

“ONE GOD FATHER ALMIGHTY”

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Abstract

“One God Father Almighty” is among the most basic Christian confessions. In this article, John Behr argues that the precise order of these four words is not random. In his works, Origen reflects on the scriptural titles for God and Christ, and concludes that “Almighty” does not precede the title “Father,” since the Father is Almighty through the Son, in whom all things were made. Building on Origen’s scriptural exegesis, Gregory of Nyssa interprets the word “God” as designating specifically the Father, whereas the Son and the Spirit receive their (eternal) identity only in relation to “God the Father.” For Origen, Jesus is the Son *of God*, rather than God the Son. The one “God over all” is the Father, made known through the Son and the Spirit.

Introduction

Perhaps the most fundamental Christian confession naming God, going back to the apostle Paul himself (1 Cor. 8:6) and the first article of every creed is: “One God Father Almighty.” It is so familiar to us that we tend not to think about it too much. Or if we do, we tend not to take it in its simplicity. For example, my eldest son reported to me an intriguing, and arresting, conversation he had with his religion instructor at a Jesuit High School. The instructor came in one day and told the class: “Today we are going to explore why we say that the one God is a Trinity.” My son immediately put his hand up and said, “I don’t, sir.” Perplexed, the instructor asked, “What do you mean?” To which he replied (so he says), “Well, I don’t know about you, sir, but I follow the Nicene Creed, which says: I believe in one God the Father.” I never found out how the discussion went after that (one can only guess). We have become so used to using the word “God” in all sorts of ways – God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, the one God who is three; the triune God, and so on – that the simple observation that the Creed does not speak like that, let alone the Scriptures, pulls us up short. They speak, much more simply, of one God the Father, one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God (not God the Son), and so on. What is the grammar that lies behind the beguilingly simple confession of faith in “One God Father Almighty,” and does the difference between that and our habitual patterns of speech make a difference for how we name God today and what we think we are doing when we do “trinitarian theology”?

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The Scriptural grammar for the word "God" is well known and has been frequently commented on: without an article, the word θεός can be applied widely: "I say, You are gods, children of the Most High," says the Psalmist (82:6), cited by Christ to affirm that all those to whom the Word of God came are "gods" (John 10:34–5); "there indeed are many gods and lords" out there, says the apostle, even if for us there is only one God and one Lord (1 Cor. 8:5–6). In the texts of the New Testament, the word "god" with the article ("the God") applies nearly exclusively to the Father of Christ, but also occasionally to Christ himself, most clearly in Thomas' confession: "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28). From Ignatius of Antioch a few decades later, and onwards, Christ is repeatedly and unhesitatingly called "my God." Yet even centuries later, the word "God," with an article, continues to refer primarily to the Father. As Gregory the Theologian puts it towards the end of fourth century:

Define our piety by teaching the knowledge of:

One God, unbegotten, the Father; and

One begotten Lord, his Son,

referred to as "God" (θεός) when he is mentioned separately, but "Lord" when he is named together with the Father – the first on account of the [divine] nature, the second on account of the monarchy; and

One Holy Spirit, who proceeds (προελθόν) or goes forth (προϊόν) from the Father,

"God" (θεόν) to those who understand properly things proposed to them – combated by the impious but understood by those who are above them, and even professed by those who are more spiritual.¹

There is, according to Gregory, a particular "grammar" regulating the use of the word "God," a grammar, moreover, which preserves the balance of maintaining the "monarchy" of the Father as the one God, and yet also the true divinity of the Son and the Spirit, who by virtue of the fact that they are of the same nature as God, can also be called "God."

