comes in the flesh, true life in death, from both Mary and God, first subject to suffering and then beyond suffering, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians 7,2, middle recension).ⁱⁱ

The longer recension of this passage, which was probably created in the 4th century,ⁱⁱⁱ presents a different wording, and contains an addition that emphasizes the reasons why Jesus did take on human nature:

“We have also as a Physician thle *Lord our God, Jesus the Christ*, the only begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterward became also man, of Mary the virgin. For ‘the Word was made flesh’, being incorporeal, He was in the body; being impassible, He was in a passible body; being immortal, He was in a mortal body; being life, He became subject to corruption, that He might free our souls from death and corruption, and heal them, and might restore them to health when they were diseased with ungodliness and wicked lusts.” (Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians 7,2, longer recension).^{iv}

Also, in other passages of his letters, Ignatius emphasizes that Jesus Christ is in the same time the son of God and the son of man. In Ephesians 20 he argues that the members of the congregation should obey the bishop and the presbytery because they “are gathering together one by one in God’s grace, in one faith and in Jesus Christ, who is from the race of David according to the flesh, and is both son of man and son of God” (Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians 20,2, middle recension).^v At the beginning of his letter to the Smyrnaeans we read that “he was truly from the family of David according to the flesh, Son of God according to the will and power of God, truly born from a virgin, and baptized by John that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him.” (Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 1,1, middle recension).^{vi} Through this kind of rhetoric, by presenting the union of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, he *quasi* anticipates the classical two-nature Christology.^{vii}

When he wrote to the Trallians, we can see in his letters an anti-docetic apology,^{viii} as well, inasmuch he has emphasized that through the incarnation Jesus Christ took on real human nature:

“And so, be deaf when someone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was from the race of David and from Mary, who was truly born, both ate and drank, was truly persecuted at the time of Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died, while those in heaven and on earth and under the earth looked on. 2. He was also truly raised from the dead; his Father having raised him. In the same way his Father will also raise us in Christ Jesus, we who believe in him, apart from whom we do not have true life.” (Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians 9,1–2, longer recension).^{ix}

The Apology of Aristides of Athen intended to be presented to Emperor Hadrian summarizes the incarnation of Christ in the following way:

“The Christians, then, trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and he is named the Son of God Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time ago was preached among them; and you also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it. This Jesus, then, was born of the race of the Hebrews; and he had twelve disciples in order that the purpose of his incarnation might in time be accomplished.”^x

The first Apology of Justin Martyr contains a passage that confesses the incarnation of Christ, embedded within the most significant events of his life, like what we could have seen in the Apology of Aristides:

“Well then, in the rolls of the prophets, we found our Lord Jesus Christ, proclaimed ahead of time as drawing near, being born of a virgin, and growing to manhood, and healing every disease and every illness, and raising the dead, and being resented, and not acknowledged, and being crucified, and dying and rising again, and going to the heavens, and being, and being called, the Son of God, and we found certain people sent by him to every race of people to proclaim these things, and that it was people from the gentiles rather who believed in him.” (Justin’s Apology on behalf of Christians, 31,7).^{xi}

Melito of Sardis, again, speaks frequently in his *De Pascha* about the incarnation of Jesus Christ embedded in the events of the life of the Saviour, which show up how Jesus Christ saved the fallen humans, i.e., his birth, suffering, and death, and his resurrection. Here I quote only two characteristic fragments from this beautiful poetical homily:

“It is he who, coming from heaven to the earth because of the suffering one, and clothing himself in that same one through a virgin’s womb, and coming forth a man, accepted the passions of the suffering one through the body which was able to suffer, and dissolved the passions of the flesh; and by the Spirit which could not die he killed death the killer of men.”^{xii}

In the other passage, we read:

“He put on a body from a virgin because of men, he who is Word with you; and God is Word, and Word is Man, and Man is with God. For God visited his own creation, which he had made in his image and likeness. He sent out his own Son from heaven to earth incorporeal, and he took a body from a virgin. He was born a man, and he raised up the lost man and gathered his scattered members”^{xiii}

Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*, points out the divine motivation of the incarnation, that is “the abundant love” of God towards His creation:

