

WHAT WERE CREEDS FOR?

I asked the priests, their bishops and their judges:
What is the best thing for the soul?
The Pater, and consecrated hosts and a holy creed.
He who sings them for his soul,
Until the Judgment will be accustomed to the best.¹

The answer to my question may seem obvious. Creeds were used to examine candidates for baptism. They may have begun in interrogative forms and later have been combined into continuous statements about the Trinity and of the facts about Christ. There is no more to be said. But this is just where I begin to doubt. After reading through Canon J. N. D. Kelly's book, *The Athanasian Creed* (London, 1964), it became clear to me that one could not account for all creeds in that summary way. In the abundant documentation which Canon Kelly supplies about that creed, there is the significant sentence in the *Zwiefalten* ms., which states another purpose of creeds: "And because it is necessary and incumbent on them that all clergymen, and laymen too, should be familiar with the Catholic faith, we have first of all written out in this collection the Catholic faith itself as the holy fathers defined it, for we ought both ourselves frequently to read it and to instruct others in it." Kelly also notes how often the Athanasian Creed is found written out in psalters, "a practice which seems to have begun in the latter part of the 8th century and to have become general in the 9th" (p. 43). The Golden Psalter of Charlemagne, the Utrecht Psalter, and many others have this creed with the New Testament Canticles, the Pater Noster, and the Apostles' Creed copied out after the Psalms. Kelly does not favor the view (held by Kattenbusch, by Heinrich Brewer, S.J., and by F. J. Badcock²) that the Athanasian Creed was originally composed for singing, nor that this composition could be ascribed to St. Ambrose.

The earliest codex which contains the Athanasian Creed is a Bobbio ms., now at Milan, dating from a little before or after 700. This was reproduced by A. E. Burn (*Facsimiles of the Creeds*, Henry Bradshaw Society Vol. 36, 1909), and there is much of interest in the preamble to the Creed, which

¹ This ancient Welsh poem is from *The Black Book of Caermarthen*, edited in 1868 by W. F. Skene, *Four Ancient Books of Wales* 1, 520 and 2, 43. The codex was written down after 1100 but its contents are much older.

² Brewer, *Das sogenannte Athanasianische Glaubensbekenntnis* (Paderborn, 1909), put up a strong case for the creed being an Ambrosian hymn, but Canon Kelly has weakened this case, most notably by his parallels between the creed and Augustine. Badcock's *History of the Creeds* (London, 1938) was a much slighter work.

can be read in Burn's transcript facing Plate XXII. The scribe was Irish, and what he sets down is presumably an Irish view of what creeds were for in the late seventh century. He seems to be working out an elaborate symbolism from data found in the Old Testament, an occupation that was not unfamiliar to Irish scribes.

That man turns gold into bronze who withholding the true substance of faith reproduces in his profession an empty tinkling. He may be thought devout among the throng, yet is he found guilty in his intent, when he professes that which he does not believe. It may be thought that the blessed Apostle spoke about such men when he said: "They have the appearance of piety but deprive it of all validity" (2 Tim 3:5). Should not one think that validity is to be found in gold and the mere appearance in bronze? But we may hope to maintain the prophet's claim by laying down under the hooves of the king's horses the shields of our faith. And who are these horses, if not our bishops and teachers, whose feet are swift over the mountains to proclaim peace? Three hundred golden shields stand for the blessed faith in the Trinity, or else for the tilth of all living things in sky, earth and sea. The runners who place these shields before the horses' hooves, are those who have been able to say: "I have finished my course." That we may keep on the course we have begun, may thy prayers to Jesus Christ our Lord defend us, lest Susakim the king of Egypt (who is the devil) steal them from the temple of our hearts.

It was Roboam who made bronze, to replace golden, shields, when the Temple had been despoiled by Sheshonk or Susakim, king of Egypt, as recounted in 3 K 14:26-28. The shields are said to have been made by Solomon (3 K 10:16) in order that they might be carried before him as he made his progress to the Temple. The Irish scribe has therefore worked out, or inherited, an elaborate typology from this episode of the reign of Roboam, in order to express what in his mind was the purpose of a creed. It was the display, with a view to worship, of the most valuable materials of the Christian faith.