1. Origen

It is with Origen that we start to find close examination of the terms "Father" and "Almighty" as names of God. As is always the case with Origen, his analysis is carried out through scriptural exegesis, in the interplay between Scripture and the Gospel and by coordinating various verses from Scripture. By "Gospel" Origen does not primarily mean "the narrative of the deeds, suffering and words of Jesus," but all the writings which "present the sojourn of Christ and prepare for his coming (παρουσία) and produce it in the souls of those who are willing to receive the Word of God who stands at the door and knocks and wishes to enter their souls."² The

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 25.15; PG 35; ET *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter NPNF), series 2, vol. 7, ed. William Sanday (reprint Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

² Origen, *Commentary on John* (hereafter *ComJn*), 1.20, 26; *Commentaire sur saint Jean*, ed. and French trans. Cécile Blanc, Sources Chrétiennes (hereafter SC) 120, 157, 222, 290, 385 (Paris: Cerf, 1966, 1970, 1975, 1982, 1992); ET Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series 80, 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989, 1993).

Gospel is an “exhortatory address” (*ComJn.* 1.18), presenting the Word of God to the hearers in such a way that they receive the Word, who then dwells in them. With this definition of “Gospel,” the writings of the Law and the Prophets can also be called this, though only retrospectively:

Before the sojourn of Christ, the Law and the Prophets did not contain the proclamation which belongs to the definition of the Gospel, since he who explained the mysteries in them had not yet come. But since the Savior has come and has caused the Gospel to be embodied, he has by the Gospel made all things as Gospel.³

So strong is Origen’s emphasis upon the distinctiveness of the revelation brought by Christ that it leads him to suggest that heretics such as Marcion may have had a point: “It is indeed possible to agree with the heterodox view, that Moses and the prophets did not know the Father” (*ComJn.* 19.27). As Origen points out, though there are countless prayers in the Psalms and the Prophets, none of them address God as Father, but only as Lord and God.⁴ He is not, however, prepared to concede an ontological disjunction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. Rather, having apparently conceded ground to Marcion, Origen makes a qualification that invests the designation of God as “Father” with new significance. When Christ explained the mysteries hidden in the writings of the Law and the Prophets, he revealed the spiritual sense of Scripture, and as the true meaning of their words this is, according to Origen, the meaning truly intended by those who wrote the Scriptures. So, Origen claims, they already

spoke or wrote about God as Father in secret and not in a manner intelligible to all, so that they might not anticipate the grace that is poured out to all the world through Jesus, who calls all people to adoption so that he may declare the name of God to his brothers and praise the Father in the midst of the assembly in accordance with what has been written.⁵

That is, if Moses and the Prophets already knew God as Father, this knowledge is nevertheless dependent upon the grace granted only through Jesus. Moreover, although Origen occasionally classifies the designation “Father” along with titles such as “Lord,” “Creator,” and “Judge” as “aspects” (ἐπίνοιαί) of God, here he suggests that the term “Father” should actually be considered as the very *name* of God, revealed for the first time by the Son.⁶ Thus, for Origen, not only is it the relationship to the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, that defines God as Father, rather than the more general relationship of God to creation described by the Platonic

³ *ComJn.* 1.33. The point is repeated a few lines later: “Nothing of the ancients was Gospel, then, before that Gospel which came into existence because of the sojourn of Christ” (*ComJn.* 1.36). Cf. Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.1.6, ed. and trans. John Behr, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): “We must add that it was after the advent of Jesus that the inspiration of the prophetic words and the spiritual nature of Moses’ law came to light.”

⁴ *ComJn.* 19.28.

⁵ *ComJn.* 19.28, which concludes by citing Ps. 21:23 (LXX), already applied to Christ in Heb. 2:12.

⁶ Cf. Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 84.

designation "Father of all,"⁷ but as the very name "Father" depends upon this relationship to the Son, the existence of the Son is now, as it were, constitutive of what it is to be God.⁸ The Gospel which proclaims this fatherhood of God and opens up for all the possibility of adoption to sonship is, for Origen, the universal content of Scripture, the deeper, spiritual sense of Scripture, revealed in the exegesis taught by the Savior in the Gospel he caused to be embodied. The theological affirmation, that there is only one God, the Father of his Son Jesus Christ and those adopted as sons in him, is thus inextricably related for Origen to the exegetical setting in which the scope of the Gospel extends throughout Scripture.