“Many barbarian peoples who believe in Christ assent to this sequence, and possess salvation, written without paper or ink by the Spirit in their hearts, diligently observe the ancient tradition. They believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth and everything in them, and in Christ Jesus the Son of God, who because of his abundant love for the work he fashioned submitted to birth from the Virgin, in order himself through himself to unite man with God, and he suffered under Pontius Pilate and rose again and was taken up in glory, and will come in glory as Saviour of those who are saved and Judge of those who are judged, sending into eternal fire those who disfigure the truth and despise his Father and his own advent.” (Irenaeus: *Adversus Haereses* III 4,2).^{xiv}

In a later passage of the same work, while trying to explain the relationship between the divine and the human nature within the incarnated Jesus Christ, he writes:

“For the Christ did not then descend into Jesus, nor was one the Christ, the other Jesus; but the Word of God, the Saviour of all who rules over heaven and earth, who is Jesus, as we have shown before, who took flesh and was anointed with the Spirit by the Father, became Jesus Christ.” (Irenaeus: *Adversus Haereses* III 9,3).^{xv}

In his demonstration ‘On the apostolic preaching’ Irenaeus quotes several times statements that could remind us of the first early Christian Creeds, which contain the main elements of the

doctrine of incarnation. At the beginning of the first part of this work, where the author exhorts his readers to keep the *regula fidei* we read:

“So, faith procures this for us, as the elders, the disciples of the apostles, have handed down to us: firstly, it exhorts us to remember that we have received baptism for the remission of sins, in the name of God the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, [who was] incarnate, and died, and was raised, and in the Holy Spirit of God; and that this baptism is the seal of eternal life and rebirth unto God that we may no longer be sons of mortal men, but of the eternal and everlasting God;” (Irenaeus: On the apostolic preaching, 3).^{xvi}

In paragraphs 31–33 of the same work we read a longer passage in which the author presents theological reasons for incarnation and the birth of Jesus from a virgin, arguing that it was necessary in order that the communion with God lost by the disobedience of the first humans could be restored by that who was born through the obedience of a virgin.^{xvii}

Tertullian in the first section of his *On the Veiling of Virgins* provides a summary of the *regula fidei* (the rule of the faith), containing the most crucial elements of a creed, summarized as it follows:

“The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable; the rule, to wit, of believing in one only God omnipotent, the Creator of the universe, and His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right (hand) of the Father, destined to come to judge quick and dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well (as of the spirit)”. (Tertullian: On the veiling of virgins, 1).^{xviii}

In his *Prescription against heretics*, Tertullian uses a more figurative way of speaking to describe the mystery of incarnation. He writes that the rule of faith:

“prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, *and*, under the name of God, was seen in diverse manners by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh”. (Tertullian: Prescription against heretics, 13).^{xix}

In the preface of his *De principiis* Origen summarizes the essence of the Christian faith, and in the passage about the incarnation he emphasizes with clearly anti-gnostic characteristics that both the incarnation of the Son and everything that followed after it, was real:

“*Secondly*, That Jesus Christ Himself, who came (into the world), was born of the Father before all creatures; that, after He had been the servant of the Father in the creation of all things —

For by Him were all things made — He in the last times, divesting Himself (of His glory), became a man, and was incarnate although God, and while made a man remained the God which He was; that He assumed a body like to our own, differing in this respect only, that it was born of a virgin and of the Holy Spirit: that this Jesus Christ was truly born, and did truly suffer, and did not endure this death common (to man) in appearance only, but did truly die; that He did truly rise from the dead; and that after His resurrection He conversed with His disciples, and was taken up (into heaven).” (Origen: *De principiis*, Preface 4.)^{xx}

In the extant works of Adamantius, called also Pseudo-Origen we read that the incarnated Son is consubstantial and coeternal with the Father, and in the most recent times (in *novissimis temporibus*) has taken on the human nature from a virgin, and was born as a man, was crucified and has risen from the dead (Adamantius: *De recta in Deum fide* 4,12–14)^{xxi}.

We can see on the one hand that all these creed-like statements and formulations of *regula fidei* (the rule of the faith) speak about the mystery of the incarnation in the context of the whole life of Jesus Christ, including its eschatological aspects, as well, and on the other hand, they are embedded in an apologetical context, defending the true faith against Gnostics and other heretics.

