

We Believe: Group Belief and the Liturgical use of Creeds

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We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen....

So begins the Nicene Creed (or, more accurately, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed).² These statements of belief have been used in corporate liturgy throughout the history of the Christian Church, and across many different traditions. For this reason, it's often referred to as 'the ecumenical creed'. As the Church of England describes it on its website,

The Nicene Creed is a...detailed summary of *what the whole Church believes* about the great doctrines of the Christian faith. ...Despite the divisions within the Church that have happened over the centuries, all the major Christian traditions continue to acknowledge the words of the...Nicene Creed in their worship and teaching.³

It's not difficult to find similar remarks summarising the nature of the creeds. However, it's not entirely clear how we should interpret the statement 'the whole Church believes'. For how can a group of individuals, especially a group as diverse as the Church, have beliefs?

This paper seeks to answer this question. It does so by providing an analysis of the meaning of the words, 'We believe...', in the context of the liturgical recitation of the Creed.

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² For the history of the formation of the Nicene Creed, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, : 205-262, 296-367.

³ Church of England, 'Apostles Creed'; emphasis added.

Drawing from recent work in group ontology, I explore three recent accounts of group belief (summative accounts, joint commitment accounts, and functionalist accounts) and consider the potential of applying these to the group belief contained in the Creed. First, according to the summative account, “we believe” attempts to summarise the beliefs of most, or all, of those reciting the creeds, or all/ most of the members of the worldwide Church. However, I argue, the summative account most likely fails to accurately capture the beliefs of the Church, and, even if it did, since this account is purely descriptive it fails capture the normative significance of reciting creeds. Secondly, I consider the application of Margaret Gilbert’s work on joint commitment in which “we believe” describes a belief (or set of beliefs) that a group commits to upholding.⁴ Gilbert’s account better captures the normative aspect of liturgical uses of creeds and fits especially well with the use of creeds in baptismal liturgy. However, I argue, joint commitment accounts don’t scale well, requiring a level of common knowledge that is unrealistic when applied to the whole Church. Finally, I outline my preferred model, a modified version of group functionalism, which thinks of groups as capable of holding beliefs in virtue of their ontology. Drawing from Stephanie Collins’ recent discussion of group obligations,⁵ I show how belonging to a group which believes in the Creed provides certain obligations of its members. Thus, I argue, a suitably modified version of the functionalist account best captures the use of “we believe” in the Creed.

We vs. I: The use of creedal pronouns

Before exploring the meaning of *we believe* in the context of liturgy, it will first be helpful to reflect on the significance of the use of the plural pronoun in the Creed (as opposed to the singular).⁶ The Nicene Creed has undergone many different translations in its history, and

⁴ Gilbert, Margaret, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*.

⁵ Collins, *Group Duties*.

⁶ Another interpretative issue which is of less significance for this discussion is the different kinds of belief present in the Creed. It seems that there are two different kinds of belief involved in the Nicene Creed, a kind of belief-in — an attitude of trust, as well as a kind of belief-that—an epistemic commitment to believing claims about God. Along with ‘we believe in one God’, there are three other instances of ‘belief-in’ used in the Creed; belief-in Jesus Christ, belief-in the Holy Spirit, and belief-in the Church. Belief-*in* here implies more

one of the key features that appears to be repeatedly changed is which pronoun is most appropriate — ‘I’, or ‘we’. As Peter Jefferey notes, the original Greek texts published by the early ecumenical councils used the plural, ‘We believe’, as did many early liturgical texts of the Church.⁷ Yet, different translations have historically used different pronouns. Jeffrey states that, ‘The Coptic, Ethiopian, Chaldean and Armenian rites stay closer to the conciliar originals with “We believe,” but the ancient Greek liturgies of Byzantium, Jerusalem, and Egypt use “I believe.”’⁸ In the Catholic tradition, whilst Vatican II translated the Creed using the English ‘we’, more recently, The Order of Mass, published in 2010, reverted to the

than just a kind of factual belief about God. The word used in the Greek, ‘πιστεύω’, implies a kind of trust, or faith in God. As Daniel Howard-Snyder has recently argued, having faith in God needn’t entail belief-that God exists. Howard-Snyder suggests that whilst faith requires taking some positive cognitive stance towards a thing’s existence, this needn’t be anything as strong as belief — ‘presupposing, trusting, hoping, accepting, credencing, assenting’ would all be sufficient for faith, he thinks. Howard-Snyder, ‘Does Faith Entail Belief?’, 9. This seems right. Thus, in stating that I believe-*in* one God, I am committing to a having faith in God and to trust in God, and not just asserting beliefs about God. Yet, even if we assume that belief-in God the Father without belief about God’s existence is possible, it appears that the Nicene Creed asserts more than just these four beliefs-ins; there are also a number of subsidiary claims about each of these four objects of belief (the Creed speaks of God as creator and of Christ as born of a virgin, for instance). A natural way of reading these claims is to insert an implicit ‘we believe that God is...’ at the beginning of the second line. Indeed, in the Church of England’s summary of the Creed cited above, they suggest that the Creed summarizes what the ‘Church believes *about* the great doctrines of the Christian faith’ (emphasis added), and not just a summary of the Church’s faith in God. There may be other ways of reading these claims, but for the purposes of this paper, I assume that reciting the Creed involves both a commitment of trust in the persons of the Trinity and the Church, as well as a statement of belief that various statements are true of these persons and objects. From here on in, I’ll use ‘believe in the Creed’ as short-hand for these two kinds of belief involved in reciting the Creed.

⁷ Jeffery, *Translating Tradition*, 18.