In his work *On First Principles*, written about the same time as the first half of his *Commentary on John*, Origen explores the name of "Father" further. He does not do so in the chapter devoted to "God" that opens the work – there he is more concerned to clarify what is meant by the fact that God is incorporeal and a consuming fire – but in the second chapter of book one, where he examines the various "aspects" or "titles" (ἐπίνοιαι) of Christ: Wisdom, Word, Truth, etc. One of his key scriptural verses is from Proverbs, where Wisdom says of herself that God "created me at the beginning of his work [...] before the beginning of the earth" (Prov. 8:22–5), a verse which brings together both creation and begetting, relating to the name of God as Father and the title "Almighty." It is the phrase "before the hills he begets me" (not by any understanding we might read into the term "Father" or the term "only-begotten") that leads Origen to emphasize that the begetting of the Son is an eternal begetting (it is in the present tense), and an eternal begetting that we too might share.⁹

Origen's teaching on creation is notoriously complex and has been the subject of controversy almost from the beginning. At the beginning of the chapter, Origen explains how Wisdom can speak of herself as created in terms that recall both the Platonic "ideas" and the Stoic "reasons," suggesting that as "within this very subsistence of Wisdom there was every capacity and form of the creation that would come to be, [...] Wisdom herself says through Solomon that she was *created the beginning of the ways* of God, that is, containing within herself the beginning and the reasons and the species of the entire creation" (*Princ.* 1.2.2). At that stage in his argument, then, if creation can be said to be eternal, it is only in a prefigurative sense.

Later on in the chapter, however, when Origen turns, in *Princ.* 1.2.10, to consider the verse in which Wisdom is said to be "the purest emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis. 7:25), he seems to imply a more concrete content to the eternal existence of creation. He begins by examining what might be meant by "the glory of the Almighty" to then be able to understand what its "emanation" is, and does so by way of an analogy to the correlation, used earlier, between the existence of a father and that of a son, to demonstrate that the Son is eternal (*Princ.* 1.2.2). As it is impossible to be a father without having a son, so also it is impossible for God to be almighty, he says, "if there are not those over whom he can exercise his power"; and, as it is clearly better for God to be almighty than not, those things by virtue of which he is almighty must always have existed: "if there never is a 'when' when he

⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, 28c; cf. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 10.6.

⁸ Cf. Widdicombe, *Fatherhood*, 78–9.

⁹ Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah* 9.4.

was not almighty, by necessity those things must also subsist by which he is called almighty, and he must always have had those over whom he exercised power and which were governed by him as king or prince" (*Princ.* 1.2.10); and of these things, he adds, he will speak more fully in the proper place, when discussing the subject of his creatures.

Pared down to the bare bones of the logical structure of the analogy, as was done by Methodius of Olympus,¹⁰ and those who follow in his wake, this opening passage does indeed seem to suggest that creation must in some sense be eternally actualized for God to be eternally the Almighty. Stated in such a manner, as Rowan Williams suggests, it rests upon the premise that true statements about God must hold eternally, and the mistaken inference from this that anything standing in relation to God must also exist eternally.¹¹

However, as Origen himself reminds us in the last lines of the opening paragraph of this section, he is not here concerned with created being themselves, but with the various titles of Christ and how they correlate amongst themselves and with the Father. So much is the analogy open to misunderstanding that he continues with a warning:

But even now, although briefly, I think it necessary to give a warning, since the question before us concerning Wisdom is how Wisdom is *the ἀπόρροια* (or the emanation) of the purest glory of the Almighty, lest anyone should consider that the title of *Almighty* is anterior in God to the birth of Wisdom, through whom he is called Father, since it is said that [Wisdom] is the *emanation of the purest glory of the Almighty*. Let him who would think like this hear what the Scriptures clearly proclaim, saying *In Wisdom have you made all things*, and the Gospel teaches, that *All things were made by him and without him nothing was made*, and let him understand from this that the title of *Almighty* cannot be older in God than that of Father, for it is through the Son that the Father is almighty.¹²

In other words, Origen's concern is not so much the status of creation itself, but to work out the hierarchy of the scriptural titles for God and Christ. If Wisdom is said to be "a pure effluence of the glory of the Almighty," it is nevertheless "in Wisdom" that God has made all things and by the Word that "all things were made," so that, as he puts it: "the title of 'Almighty' cannot be older in God than that of Father, for it is through the Son that the Father is almighty."