The early Christian Creeds on the incarnation

One of the most frequently used Creed of Christianity is the so-called Apostles’ Creed, whose *textus receptus* dates to the end of the 8th century CE.^{xxii} It is supposed that the *textus receptus* of the Apostles’ Creed emerged from the so-called Old Roman Creed, from the 4th century CE, whose text is not extant, but scholars tried to reconstruct it on the basis of the so-called daughter creeds of Old Roman Creed, which were used in various churches of the Roman Empire or its successor states. In this section of my presentation, I will provide a panorama of the most important Creeds showing the way they are speaking about the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

On the liturgical papyrus from Deir Balyzeh dating from the 6th century, there is an ancient form of the Creed, that can be dated according to various scholars somewhere between the 2nd and 4th centuries:

“Confesses the faith...
I believe in God the Father Almighty [*pantokratora*]
And in his only begotten Son,
Our Lord, Jesus Christ,
And in the Holy Spirit,
And in the resurrection of the flesh
In the holy catholic Church.”^{xxiii}

Regarding to the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, this Creed contains only one information: namely that He is the “only begotten Son” of God, the Almighty Father.

The interrogatory baptismal Creed of Hippolytus of Rome, from the beginning of the 3rd century, which likely could be an early form of the Old Roman Creed we find a more detailed passage concerning the incarnation:

“Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, Who was begotten by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate...”^{xxiv}

This fragment from the Christological passage of the Creed of Hippolytus states that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and contains two details concerning his incarnation: it emphasizes on the one hand that He “was begotten by the Holy Spirit” (*διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου*), and on the other hand that His incarnation happened “from the Virgin Mary” (*ἐκ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου*).

Liuwe Westra provides a reconstruction of the Old Roman Creed by Kattenbusch that presents the incarnation of Jesus Christ with the following words:

“et in Christum Iesum, filium eius unicum dominum nostrum qui natus est de spiritu sancto et Maria uirgine”.^{xxv}

According to this reconstruction, the Old Roman Creed would have contained two epithets of Jesus Christ, namely that He was the “only Son of God” and “our Lord”, and regarding the incarnation the statement that He “was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary”.

In the Western Churches, several versions of the Old Roman Creed have developed, that is called “daughter Creeds”. Regarding the information provided concerning the incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ they can be divided into two groups. To the first group belong those Creeds of Milano (by Ambrose), Aquileia, Ravenna, Turin, Remesiana, Hippo, Carthago, Ruspe, and others, that formulate the passage on incarnation as “*et in Iesum Christum, filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum, qui natus est de Spiritu sancto ex Maria uirgine*”.^{xxvi} The only difference between the reconstructed Old Roman Creed and this group of daughter Creeds is the changing of the conjunction “et” (and) into the preposition “ex” (from). According to these Creeds Jesus Christ “was born of the Holy Spirit from Mary the Virgin”. The other group of daughter Creeds of the Old Roman Creed is represented by the Creed from Milano (by Augustine) and by the Creeds used in the Churches of Hispania. The passage concerning the incarnation in these Creeds is identical with the formulation of the reconstructed Old Roman Creed: “*et in Christum Iesum, filium eius unicum dominum nostrum qui natus est de spiritu sancto et Maria uirgine*”. But in the Creed from the Mozarabic liturgy, we find an addition, namely that Jesus Christ was born of the Holy Spirit, from the womb of Mary the Virgin: “*et in Iesum Christum, filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum, natum de Spiritu sancto ex utero Mariae virginis*”.

In the Creeds of some Gallican Churches, a new element tries to explain the mystery of the divine incarnation. According to this textual variant Jesus Christ was not “born of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin”, or “born of the Holy Spirit from Mary the Virgin”, but He was “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born from Mary the Virgin”. In this way in the Creed of Faustus of Riez, Cyprianus of Toulon we find the formula “*et in filium ejus, dominum nostrum Iesum Christum, qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria uirgine*”. Caesarius of Arles also uses the formula of the conception by the Holy Spirit, his Creed is unique due to the additional epithets “only begotten” and “eternal” used to emphasize the divine nature, the lordship and the dignity of Jesus Christ: “*et in filium ejus unigenitum sempiternum Iesum Christum, qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria uirgine*”.