⁸ Jeffery, 19.

singular, in an attempt to capture the Latin 'Credo' ('I believe') more literally.⁹ In the Church of England, the contemporary prayer book, *Common Worship*, uses the plural pronoun, but in the more traditional liturgical text, *The Book of Common Prayer* (still used in many contexts), the pronoun is singular. And whilst many protestant Churches use only the Apostles' Creed in liturgy (which typically has the singular pronoun), some strands of the Lutheran Church use the Nicene Creed with the plural pronoun, but not all.¹⁰ Finally, in the Orthodox tradition, the Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian churches use the plural, but some Eastern Orthodox traditions use the singular.¹¹

The reasons behind the choice of pronoun are not always clear. However, there are some that argue that since the singular pronoun is more commonly found in Latin translations, that it is therefore more in-keeping with the Roman tradition. For instance, the author of the *Liturgiam Authenticam* writes, 'The Creed is to be translated according to the precise wording that the tradition of the Latin Church has bestowed upon it, including the use of the first person singular'.¹² Jeffrey casts doubt on this claim, showing that both plural and singular pronouns were used in very early Latin translations; the choice of pronoun appears to ultimately have been dictated by context. The so-called 'Apostle's Creed', for instance, uses the singular, 'I believe', but this is because it is predominantly used in the context of Baptismal rites, in which the candidate professes his or her faith aligns with the faith of the Church.

Even when the singular pronoun is used, however, it is clearly supposed to denote a broader set of beliefs. There are many contexts where the use "I" implies more than a singular commitment, such as the use of "I do" in a wedding ceremony. This statement must be understood in reference to the joint commitment made by both parties to the *we* that is instituted in the ritual.¹³ Indeed, the use of creeds in baptismal liturgy is surely similar, that is, it involves an individual commitment but one which must be understood in the broader

⁹ Jeffery, *Translating Tradition*, 19.

¹⁰ Evangelical Lutheran Church in American, 'The Nicene Creed'.

¹¹ The other major strand of American Lutheranism, Missouri Synod, uses the Nicene Creed with the singular pronoun.

¹² Jeffery, *Translating Tradition*, 18.

¹³ With thanks to an anonymous referee for this example.

context.¹⁴ Thus, even in the context in which “I believe” is used, there is often an implicit commitment to a group belief of some sort. For the sake of brevity, in what follows, I will restrict the discussion to the meaning of “we believe” and consider how recent accounts of group belief in the social ontology literature might provide us with a model for thinking about group belief in the context of the liturgical use of creeds.

Summative Accounts

Summative accounts, broadly construed, are attempts to summarise the beliefs of most or all people in a particular group. As Anthony Quinton argues,

To ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members. With such mental states as beliefs and attitudes, the ascriptions are of what I have called a summative kind. To say that the industrial working class is determined to resist anti-trade union laws is to say that all or most industrial workers are so minded.¹⁵

Following Quinton, we might suppose that to say that ‘we believe in...’ in the context of the Nicene Creed is simply to say that ‘all or most of those reciting the words of the Creed believe in the Creed’. Or more specifically, in using the Creed in the liturgy, most or all of the congregation claim that they believe in the Creed. If we wish to capture a broader sense of ‘we’, the summative account might also extend to think about what all or most members of the worldwide Church believe.

As Deborah Tollefsen suggests, however, such an account of group belief can’t explain most instances of group belief adequately without some amendment. She writes, ‘imagine a case where each individual believes that p but no member knows that other members have such a belief. Perhaps each person keeps it a secret that they believe that p.

¹⁴ Similarly, “We” can be used in a fairly thin sense that doesn’t denote a strong community identity or pick any communal beliefs, such as when a group are moved on by the police and say: “Alright, alright, we get it. We’re leaving.” With thanks to an anonymous referee for this example.

¹⁵ Quinton, ‘The Presidential Address’, 17.

Would it be appropriate in this case to attribute a group belief?'.¹⁶ She thinks not. Whilst such a description might capture cases in which many individuals happen to share a belief (e.g. it might be the case that most Americans believe that Donald Trump should run for a second term in office, even if many are too ashamed to admit this belief to their friends and colleagues), Tollefsen suggests that group belief requires some level of awareness of the beliefs of the other group members to count as a group belief. What is needed to bolster this account, then, is an explanation of what each member believes about each other member. Tollefsen suggests that the concept of 'common knowledge' as that proposed by David Lewis would help to overcome this difficulty. Lewis writes,

Suppose the following state of affairs—call it *A*—holds: you and I have met, we have been talking together, you must leave before our business is done; so you say you will return to the same place tomorrow. Imagine the case. Clearly, I expect you to return. You will expect me to expect you to return. I will expect you to expect me to expect you to return.¹⁷

Cases of common knowledge are an important part of our social interactions. For instance, it's implicit in my interactions with my colleagues that the proposition 'Boris Johnson is the Prime Minister' is common knowledge between us, even if we never explicitly acknowledge this when we have conversations about politics. Lewis fills out the conditions for common knowledge in more detail in the following way:

it is *common knowledge* in a population *P* that _____ if and only if some state of affairs *A* holds such that:

- (1) Everyone in *P* has reason to believe that *A* holds.
- (2) *A* indicates to everyone in *P* that everyone in *P* has reason to believe that *A* holds
- (3) *A* indicates to everyone in *P* that_____.¹⁸

¹⁶ Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*, 11.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Convention*, 52.

¹⁸ Lewis, 56.

Introducing the concept of common knowledge to the account of group belief allows individuals to be aware of one another's beliefs, and thereby to identify the belief to the group as a whole. This seems important for the kind of account Quinton proposes—if there were no common knowledge, or at least an assumption of common knowledge, then it's difficult to see how we could attribute the belief to the group at all. The Creed is concerned with statements of belief rather than knowledge, and so the application of the literature on common knowledge might seem inappropriate. Yet, what is commonly known, at least in the contexts of the recitation of creeds, is that one's fellow congregants also *believe* in the Creed. And so common knowledge in this context refers only to the context of group belief and not to whether congregants have knowledge about the creed's claims.

To apply this account to thinking about group beliefs and the Creed, we can give the following account:

A group, *C*, believes in the Nicene Creed if and only if all or most of the members of *C*, believe *in* the three persons of the Trinity and the Church and they believe *that* the propositions asserted about them are true, under conditions of common knowledge.¹⁹

Note that in the context of liturgy, on a summative account the “we” in “we-believe” might refer to the gathered congregation, a church denomination (such as the Church of England), or the worldwide Church. The account can accommodate all of these possibilities.