Whatever else Origen may be saying or implying about creation, the point he has established, through correlating various scriptural verses, is a fundamental theological point, that becomes a given thereafter: that is, that the creative activity of God must be understood in terms of his existence already as Father.¹³ This is, in fact, the opening affirmation of almost every subsequent creed: I believe in One God Father Almighty. The two terms "Father" and "Almighty" are not just randomly placed

¹⁰ See the account given by Methodius of Olympus (in a work entitled *περὶ τῶν γεννητῶν*, "On creatures"), as preserved in Photius, *Bibliothèque*, vol. 5, ed. René Henry (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967), 302a30–302b4 (codex 235).

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Arius: History and Tradition* (London: SCM Press, second edition 2001 [1987]), 138.

¹² *Princ.* 1.2.10; Ps. 103:24; John 1:3.

¹³ Cf. Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God*, 76, and *passim*.

after the subject of the first article: "Father" is the name of God, and he is Almighty as the Father of his Son, who is the Word and Wisdom of God, by whom all things were made. God's creative act is thus grounded in the eternal relationship between Father and Son.

Origen goes on to reflect further on the title of "Almighty" and what this omnipotence is. He points out that the title "Almighty" is one that is also shared by Christ (Rev. 1:8), and that this divine omnipotence is demonstrated in a very specific manner. For Origen, the truth of their omnipotence is demonstrated by Paul's words in Philippians, that, as a result of the Passion, every knee bows at the name of Jesus. The dominion which the Father holds over all things and by virtue of which he is called "the Almighty," is exercised through his Son, who is thus also called "Almighty," for "at the name of Jesus every knee bows." So, Origen concludes: "if every knee bows to Jesus, then, without doubt, it is Jesus to whom all things have been subjected, and he it is who exercised power over all things, and through whom all things have been subjected to the Father" (*Princ.* 1.2.10).

To make his point even clearer, Origen continues by explaining just what the glory of this omnipotence is:

And we add this, so that it may be more clearly understood what the *glory* of omnipotence is. The God and Father is *Almighty* because he has power over all things, that is, over heaven and earth, sun and moon, and all things in them. And he exercises power over them through his Word, for *at the name of Jesus every knee bows, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth.* And, if *every knee bows* to Jesus, then, without doubt, it is Jesus to whom *all things have been subjected*, and he it is who exercised power over all things, and through whom *all things have been subjected* to the Father; for it is through Wisdom, that is by Word and Reason, not by force and necessity, that they have been subjected. And therefore his glory is in the very fact that he possesses all things, and this is the *purest and most clear glory* of omnipotence, that by reason and wisdom, not by force and necessity, all things have been subjected.¹⁴

For Origen, then, not only does the attribute of omnipotence which calls creation into being derive from the relationship between the Father and the Son, but the "glory of omnipotence" is found nowhere else but on the cross, as the reference to the Philippians hymn makes clear. If we do not strip away from his argument the scriptural verses that he is in fact discussing, to treat it merely as a logical argument, but instead pay attention to the scriptural verses he uses to develop his argument, a very different picture emerges.

The "omnipotence" Origen is speaking about when using the analogy with the relationship between Father and Son is the power revealed through the weakness of the cross. And likewise the "creation" that is brought into being by this omnipotence of God is not simply that of lifeless, inanimate, and irrational matter, over which a workman might exercise his power, but the creation brought into existence through his Word, "by word and reason, not by force and necessity," that is, through persuasion upon rational, self-determining beings, who through God's long economy of

¹⁴ *Princ.* 1.2.10; Phil. 2:10-1; 1 Cor. 15:27-8.

creative activity come, in the end, to bow their knees in subjection to Christ, so that, through his own subjection to the Father, God comes to be “all in all.”¹⁵ Commenting on Origen’s understanding of Prov. 8:22, Wisdom saying “the Lord created me the beginning of his ways,” Rowan Williams helpfully suggests that for Origen “creation, *ktisis*, is strictly only the unimpeded expression of God’s rational will.”¹⁶ This creation is not protological but eschatological, when everything, through God’s long economy, is brought, freely, into subjection to him, such that God is “all in all.” In this way, the incorporeal God, with which Origen begins *On First Principles*, comes, at the end, to be embodied, with all matter being transformed in the consuming fire that is God, which is how Origen ends the work.

