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## **Review of Anna Wierzbicka. 2025. *The Nicene Creed in Minimal English: Why Christianity Needs Universal Human Concepts*. Cham: Springer Nature.**

Sandy HABIB  

*Tel-Hai University of Kiryat Shmona in the Galilee, Kiryat Shmona, Israel*  
 [havivsana@m.telhai.ac.il](mailto:havivsana@m.telhai.ac.il)

The Nicene Creed (also known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) is an ancient text about the core of the Christian faith. It was formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. and was expanded to its current form at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. This text proclaims belief in the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the one Church, one baptism, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life. While many books have been written on this creed, Anna Wierzbicka's book on it stands out as a work that combines linguistics and theology.

The Introduction presents the concept of the Nicene Creed, discusses its relationship to the Bible, and highlights its promotion of the oneness of humanity. Additionally, it discusses the idea that Jesus' message, while being universal, was communicated to humanity through the Jewish linguaculture (interwoven ways of speaking and living). Therefore, there is a need to explore and unpack the meanings of the cultural norms of this linguaculture, as well as Jesus' whole message and ultimately the Creed itself. To this end, the author presents the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach, which she employs to explicate (define in relatively simple and cross-translatable words) the Creed.

The second chapter offers an explication of the Nicene Creed presented in eighteen sections. Each subsequent chapter (3–20) corresponds to one of these sections and provides detailed commentary.

Although the Nicene Creed begins with 'I believe in one God,' Wierzbicka does not start by explicating this sentence. Rather, in Section 1 of Chapter 2—and

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its commentary in Chapter 3—she respectively explicates and discusses three themes: the rationale behind the faithful’s reciting the Creed, Jesus’ teaching on the Holy Spirit, and the Pentecost event versus the Council of Nicaea. She justifies this by stating that the “communal aspect of the Christian confession of faith comes not from the phrase ‘I believe’, but from the word ‘creed’ and the whole phrase ‘Nicene Creed’” (p. 115). For those unfamiliar with Christianity, Section 1 serves as a clear and accessible introduction.

Section 2 of Chapter 2 explicates the sentence ‘I believe in one God.’ Because the explication is relatively long, it is presented in four blocks: who God is, what can be known about him, how people can think about him, and how they can speak to him. Chapter 4 provides commentary on this explication. Unlike almost all the definitions of the word *God* presented in theological books and religious education textbooks, Wierzbicka’s definition is so simple that even young children can comprehend it. I should note, however, that defining God as someone poses a serious theological challenge. How would the formula “God is one being in three persons” be explicated in NSM? Saying that God is someone and, at the same time, that he is three someones seems to be contradictory. I should also note that this difficulty points not to any limitation of NSM but to the inherent limits of human language and conceptualization when speaking of the infinite.

What follows the explication of ‘I believe in one God’ is the explication of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and that of the Incarnation and the Redemption (the Son becoming man, suffering, dying, and rising). Wierzbicka devotes twelve sections (Sections 3–14) to presenting this explication and twelve chapters (Chapters 5–16) to commenting on it. Three remarks are warranted concerning (1) the length of this part, (2) the concept of ‘salvation,’ and (3) some parts of the explication of the two target doctrines.

First, the length of the explication and discussion is fully justified. These two doctrines form the core of the Nicene Creed. In the Greek text, they constitute 85.6% (149 of the 174 words) of the whole text. Wierzbicka succeeds in clarifying the meanings of some phrases that Christians have become so accustomed to that they no longer realize their theological complexity—unless directly asked about their meanings. Two of these phrases are ‘born not made’ and ‘consubstantial with the Father.’ As a parish priest, I can testify that, when I asked some of my parishioners (adolescents and adults) about these phrases, most of them were not able to provide the correct answer.

Second, in Block 1 of Section 7 (p. 71) and Block 6 of Section 9 (pp. 80–81), Wierzbicka briefly introduces the concept of ‘salvation’ and presents the reason why Jesus died on the cross in cross-translatable terms. From at least a Catholic viewpoint, the two blocks are flawless, but it is worth noting that Christian theologians across the centuries have not completely agreed on the precise meaning of salvation or on why Jesus died on the cross. Consider, for instance, the three major models of satisfaction, penal substitution, and *Christus Victor*. Wierzbicka is aware of the differences in theological opinions; in Chapter 11 (p. 192)—which is

a commentary on Section 9—she discusses, e.g., the perspectives on Jesus’ suffering put forward by the Catholic theologian Roy Schoeman and the Anglican apologist C. S. Lewis. Both perspectives differ from her own.

Third, some very minor parts of the explication of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and that of the Incarnation and the Redemption may appear to diverge slightly from the main theological focus. Consider, for example, Block 4 of Section 8 (p. 75). This block unpacks the rationale behind the Son’s incarnation. Although the block is theologically sound, its inclusion of Jesus’ words to his apostles in the Upper Room—shortly before going to Gethsemane and being arrested there—may strike readers as unexpected. Also, Block 1 of Section 10 (p. 82), titled ‘What Happened after Jesus Died and was Buried,’ mentions the Shroud of Turin. While this shroud has been meticulously studied by scientists and is believed by many Christians to be real and to offer insights into the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, its presence in the explication of the Creed seems somewhat tangential. Notably, the author acknowledges that mentioning the Shroud of Turin in the explication can be felt to be out of place (pp. 201–202) but justifies this mentioning at length in an excursus (pp. 207–218).