There are some factors in favour of such an account. First, the summative account is philosophically straightforward. On such an account, we don't need to attribute beliefs to a group as a distinct entity from its members, as Quinton states, ‘To ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members’.²⁰ Many of the other accounts of group belief in the literature require some kind of group ontology in which beliefs and actions are attributable to groups above and beyond the beliefs of its

¹⁹ Amended from Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*, 12.

²⁰ Quinton, ‘The Presidential Address’, 17.

members. The summative account is not metaphysically mysterious in any way, and merely provides a way of counting the beliefs of members. Secondly, this account captures something of theological importance, that is, the creeds articulate something which is common to all Christian believers and reciting this together with one's fellow believers, provides a feeling of unity, arising from our common knowledge. Thirdly, there are good practical reasons to endorse this account. The public use of a statement of belief acts as a very obvious source of common knowledge for participants in a church. Whilst it might be implicit in many of my conversations that I know that my colleagues know who the Prime Minister is, if we began each of our exchanges by making these implicit beliefs explicit, then it would be difficult to be mistaken about our common knowledge.

Despite its promise, however, the summative account isn't tenable as an explanation of group belief in the creeds. I will raise two issues here: first, an issue of accuracy, and second, an issue of normativity.

Let's begin by considering the accuracy complaint. Put simply, the point is this: if "we believe" is supposed to capture what all or most of the Church believe, then it doesn't do so very accurately. To make things straightforward, limit the "we" to refer only to the gathered congregation in the first instance, before thinking more broadly. Suppose, in reciting the Creed, what Brian means is something like 'I believe in the Creed..., and I believe that Kenneth, Deirdre and Blanch believe in the Creed... and have good reasons to believe in creed...'. Yet suppose, unbeknownst to Brian, that Deirdre holds to a theologically liberal view of the authority of Scripture, and she is particularly sceptical about Mary's virginity, even though she can quite happily endorse most of the other claims in the Creed. That is, Deirdre doesn't have good reasons to believe all of the propositional statements in the Creed. Moreover, also unbeknownst to Brian, Blanch is suffering with dementia. Because she has recited the Nicene Creed every week since she was a little girl, she can competently recite these lines, yet, in attending to the meaning of a particular statement of creed, Blanch is unable to tell you whether or not she believes it, or to give good reasons for her belief. Finally, suppose, unbeknownst to Brian, Kenneth has been reading theological blogs online and has come across a particularly compelling argument claiming that the line 'begotten not made' is nonsensical and should be omitted from the Creed.

Now, if the account outlined above is true, then Brian's belief is false. That is, whilst Brian believes that his fellow congregants also believe, he is mistaken. Not only is Brian's

belief false, however, but also the conditions for common knowledge fail to obtain in such a case, even if there is the illusion of common knowledge, at least for Brian. The other congregants don't have reason to believe the set of propositions contained with the Nicene Creed. And thus, his use of the 'we' to capture a kind of shared belief of a group fails. What's more, even if we remove the insistence on conditions of common knowledge and revert to Quinton's suggestion that group belief is merely summative of what most or all people believe, the account still fails, at least in Brian's congregation. More worryingly, this account also requires individuals to be cognitively able to assent to the beliefs in the Creed. Yet, the vast majority of churches aren't composed only of individuals who can understand and believe the contents of the Nicene Creed. Many traditions, particularly those which practice infant baptism, will consider young infants and those with severe cognitive impairments to belong to the church.²¹

Setting such a high bar might not simply exclude young infants and severely disabled individuals, but also it seems to require a relatively robust understanding of Christian theology from the church's members. Take the following line from the Nicene Creed, for instance: 'We believe...in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages'. For an account of common-belief to explain the reciting of such a statement, all the participants in the liturgy must believe this proposition. Yet, without some comprehension of theology, it's not at all obvious what the relationship of being 'begotten' amounts to. I imagine that a large proportion of confessing creed reciting Christians don't understand the meaning of 'begotten'. How can one believe that Christ is begotten of the Father, if one has no understanding of what begotten means? It's just not clear that most creed reciting Christians have a comprehensive understanding of all of the claims of the Creed.²² And indeed, many others will take issue with statements of theology

²¹ I have explored the importance of inclusivity in giving an account of group action in liturgy in more detail in Cockayne, 'Inclusive Worship and Group Liturgical Action'.

²² Note that this isn't the same as stating that one must have good *reasons* to believe in order to recite the Creed. But rather, I assume, one must at least have a basic comprehension of some proposition in order to believe it.

in the Creed, yet still remain committed Christians.²³ Moreover, it is difficult to know how this issue would be resolved by focusing on the whole Church, rather than some creed reciting congregation, for many of the same issues will continue to apply.

The question of accuracy points to a deeper issue with the summative account. That is, the summative account is purely descriptive, but creeds appear to have a normative function. Consider Luke Timothy Johnson's discussion of the liturgical use of creeds:

The Church always believes more and better than any one of its members...To pray "We believe in one God ..." is to join our voice to the Church's voice, to step into something larger than our own ideas, doubts, fears, and questions, "in the hope that our individual 'I believe' someday approaches the strength of the church's 'We believe'".²⁴

Johnson's point appears to be twofold: (1) it's the Church that believes the creeds, even if its members do not, and, (2) the Church's belief provides the ideal for what its members ought to believe, even if they do not currently. Both of these points are difficult to capture on the summative account, which seeks to describe the beliefs of the Church's members. A similar point is made by Thomas Aquinas. In responding to the charge that creeds should be removed from liturgy since many recite them without agreement, Thomas writes, the creeds are recited, 'from the person...of the whole church...Hence the confession faith is confessed ... in a manner that is in keeping with living faith, so that even if some of the faithful lack living faith, they should endeavour to acquire it'.²⁵ In other words, the Creed describes the beliefs of the *Church*, rather than summarising the beliefs of its members. Moreover, in describing the belief of the Church, the recitation of creeds also has certain normative implications for those who recite it. Both Aquinas and Johnson appear to be committed to the claim that individual members of the Church may have different beliefs

²³ See, for instance, Bob Fischer's defence of a theologically liberal, yet orthodox account of ecclesiology: Fischer, 'Rawls Goes to Church'.