Leaving aside for now this eschatological understanding of creation, the point is clear that for Origen the statement, adopted by all creeds thereafter, “One God Father Almighty” is a precise theological statement: “Father” is the name of God, and by virtue of being Father, that is, through the Son, he is Almighty, possessing an omnipotence which is not that of a craftsman over inert matter, but that of one who works through reason and persuasion, bringing all things into rational and free subjection to himself so that he can be all in all.

2. Gregory of Nyssa

The grammar that Origen is working towards is made more precise by the later Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa in his *Letter to Peter*. Here he works out, with labored precision, the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, as relating to the different names and properties used in speech about God. His argument is fairly simple and straightforward. A term such as “human” can be applied to many objects, and therefore denotes the common nature that they share. But the common element is an abstraction, indicating something general, an “indefinite concept.” This common element, the nature or the essence, does not exist by itself, it is not a thing (πρᾶγμα), an entity that actually exists. Nature or essence only subsists in particular entities denoted by particular names. Thus the common element (κοινότης) needs to be delimited if it is to be “given-standing” as a subsisting being, if, that is, we are to understand not simply “human in general,” but specifically Peter or Paul. A term such as “human” indicates what kind of being something is, the *ousia*, while a particular name denotes a concrete, specific object (“thing,” πρᾶγμα), the *ousia* subsisting in a particular manner, delimited and denoted by the *hypostasis*. The term *hypostasis*, therefore, for Gregory, refers not so much to the particular entity itself (for which, at least in the created realm, he uses πρᾶγμα), but the particularizing properties by which it is made known.¹⁷

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 15:27–8; treated most fully in *Princ.* 3.6.

¹⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 141.

¹⁷ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter to Peter* (= Basil, *Ep.* 38; hereafter *EpPet*), *Saint Basile: Lettres*, ed. and trans. Yves Courtonne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957–66); *Letter to Peter*, ed. and trans. Roy J. Deferrari, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926–34), and in NPNF 8. See *EpPet.* 5: “the *hypostasis* is the particularizing sign of each (ἡ δὲ ὑπόστασις τὸ ἰδιάζον ἐκάστου σημειῶν ἐστίν)”; *EpPet.* 6: “we have taught that the *hypostasis* is the concurrence of the particular properties in respect to each (Εἰ γὰρ ὑπόστασιν ἀποδεδόκαμεν εἶναι τὴν συνδρομὴν τῶν περὶ ἕκαστον ιδιωμάτων),” and “the *hypostasis* is the distinctive sign of the existence of each (ἡ ὑπόστασις τὸ ἰδιάζον τῆς ἐκάστου ὑπάρξεως σημειῶν ἐστίν).” Each of these passages is discussed in context below. This usage is already present in the Letter of George of Laodicea (in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.16.4), and also in the way in which Gregory of Nazianzus treats the term ἰδιότης as synonymous with *hypostasis*, cf. *Or.* 31.9, and 39.11.

Having examined how things stand with regard to our language and its employment of certain terms, Gregory then argues that we can apply these same principles to how we speak of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: "If you transfer to the divine dogmas the principle of differentiation, which you recognize in human affairs, between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, you will not go astray" (*EpPet.* 3). The transfer that Gregory recommends is specifically that of the grammatical distinction between common and particular, not any other analogy that might suggest itself to us from the human examples that he gives for the purpose of illustration. The first conclusion that Gregory draws is that each member of the Trinity has a common substance:

Whatever your thought suggests about the manner of the Father's being (it is useless to rest the soul upon any subordinate concept, for we are convinced that it is above all concept), you will think this also of the Son and likewise of the Holy Spirit.