Further light on the use of creeds can be gained from the Third and Fourth Councils of Toledo. At the Third Council (589) it was decreed (in canon 2) that in all churches of Spain and Narbonne, before the Pater Noster at Mass, the creed was to be sung, "in order that the true faith may have an open testimony and that the people may come to receive the body and blood of Christ with hearts purified in faith." The creed that was chosen is described as "the bishops' creed of the Eastern churches," i.e., the Nicene Creed. The Coptic and Greek Liturgy of St. Gregory³ has a profession of faith in the Eucharist as a preparation for Communion, and the *Testamentum Domini*⁴

³ In Renaudot's *Liturgia orientalis* 1 (1716) 36 and 123.

⁴ In the Cooper and Maclean edition (Edinburgh, 1902) this *mystagogia* occupies five large pages (85-89). An appendix to the same edition has an Arabic *mystagogia* of some three pages.

has a *mystagogia* or rather lengthy instruction on the faith that comes after Epistle and Gospel, but there does not seem to be any exact precedent for what was decreed at Toledo. The Fourth Council (633) began its proceedings (at which Isidore of Seville presided) with a creed, saying: "Since we are holding a general council, the first utterance of our voice ought to be about God, so that after our confession of faith the ensuing business may be established as it were on a most firm foundation" (Kelly's translation, *op. cit.*, p. 39). To begin thus from the Trinity was a practice of the Catholic past (and not only of the past, as may be seen from the Constitution of the Irish Republic), but this is perhaps the first indication of its observance.

The Der Balyzeh papyrus used to be cited as evidence for the use of a creed at Mass, but since the rearrangement of the leaves of that document by C. H. Roberts (for the new edition, in *An Early Euchologion*, which he prepared with the late Abbot Capelle), it can no longer be said that the creed was there employed at Mass. It comes on a leaf which cannot be part of the Mass-text and which may be a preparation for the communion of a sick man or even a baptismal *ordo*. All that survives is the rubric: "He confesses this creed," followed by credal words. Fifteen lines of lost text separate this fragment from the preceding Mass-*ordo*, and while they would allow for directions about the visitation of the sick, there would scarcely be room for all the preliminaries of baptism up to the point where a creed has to be recited.

The *Te Deum* is credal and yet has been presented as *cantabile* from the very beginning. The Christian people could not perhaps be expected to sing the creed used by the bishops at the councils when they met, at Nicaea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and so forth; but a popular and simple formula which gradually changed over from statement of credal fact to prayer of petition was much more to the point. Canon Kelly notes in his Preface that when he had concluded the last of his Paddock Lectures at the General Theological Seminary of New York on the subject of the Athanasian Creed, the whole audience rose and began to sing that Creed, a rare event in itself but one that shows the popular appeal that creeds can have. Yet quite apart from the popular appeal of credal summaries as a help to learning, the use of creeds as prayers was certainly extended by their being sung.

The creed as an act of worship was understood by the anonymous Irish scribe of 700 who set out the typology of the golden shields and the bronze. He was not concerned with the creed as a help to memorizing one's faith, but with the act of casting down the shields before the hooves of the king's horses. He imported this act into the Old Testament narrative, presumably from some known Irish practice, and then gave it a symbolical meaning. Just over a hundred years after his time of writing, Rabanus Maurus (one of the

few to comment on the Books of Kings) gave the same general typology for the passage (*PL* 109, 202), but without the idea of casting down the shields before horses. Christ was another Solomon (says Rabanus), who gave us the golden shields of His doctrine, but the wicked king of Egypt, the devil, takes them away when their owners are bent on earthly things, and then these owners put bronze in place of them by blustering eloquence which is not in any way so good for the protection of the faith. Rabanus repeats his comment almost verbatim when treating of the parallel passage in 2 Par 12:9-12 (*PL* 109, 485). He was the pupil of Alcuin and he set out to collect all that he could find of patristic comment on the books of his choice, not scorning also to seek help from a contemporary Jewish scholar learned in rabbinic tradition. That one or other of the Fathers had taken occasion from the phrase about "the shield of faith" (in Eph 6:16) to construe the Susakim episode in terms of the Christian faith, would not be surprising, and one may be reasonably sure that Rabanus had found this in his reading of the Fathers.

The creed, then, was conceived as a prayer of praise as early as the seventh century, not in any spirit of what is now miscalled "triumphalism," but in grateful submission to the authority of the Church. The shields were to be cast under the hooves of the horses, and these typified the bishops. In the Welsh poem cited at the head of this article the word *credo* has been adopted as a loanword into Welsh, and our current practice of speaking of a *credo* thus has very ancient authority; it was a prayer like the Pater, only that it was praise by expression of belief rather than praise by petition or thanksgiving. The theologian is too apt to consider all credal formulae as if they were solely for the outwitting of the heretic.

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