²⁴ Johnson, *The Creed*, 46.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q.1 art 9. ad 3.

(or be less strongly committed) concerning the claims of the creeds. But such a position is very difficult to make sense of in summative terms.²⁶

²⁶ This account also seems to run into an aggregation problem. Problems of aggregation come when considering how best to account for complex group belief, particularly when group beliefs arise through democratic means. As List highlights, in many cases of group deliberation such as this, ‘a group may not achieve consistent collective judgements even when all group members hold individually consistent judgements’. List, ‘Group Knowledge and Group Rationality’, 225. Problems of group aggregation call into question decision making procedures of groups which seek to give equal weight to the views of all of the group members, as well as the overall judgements of group members. This kind of problem seems to rear its head if the purpose the Nicene Creed is to capture some majority group belief of a church community or of the worldwide members of the Church. To simplify matters, let’s assume that in Brian’s congregation, there is disagreement only on the propositional beliefs contained in the Nicene Creed, and not about the instances of belief-in. Now, suppose that the following were true of Brian’s congregation:

	Begotten	Virgin birth	Ascended	Nicene Creed
Brian	True	True	True	True
Kenneth	True	False	True	False
Blanch	False	True	False	False
Majority	True	True	True	False

Assuming the congregation is composed only of Brian, Kenneth and Blanch, what is problematic is that whilst the majority of the congregation believe the claims contained in the Nicene Creed, the majority don’t believe in the Nicene Creed. The problem here is that the claims in the Creed appear to function as conjunctions. Just as one can’t believe in the American Constitution and reject the second amendment, one can’t believe in the Creed without believing in the virgin birth. Thus, if Kenneth doesn’t believe in the virgin birth, then

What this conclusion points to, is that the use of creeds in liturgy doesn't seem to express the majority position of those in the congregation. Indeed, the statements of the Creed appear to somehow transcend the beliefs of individual congregants, which makes the summative account look like a poor fit. Deborah Tollefsen summarises this point well in noting that,

summative accounts, even those that require that members know of each other's beliefs, don't quite capture what is going on in many cases of group belief ascription. In many cases, when we attribute beliefs to a group, we don't want to note simply that most members have the belief in common but that the belief plays a role within the life of the group.²⁷

he doesn't believe in the Creed. Where this gets difficult, is in considering whether a church community believes in the Creed. If we are to aggregate all of the judgements of the church, then the church as a majority believes in the conjunction of the claims, but not the Creed itself. This looks problematic. Whilst all of the congregants make consistent judgements in rejecting the Creed if they reject at least one claim in the Creed, the congregation, as a whole, rejects the Creed, despite not rejecting any one claim in the Creed. There are a number of ways of overcoming problems of group aggregation, and List outlines the different decision-making procedures that might produce consistent group beliefs List, 'Group Knowledge and Group Rationality', 226-230. For instance, by giving preference to either the premises of the Creed, or the conjunction, we might avoid the issue of inconsistency. It isn't clear, however, what reasons we might have for preferring a premise-based procedure over a conclusion-based procedure, other than an existing preference for the results of one procedure over another. Such a preference would appear to undermine the intention of summarizing the views of the congregation in the first instance. It just isn't clear which procedure truly captures the views of the congregation. In general, List notes, the way to overcome group aggregation problems is to think more carefully about institutional design in group decision making. List, 239. That is, to give an account of consistent group decision making, we need to give a clearer account of the nature and systems involved in group agents.

²⁷ Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*, 14.

The use of group belief in the creeds appears to be such a case. As the 19th Century Anglican theologian F.D. Maurice describes it, the Creed isn't supposed to function as summary of doctrine at all, but rather as 'an act of allegiance' to God and to the Church.²⁸ In the next section, I consider how ascribing beliefs to the group as a whole, rather than to individual members is a more promising approach.

Joint Commitment Accounts

In this section, I give an alternative interpretation of the use of 'we believe...' in the Creed which can overcome the problems highlighted with summative accounts. In contrast to summative accounts, joint commitment accounts think of the meaning of 'we' in 'we believe' as capturing something about the group as a whole, rather than primarily as a means of capturing something of the individual members. According to Margaret Gilbert, for instance, what makes it true that a group believes X, is not that its members all believe X, but that its members are committed to upholding the truth of X in the life of the group.

Let's examine the details more closely. On Gilbert's account, group belief is derivative of a kind joint commitment to a proposition by a group of individuals. Thus, according to Gilbert, 'A population, P, believes that p if and only if the members of P are jointly committed to believe as a body that p'.²⁹ 'Joint commitment', as Gilbert uses it here, is a technical term. First, consider Gilbert's account of personal commitment. She writes that, 'if Pam, say decides to go shopping today, she is committed to doing so. In the case of a personal decision, the commitment is *personal*...once committed, pam *has sufficient reason* to go shopping today, unless and until she changes her mind'.³⁰ Extending from this account, she suggests that a joint commitment

is the concept of commitment of two or more people. A joint commitment so conceived is not something composite, a conjunction of the personal commitment of one party with the personal commitment(s) of the other(s). Rather, it is simple. A joint commitment is the creation of the parties to it, rescindable only with the

²⁸ Maurice and Conway, 'The Kingdom of Christ, Or', 5.

²⁹ Gilbert, Margaret, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World.*, 173.