In the Creeds of the Ecumenical Councils, the mystery of the incarnation is explained in such a way that it should make obvious the divine nature of Jesus Christ and his consubstantiality with God, the Father. In the Creed of the Council of Nicaea, we find the following formulation concerning the incarnation of Jesus Christ:

| | |
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| καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς [μονογενῆ, τοὔτεστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ,] Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, | And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] |
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| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί, δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, [τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῆ.] τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα...</p> | <p>Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; by whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man...</p> |
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The Creed of the Council of Constantinople from 381 contains some changes and additions, but its main goal remains the same, as that of the Council of Nicaea, but adapted to the new theological questions that arose between the two councils (the additions are written with italics):

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|---|--|
| <p>Καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ <i>τὸν μονογενῆ,</i> τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα <i>πρὸ</i> <i>πάντων τῶν</i> <i>αἰώνων,</i> φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί· δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο· τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν</p> | <p>And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the <i>only-</i> <i>begotten,</i> begotten of the Father <i>before all</i> <i>worlds (æons),</i> Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation,</p> |
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| | |
|--|---|
| κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα... | came down <i>from</i> <i>heaven</i> , and was incarnate <i>by the</i> <i>Holy Spirit and</i> <i>of the Virgin</i> <i>Mary</i> , and was made man... |
|--|---|

We can observe that the term “only-begotten” is used here without the explanation from the Creed of Nicaea (“that is, of the essence of the Father”), while the passage “begotten of the Father” is expanded with a temporal clause that underlines the eternal nature of Christ: “begotten of the Father *before all worlds (æons)*”. The actions performed by Christ “for us and for our salvation” are explained with more detail than in the Creed of Nicaea, where we read that he “came down and was incarnate and was made man”. Instead of this simplicizing formulation, we find in the Creed of Constantinople that He “came down from the Heaven”, and that He “was incarnate *by the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary*” (as we have seen it already in the Old Roman baptismal Creed).

In the Syriac Creeds before the theological debates in the age of the Ecumenical Councils, the regular way of describing the incarnation of Jesus Christ has been the use of the terms “put on a body” and “put on our manhood”. After the rise of the Christological controversies, in formal Statements of Faith, confessing the belief on the incarnation of Jesus Christ has received some additions like: “He became incorporate” (Isaac of Antioch, Philoxenus) or “He became incarnate”, but the traditional expression “He put on a body” was still kept. To illustrate the formulation of the doctrine on the divine incarnation in the early Syriac Creeds I quote three examples. In the first instance the creed of Aphraates (337-345 CE), could be reconstructed from his homilies:

“[And in our Lord Jesus Christ] God, Son of God, King, Son of the King, Light from Light, Son, and Counsellor, and Guide, and Way, and Saviour, and Shepherd, and Gatherer, and Door, and Pearl, and Lamp,) and First-born of all creatures, Who came and *put on a body from Mary the Virgin* (of the seed of the house of David, from the Holy Spirit), and *put on our manhood...*”^{xxvii}

In the Act of Thomas from the 3rd century:

“and in Jesus the Messiah, His Son, the Only-begotten, God, Son of God, Living, Son of the Living, that came from on high, Who *didst put on a body, and become man, from Mary the Virgin...*”^{xxviii}

Finally in the Teaching of Addai:

“[I believe in] Jesus Christ... the Son of God, God, Son of God, the Son of the King, Who came down from heaven, and *put on a body, and became man...* through his birth from a virgin...”^{xxix}

The snapshots from the history of doctrine and Creeds presented above obviously show that the doctrine or Christian way of thinking on the divine incarnation has been formed over a long period of time, and it has been shaped mainly by theological debates on Trinity and Christology. The historical and theological circumstances have made it necessary to replace the simplest

formulations of faith with more complex statements that could give an answer to the arisen questions and could be a steadfast point against heterodoxy. The content of the Christological passage of the Creeds concerning the incarnation of Jesus Christ has the following main elements: the name of Jesus Christ, His relationship with God, and description of the incarnation.

Regarding the description of the incarnation, we can see that it has two “actors”: the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin. In the earliest Creeds, the formulation is very simple: Jesus was “born from the Holy Spirit and Mary”. Later, in order to avoid the idea of any hierogamy this formulation was changed into “*natus de Spiritu ex Maria*” (born of the Holy Spirit from Mary), while the final form was given by the Gallican Churches: “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from Mary”. In the text of the Creeds of the Ecumenical Councils, due to the theological questions in the debate, remarks regarding the nature of Jesus Christ, demonstrate his consubstantiality/coessentiality with the Father.

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- ^{xxix} Connolly 1906, p. 220.

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