After explicating the two doctrines of the Holy Trinity and of the Incarnation and the Redemption, Wierzbicka brilliantly presents an elaborate explication of a short sentence in the Creed, i.e., ‘I believe in One Holy Catholic Church.’ This sentence appears to be simple, but reading Section 15 and its corresponding Chapter 17, readers who are not well acquainted with the Christian faith discover the rich meaning of each of the words of this sentence.

In a similar vein, Section 16 explicates another brief sentence, namely ‘I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.’ The explication of this seemingly simple sentence extends over about five pages, demonstrating its theological depth. Reading the corresponding chapter—Chapter 18—readers can appreciate this complexity and understand why such a lengthy explication is warranted.

The last two sections and their corresponding chapters deal with the resurrection of the dead and the everlasting life. It seems that many ordinary Christians are not familiar with the meaning of the resurrection of the dead or with what happens after death, according to the Bible and teaching of the Church. This highlights the importance of explaining these doctrines to them, and Wierzbicka demonstrates how this explanation can be couched in a relatively simple and universal way.

Wierzbicka’s writing is coherent and easy to follow, reflecting the author’s clarity of thought. This does not come as a surprise to people familiar with her work. Generally, her writing style is relatively simple yet highly academic. It is worth noting that the author brilliantly explicates parts of the Creed through narrative. For example, in explicating the sentence ‘I believe in One Holy Catholic Church,’ the author narrates the conversation that took place between Jesus and the apostles in Caesarea Phillipi (present-day Banias). This is neither usual nor intuitive in definitions and explications of abstract concepts and notions. By making recourse

to narratives, the author elucidates complex theological ideas and renders them more concrete to the reader.

This book is both a linguistic and theological work. A reader who is unaware of Wierzbicka's linguistic background might readily take her to be a theologian. The commentary on the explication of the Creed provides theological insights that show the depth and breadth of the author's knowledge of the Bible, the teaching of the Catholic Church, and the works of first-rate theologians, such as Pope Benedict XVI and the Anglican bishop N. T. Wright. Moreover, she draws judiciously on the works of other eminent scholars, such as the historians Tom Holland and Yuval Noah Harari, the geneticist Francis Collins, and the theoretical physicists John Polkinghorne and Steven Weinberg.

This book is valuable to both experts and non-experts in linguistics and theology. To non-expert readers, this book can be truly enlightening and enriching. For non-believers in the existence of God, it offers several points of reflection, especially in chapters 4–6, which discuss the concepts of 'God' and 'creation.' For non-Christians, it presents the Christian faith in a way that is accessible and theologically sound. For Christian believers, it can deepen their understanding of this faith and help them articulate it clearly. For linguists, theologians, and religious educators, this book demonstrates how complex (theological) ideas can—and in fact should—be expressed in simple terms. This simplification is important, not only for young children, but also for adults. Adults who, for example, regularly recite certain sentences—such as those in the Creed—may think they understand them well. If, however, they are asked about their meaning, they may realize that they grasp it partially or do not fathom it at all. Empirical evidence presented by Habib (2025) on the extent to which Christians understand the hymns they sing is illustrative of this point.

The choice of the simple terms that Wierzbicka uses in the explication of the Creed is not haphazard but scientific. It stems from decades-long empirical research initiated by Wierzbicka and conducted by her and many other linguists on languages from distinct language families (Wierzbicka 2021). This research led to the identification of 65 simple and universal concepts. It also demonstrated their usefulness in analyzing hundreds of complex words and expressions across a wide range of fields, including theology (Habib & Sakaba 2025a, 2025b, Wierzbicka 2001, 2018, 2019, Wierzbicka 2021, among many others). This book is yet another milestone in demonstrating the power of these words in elucidating meaning.

Wierzbicka's book arrived as a timely gift in a special year—one in which Christians around the globe celebrated the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formulation of the Creed. Reading it has the potential to, not only enrich linguists and theologians, but also to enkindle the flame of faith in many hearts and strengthen it in many others. In sum, this is a profound contribution to the NSM approach and to Christian thought. It deserves wide readership.

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### Bionote:

**Sandy HABIB** is Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at Tel-Hai University of Kiryat Shmona in the Galilee, Israel. He is also a Catholic priest serving at St. Maroun’s Parish in Jish. His research interests embrace cultural semantics, religious semantics, and pragmatics.

*e-mail:* [havivsan@m.telhai.ac.il](mailto:havivsan@m.telhai.ac.il)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8450-5361>

### Сведения об авторе:

**Сэнди ХАБИБ** — преподает лингвистику в Тель-Хайском университете в Кирьят-Шмоне, Галилея, Израиль. Он также является католическим священником, служащим в приходе Святого Маруна в Джише. Его научные интересы включают культурную семантику, религиозную семантику и прагматику.

*e-mail:* [havivsan@m.telhai.ac.il](mailto:havivsan@m.telhai.ac.il)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8450-5361>