³⁰ Gilbert, Margaret, 173–74.

concurrence of all. Insofar as it involves a type of self-directed order, it involves an order issued jointly by all the parties to all the parties...A joint commitment is created only when each of the parties has, in effect, openly expressed his or her personal readiness to be party to it. That these expressions have been made openly must be common knowledge in the relevant population.³¹

For Gilbert, group belief has a kind of normativity to it. That is, by committing to a way of intending or believing as a group, one is subject to certain obligations. Thus, Gilbert argues,

the joint commitment to X as a body is a joint commitment to bring it about that, as far as is possible, the parties emulate a single body that Xs, and to do so in light of the joint commitment in question ... The guiding idea of *a single body* that Xs includes nothing about the intrinsic nature of the single body in question. In particular, it does not imply that it is in some way made up of two or more distinct bodies that are capable of X-ing on their own.³²

Whilst Gilbert's account includes important normative constraints on how individuals must act in their role as part of the group, she argues that a joint commitment to p, 'does *not* require each participant to believe that p'.³³ Let's consider an example to see how this account works:

Many hands write *The Economist*, but it speaks as a collective voice...What, besides free trade and free markets, does *The Economist* believe in?...It is to the Radicals that *The Economist* still likes to think of itself as belonging...It has back conservatives...[but also] espoused a variety of liberal causes, opposing capital punishment from its earliest days, while favouring penal reform and decolonization,

³¹ Gilbert, Margaret, 174.

³² Gilbert, Margaret, 175.

³³ Gilbert, Margaret, 176.

as well as – more recently—gun control and gay marriage. Lastly, *The Economist* believes in plain language.³⁴

On Gilbert's account of group belief, when a journalist from *The Economist* writes in verbose prose, she violates her obligations to be jointly committed to writing plainly. However, if she happens to believe that verbose prose is better, or if she writes a personal blog which disassociates her personal writing from her professional writing, then she doesn't violate any obligation to her group beliefs as a member of *The Economist*. In other words, the group's belief derives from the commitments of the members but it isn't identical with the beliefs of all or even most members.

There is something intuitive about Gilbert's account in application to the Creed. For creeds don't merely describe what churches or individuals *happen* to believe, they describe what churches or individuals *should* believe in their commitment as members of the Church. Indeed, we might think, in the context of jointly committing to the Creed, the kind of obligations at work are even stronger than those Gilbert describes. Whilst one's membership of the Church and one's faith doesn't depend on one's personal beliefs about the virgin birth or the meaning of 'begotten', the Creed does play a normative role in what one personally believes, as well as what one believes as part of a group. That is, the Creed gives an ideal of what Christians should personally believe as members of the group. Gilbert's view is helpful here since it gives an account of how joint commitment can explain the normative function of group belief.

That reciting the Creed involves some notion of commitment can be seen by looking at the use of creeds in the baptism liturgy. The presider makes the following request of the congregation: 'Brothers and sisters, I ask you to profess together with *these candidates* the faith of the Church'.³⁵ This request is typically followed by the recitation of the Apostles' creed, which uses the first-person pronoun. Baptism provides a means of jointly committing to acting and believing in certain ways, in the context of one's membership of the Church as a group, to the claims of the Creed. Moreover, the context

³⁴ List, 'Group Knowledge and Group Rationality', 41.

³⁵ 'Holy Baptism'.

of baptism provides a clear example of how common knowledge can obtain, at least between the members of a particular church community.

However, the joint commitment account is not entirely unproblematic either. As critics of Gilbert's work have noted, joint-commitment accounts fare particularly well in small groups with little organisational structure, but have difficulty explaining what it is for a larger group to believe certain things and to be committed to acting in certain ways. In larger groups, not every individual member contributes to the decision-making processes of the group, and this is not always done by means of transparent decision-making procedure. Suppose, for example, a group held a secret vote to determine the content of beliefs, there would be no way of individuals knowing the beliefs of other group members, thereby ruling out the kind of joint-commitment Gilbert has in mind, but this process might still be a way of determining the beliefs of a group.

In larger groups it seems unreasonable to think that one could know every member of the group, thereby ruling out the possibility of jointly-committing to some course of action with them.³⁶ The more general point is this: joint commitment sets too high a bar for claiming that large groups are committed to certain ways of acting or believing. For groups in which beliefs remain constant but members often leave (such as global organizations and corporations), Gilbert's conditions appear too demanding.³⁷ In larger, more dispersed groups with frequent changes of membership, Gilbert's account is particularly poorly suited, since the personal identity of the group 'rises and falls with the specific joint commitment that defines it—for example, a joint commitment to paint the house or go for a walk.'³⁸

This seems especially important in the context of the Church. For whilst there are commitments involved in belonging to the Church, say, in the context of baptism, the beliefs

³⁶ This worry is raised by Ulrich Baltzer in Baltzer, 'Joint Action of Large Groups'. Gilbert has responded to Baltzer's objections, noting that one can jointly-commit to a course of action with someone that one has never met. She claims all that is strictly necessary for making a joint-commitment with someone is that, you know *of* that person and that you know they have a certain intention. Gilbert, Margaret, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World.*, 52.

³⁷ Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*, 22.

³⁸ Collins, *Group Duties*, 57.

of the Church are not *constituted* by these commitments, as in Gilbert's account. Instead, individuals commit to a set of beliefs which are already the beliefs of the Church. This might mean that Gilbert's account could explain how the Creed got to be called the Creed through the voting procedures that took place in the early church councils.³⁹ However, given the problems with scaling Gilbert's account, it looks poorly suited to explain the meaning of "we believe" in most liturgical context. Rather than thinking of the Church's commitments arising from individual's commitments, I think it is more promising to think of individual's commitments arising from the Church's commitments. But to make sense of this idea, we need an account of how something like the Church could believe.

The Normative Functionalist Account

While Gilbert's joint commitment account captures something intuitive about the normative role of creeds, in other respects it still fails to capture the meaning of "We believe" in liturgical contexts. Rather than constituting the Church's commitment to the beliefs of the creeds, the use of creeds in liturgy seems more like a summary of the Church's existing beliefs, which individuals are committed to upholding. So while there is a normative component to the use of "we believe" in liturgy, it seems strange to think that the Church's belief is identical with the commitments of its members, such that the Church would fail to believe the Creed if its members failed to commit to its claims.

Let us consider a final possibility, namely that groups, such as the Church, actually have beliefs which arise out of complex decision-making processes, in some way analogous to the way in which individuals have beliefs. Whereas the joint commitment account seeks to explain the origins of attitudes held by groups, the functionalist account takes a different approach. This account seeks to explain how something like a group could be capable of holding an attitude such as a belief, namely, a truth orientated attitude with a mind-to-world fit (or at least a system-to-world fit). This approach requires taking a functionalist stance on the nature of mental states, at least as they are instantiated in groups.⁴⁰

³⁹ See MacMullen, *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*.

⁴⁰ Note that this thesis need not commit you to a functionalist position in the philosophy of mind. One can still hold that functionalism about belief doesn't get at the heart of the matter

Here I will focus on Christian List and Philip Pettit's account of group agency to demonstrate how a functionalist account might be defended.⁴¹ Although List and Pettit are not without their critics, their discussion provides a clear example of how group belief might be thought of in functionalist terms.⁴² And it seems entirely possible to take their general

in the philosophy of mind and think that, minimally, beliefs truth orientated mind-to-world fit attitudes. This would then open up the possibility of ascribing beliefs to things other than phenomenally conscious minds.

⁴¹ See Bird, 'When Is There a Group That Knows?', for a similar account. Bird defends the idea of a distributed social epistemic subject, in contrast to Gilbert's joint commitment account.

⁴² A similar account to List and Pettit's is Raimo Tuomela's joint acceptance account. According to Tuomela, for a group to believe some proposition, is for that proposition to be accepted by the members of the group in the relevant way. As he defines it:

(Belief of Group) G believes that p in the social and normative circumstances C if and only if in C there are operative members $A_1 \dots A_m$ in G with respective positions $P_1 \dots P_m$ such that

- (1) the agents $A_1 \dots A_m$ when they are performing their social tasks in their positions $P_1 \dots P_m$, and due to their exercising the relevant authority system in G , (intentionally) jointly accept by as the view of G , and because of this exercise of the authority system they ought to continue to accept or positionally believe that;
- (2) there is a mutual belief among the operative members to the effect that (1);
- (3) because of (1) the full-fledged and adequately informed non-operative members of G tend to tacitly accept—or at least ought to accept— p as members of G ;
- (4) there is a mutual belief in G to the effect that (3)

Tuomela, 'Group Beliefs', 295.

On Tuomela's account, the group belief is not representative of the majority of the group members, but instead, is formed by the relevant operative members of the group. By 'operative', Tuomela has in mind a kind of structure to a group, in which certain members are responsible for its commitments and values, but not all. He writes that, 'The operative members in the cases of group actions, group goals, and group beliefs are those actors, goal-

approach to the issue, without endorsing every detail of their account. First, it will be important to quickly outline their account of group agency, before considering how this helps explain the notion of group belief. List and Pettit argue that for something to count as an agent it must have the following four features:

1. 'It has representational states that depict how things are in the environment.'⁴³
2. 'It has motivational states that specify how it requires things to be in the environment.'⁴⁴
3. 'It has the capacity to process its representational and motivational states, leading it to intervene suitably in the environment whenever that environment fails to match a motivating specification.'⁴⁵
4. 'It displays at least a modicum of rationality.'⁴⁶

These first three conditions are fairly minimal conditions, which merely require that to be considered an agent, something must be able to process information about its environment and act accordingly. As they describe, such states need not be realized by human brain states, they may be realized by electronic systems or by animal brains. All that is required is that the states of the agent 'play the appropriate role'.⁴⁷

formers, and belief-formers by virtue of whom, respectively, actions, goals and beliefs are attributed to groups'. Tuomela, 288. Moreover, as Tuomela suggests, no one member of the group has to individually believe that *p* for the group to believe that *p*. He suggests, for instance, that the secretary of the flat earth society might have the personal belief that the world is round, but her 'positional rule-based belief' is that the earth is flat. Tuomela, 293. By 'positional belief', Tuomela suggests that certain constitutive or informal rules of groups, as well as certain social norms make it the case that group members are to adopt beliefs in certain contexts, even if these are not their own. On Tuomela's account, then, 'the beliefs of a collective needn't be proper truth-related belief—at least as long as they are analysed in terms of the positional beliefs of their members'. Tuomela, 293.

⁴³ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, 20.

⁴⁴ List and Pettit, 20.

⁴⁵ List and Pettit, 20.

⁴⁶ List and Pettit, 36.

⁴⁷ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, 21.

As List and Pettit then argue, there are a number of kinds of groups which might meet these conditions for agency. Typically, to meet conditions 1-3, groups are organized by means of some organizational structure, such that a group of individuals ‘intend that they together act so as to form and enact a single system of belief and desire, at least within a clearly defined scope; they each intend to do their own part in a salient plan for ensuring group-agency within that scope, believing that others will do their part too’.⁴⁸ This need not mean that each member of the group is an ‘equal and willing partner’ in the group’s action, but only that those authorized to act on behalf of the group do so with a ‘full awareness for the pursuit of the group’s ends’.⁴⁹ Thus, typically such groups have two kinds of members: those who are authorized to act on behalf of the group in specific contents, and those who authorize others to act on behalf of the group. In a trade union, for instance, the group needs both paying members (who authorize) and paid negotiators (who are authorized).

In specifying that agents must display evidence of rationality, this account ensures that the judgements made by the operative members are truth orientated. As we have seen, to be considered an agent, a group must display a ‘modicum of rationality’.⁵⁰ What List and Pettit have in mind by this is that a group must, first ensure ‘as far as possible, that its beliefs are true about the world it inhabits and ideally that its desires are at least in principle realizable’.⁵¹ Secondly, ‘the group must ensure, as far as possible, that whenever its attitudes require an action, suitable members or employees are selected and authorized to take the required action’ and finally, ‘the group must ensure that whatever beliefs and desires that it comes to hold form a coherent whole’.⁵² In other words, the system which allows the group to have the relevant motivational and representational attitudes, must also ensure that these attitudes are accurate, appropriate and coherent.⁵³

⁴⁸ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, 34.

⁴⁹ List and Pettit, 35.

⁵⁰ List and Pettit, 36.

⁵¹ List and Pettit, 36.

⁵² List and Pettit, 36.

⁵³ It is here that the previous discussion of belief aggregation becomes important. For whilst a simple summative view struggles to overcome such issues, the functionalist account described here can offer some kind of response, and indeed, needs to offer a response. In making decisions as a group, deliberation and communication will likely occur, thereby

If the 'we' in 'we believe' refers primarily to a congregation or a denomination, then the application of List and Pettit's account is relatively straightforward, although the specifics will vary significantly depending on one's church tradition. To take one example, that of Anglicanism, a church congregation is typically represented by a vestry or church council (which is typically voted by members of the congregation) and a priest who is installed to lead and serve the congregation. The priest and the vestry will typically have a means of voting that some action go ahead (such as serving a new kind of coffee after the service), and this may require unanimous decisions. The group decision making procedure, such as the group deliberation (discussing which coffees are on the market and their strengths), and group voting (taking a poll on which coffee to use after the service at the end of the meeting) mean that the church congregation and not merely the vestry can have beliefs about coffee (that the Fairtrade coffee is preferable) and can act accordingly (by using church funds to purchase 10kg of Fairtrade coffee). So long as these states are done consistently (see footnotes 53 for more detail), it can be true in that church congregation that "we believe in Fairtrade coffee".

But not every decision is up for grabs in this context; the doctrine and liturgical life of the congregation is typically stipulated by diocesan bishop, or college of bishops. Thus, if a church wished to drop a line of the Creed, they would need permission from their bishop to do so. These decision-making procedures mean that a diocese or a province within the Anglican communion might be considered a group agent. Thus, in this context, in reciting a

allowing the group as a whole to form the relevant attitudes described in 1-3. But as we have seen, what is essential for List and Pettit is for these beliefs to demonstrate a basic level of rationality. Thus, any group agent must overcome instances of problematic judgement aggregation, or else they fail to count as rational since they would have an incoherent set of beliefs. In order to respond to aggregation problems, List and Pettit argue that groups must either prioritise the premises of a deliberation, or the conclusion. They suggest that the premise-based procedure often fares better. This requires that the authorized group members generate 'a group attitude towards each premise by taking a majority vote on that premise', this then allows the group to derive 'its attitudes on the conclusions from its majority attitudes on the premises'. List and Pettit, 56.

creed, an ordinary attending member of a congregation does not state his or her own belief, but the belief of that church. Just as a cabinet member may state the government position on a matter to a television interviewer (regardless of her own views), a creed reciting church member tells us something about the beliefs of the organization.

The account cannot stop here, however. For as we have seen throughout, the Creed is supposed to capture something of the whole Church's belief and not just the beliefs of some congregation or denomination. But here is where things look more puzzling. For unlike specific denominations or congregations, the whole Church has no obvious group decision-making procedure. It is here we must make a more theological claim. For if the Church is united as one group agent, it is clearly not a result of human decision-making, but of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit who unites all of the Church together in Christ. Consider the words of Anglican theologian, Evelyn Underhill:

This total liturgical life of the *Corpus Christi* is not merely a collective of services, offices, and sacraments. Deeply considered, it is the sacrificial life of Christ Himself; the Word indwelling in His Church, gathering in His eternal priestly action the small Godward movements, sacrifices, and aspirations of 'all the broken and the meek,' and acting through those ordered signs and sacraments by means of these His members on earth. Hence the corporate worship of the Church is not simply that of an assembly of individuals who believe the same things, and therefore unite in doing the same things. It is real in its own right; an action transcending and embracing all the separate souls taking part in it. The individual as such dies to his separate selfhood—even his spiritual selfhood—on entering the Divine Society: is 'buried in baptism' and reborn as a living cell of the Mystical Body of Christ.⁵⁴

Elsewhere, I have attempted to explain how we might use functionalist group ontology to explain these theological claims.⁵⁵ To see how this might be so, we must consider the notion that group voting or hierarchy might not be the only way a group fulfils the criteria for

⁵⁴ Underhill, *Worship*, 86.

⁵⁵ Cockayne, 'Analytic Ecclesiology'.

agency, on a functionalist account. Consider List and Pettit's example of the terrorist cell, for instance:

A second way in which a group agent may form without joint intention is perhaps more plausible. This would involve one or several organizational designers co-opting others into a structure underpinning group agency, without making them aware of their agency at the group level and without seeking their intentional acquiescence in the arrangement. Think of the cellular organization by which, so we are told, many terrorist organizations have operated. We can imagine that a cellular network may be established for the promotion of some goals, without those recruited to the different cellular tasks being aware of the overall purpose; they may be kept in the dark or even deceived about it. The organization would be composed of a group of people, in perhaps a thin sense of group, and would function as an agent. But it would do so without joint intention among its members, with the possible exception of a few coordinators.⁵⁶

I have argued that this description can provide a model for thinking about the Church as a group agent. Whilst the actions of individual members contribute to the actions of the body as a whole, the unity of the Church as a whole derives only from the uniting actions of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the case of the whole Church, agency (and group beliefs) arise not from bottom-up organizational structure, but from top-down authorities (i.e. the work of God). If this is the case, then one might hold that the authorized members of the Church are neither the councils, nor the bishops, nor even the writers of Scripture, but rather, it is only God himself who determines the contents of the Church's beliefs through acts of divine providence. In reciting the lines of the Creed in liturgy, then, one is participating in a 'we' that is beyond one's control or influence. This group belief is not dependent on one's own set of beliefs, commitments, or acceptances (as in the previous accounts), but rather, one speaks on behalf of the whole Church as a social reality, of which one is a part. So, if the

⁵⁶ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, 33.

Creed is descriptive, it is descriptive not of the member's beliefs but of the Church's beliefs as a whole.

Finally, let's consider how the functionalist account might capture the normative component of creeds, without having to think of group beliefs as joint commitments. In her recent book, Stephanie Collins has attempted to apply a functionalist group ontology to issues of moral responsibility. Collins argues that if groups are agents, then in virtue of their decision-making procedures, they are able to deliberate, and attend to moral considerations. For example, in virtue of its organizational structure, a group like Starbucks is able to deliberate over whether wide-scale tax evasion is a morally appropriate action. If its management decides that siphoning all of the profits to the Bahamas is the best course of action, then Starbucks can be held responsible deciding to perform this action and not some other (such as supporting the citizens in the countries it makes profit in). As Collins notes, a collective's

decision is not merely the conjunction of members' decisions. The members' decisions were *to assent to the collective's doing such-and-such*. By contrast, the collective's decision was *to do such-and-such*. The collective's decision was determined by the members' decisions, but it is not to be identified with the mere conjunction of them for two reasons. First, it has a different content: "the collective's decision is "the collective will do this". Second, the collective's decision arose out of two things: the conjunction of member's decisions *plus* the fact that they are all committed to the unanimity rules.⁵⁷

Thus, she thinks, just as group beliefs don't reduce to individual beliefs on the functionalist account, neither do group obligations. But this does not mean that individual members of groups derive no obligations from belonging to groups. Rather, according to Collins, if a group has an obligation to see to it that X, then

1. Each member has a duty to use their role, if possible and as appropriate, to put inputs into the collective's decision-making procedure with a view to the

⁵⁷ Collins, *Group Duties*, 169.

procedure's distributing roles to members in a way that: if the enough members used their roles with a view to seeing it that X, then that would be sufficient for X in a high proportion of likely futures. These are "X-sufficient" roles.

2. If X-sufficient roles are distributed, then each member has a duty to use their role, if possible and as appropriate, with a view to seeing to it that X.⁵⁸

Rather than thinking of a group's obligation as synonymous with the constituent members' obligations, or as an addition of the constituent members' obligations, a members' obligation is defined in relation to the specific role they play within the decision-making procedure of the group. As she goes on to argue, 'when there is a violation at the collective level, there is *also* a violation at the member level. The two levels remain different...my claim is not that members failed to do *exactly what the collective failed to do*...collectives' and members' duties really are over different things'.⁵⁹ The Prime Minister has different responsibilities to the Home Secretary in relation to the British Government's obligation to serve the country's wellbeing. As ordinary voters, we might have responsibilities to hold the government to account by voting them out or protesting at violations of the public good. Note, however, that 'once the roles have been distributed, a member's obligation is *not* just an obligation to perform their role, that is, to perform a specific action. It is rather an obligation to *use* their role to see to it that X.'⁶⁰ This might require challenging the expectations of one's role or questioning the contribution of others (as in the role of political protest, for instance). This model of group obligation defines the individual's obligations in relation to the obligations of the group as a whole, rather than the other way around (as in the joint commitment account).

Collins' account of group obligation provides a helpful way of thinking about the relationship between the Church's belief in the Creed and the individual's obligations. Return to Johnson's remark that, "The Church always believes more and better than any one of its members...To pray "We believe in one God ..." is to join our voice to the Church's voice, to step into something larger than our own ideas, doubts, fears, and questions, "in the hope that our individual 'I believe' someday approaches the strength of the church's

⁵⁸ Collins, 198.

⁵⁹ Collins, 183.

⁶⁰ Collins, 199.

‘We believe’”.⁶¹ On a normative functionalist account, we should interpret the Church’s belief as something dependent on its particular decision-making procedure, of which ordinary creed-reciting members have little or no input in, at least concerning the content of the Church’s core beliefs. We might even think, that it is the Church and not just the members who are obliged to uphold the claims of the Creed. But this need not mean that professing the Church’s belief has no impact on one’s own obligations; as Collins’ notes, ‘member’s obligation is *not* just an obligation to perform their role... It is rather an obligation to *use* their role to see to it that X.’⁶² And thus, if the Church as a whole is obligated to uphold the claims of the Creed, then reciting these words together obligates each professing member to *use their role* within the Church to *see to it* that the beliefs are the Church are upheld.

Conclusion

Let us take stock. There are intuitive aspects of all three accounts of group belief I have considered. The summative account captures well the notion that reciting the Creed summarises something that is common to all who believe in the Church. Its weakness, or so I have argued, is that it risks many of these recitations being inaccurate since it fails to get at the normative function that reciting the Creed is supposed to have. The joint commitment account focuses on this normative dimension of reciting creeds more explicitly and argues that group belief in the Creed *just is* a shared commitment to certain claims. Yet, I have shown, such a view risks placing too much weight on the commitments of the Church’s members; for the beliefs of the Church are not constituted by the member’s commitments, the Creed pre-exists such commitments, at least in contemporary usage.

A normative functionalist account marries together the intuitive features of both joint commitment accounts and summative accounts. For as with the summative account, for the functionalist, the Creed is descriptive in a certain sense, but it is descriptive of the beliefs of the group, rather than the sum of its members’ beliefs. Moreover, just as the joint commitment account captures something important about the normative function of the Creed, the normative functionalist account too wants to claim that reciting creeds obligates

⁶¹ Johnson, *The Creed*, 46.

⁶² Collins, *Group Duties*, 199.

one to act or believe in a certain way. The difference between the two positions is that the joint commitment account thinks of the group's obligations as derived from the individual's and the functionalist thinks that the individual member's obligation is derived from the group's obligation. Thus, we must see that the Church as a whole, united through the work of the Spirit and distributed across the world, is obligated to uphold the claims of the Creed. It is in virtue of this global obligation that each member is obligated to uphold the Creed and it is this obligation that she reminds herself of weekly as she recites the lines, "We believe in in one God, the Father, the Almighty..."

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