For the definition of being uncreated and of being incomprehensible is one and the same for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One is not more incomprehensible and uncreated, and another less so. (*EpPet.* 3)

Following passages from Origen, Gregory begins his investigation of the particularizing characteristics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with the apostle's statement that the Spirit works all grace in us (1 Cor. 12:11). If we ask further regarding the origin of these blessings, Scripture guides us to the belief that the only-begotten God is the source and cause of the blessings worked in us by the Spirit. But having arrived at this stage, we are led further in our contemplation to recognize that there is a Power that exists ingenerately and without beginning, the cause of all things, "for the Son, by whom all things are, and with whom the Holy Spirit must always be inseparably conceived, is of the Father" (*EpPet.* 4). Note that the coordinating particularities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are derived from the scriptural account of their activity.

From here, Gregory continues with a full description of what he considers to be the distinguishing marks of the *hypostases* of the Spirit, the Son and the Father:

Therefore, since the Holy Spirit, from whom all the abundance of good things gushes up to creation, depends (ἠρτηται) on the Son, with whom he is indivisibly apprehended, and has his being attached to the Father as a cause, from whom he also proceeds, he has the identifying sign of the particularity with respect to the *hypostasis* (τοῦτο γνωριστικὸν τῆς κατὰ τὴν ὑπόστασιν ιδιότητος σημεῖον ἔχει), to be made known after the Son and with him, and to subsist from the Father (τὸ μετὰ τὸν Υἱὸν καὶ σὺν αὐτῷ γνωρίζεσθαι καὶ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ὑφεστάναι).

The Son, who through himself and with himself makes known the Spirit who proceeds from the Father, alone shining forth in an only-begotten mode (μόνος μονογενῶς) from the unbegotten light, has no communion (οὐδεμίαν [...] τὴν κοινωνίαν ἔχει) with the Father or the Holy Spirit with respect to the particularity of his distinguishing marks (κατὰ τὸ ἰδιάζον τῶν γνωρισμάτων), but is alone made known by the aforesaid sign.

And the God overall alone has a special property of his *hypostasis* that he is the Father and subsists from no cause (Ὁ δὲ ἐπὶ πάντων Θεὸς ἐξαιρέτων τι γνώρισμα τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ὑποστάσεως τὸ Πατὴρ εἶναι καὶ ἐκ μηδεμιᾶς αἰτίας ὑποστῆναι μόνος ἔχει), and again by this sign he is recognized particularly. (*EpPet.* 4)

Thus, whilst developing the whole analogy of how we speak of Father, Son and Spirit in terms of what is common and particular, Gregory does not identify “God” as that which is common, a genus to which various particular beings belong; nor does he speak of the one God as three. Rather, “the God overall” is known specifically as “Father,” and the characteristic marks of the Son and the Spirit relate directly to him: the Son alone shines forth in an “only-begotten mode,” while the Spirit, proceeding from the Father, subsists, has his *hypostasis*, from the Father alone, but is known with and through the Son.

Having outlined the distinguishing marks of each *hypostasis*, Gregory returns again to the grammatical distinction between common and particular:

Therefore we say that, in the commonality of substance (ἐν τῇ τῆς οὐσίας κοινότητι), the distinguishing marks beheld in the Trinity are incommensurable and incommunicable (ἀσύμμετά [...] καὶ ἀκοινώνητα); through them the particularity of the persons (προσώπων), handed down in our faith, is made known to us, each being apprehended distinctively by means of its own particular marks, so that by means of the marks just mentioned the distinction of the *hypostases* is ascertained; but, regarding the [property of being] infinite, incomprehensible, uncreated, uncircumscribed by space, and all others of like nature, there is no variation in the life-giving nature – I mean regarding the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – but a certain continuous and uninterrupted communion (τινα συνεχῆ καὶ ἀδιάσπαστον κοινωνίαν) appears in them. (*EpPet.* 4)

The terms that Gregory applies in common to each of the three are all negative or apophatic ones, for the divine nature is above conceptualization or definition. Moreover, as the divine nature, as any nature, does not exist in the abstract, Gregory specifies that he is speaking of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, known through their particularizing properties, which are unique and incommensurable, such that we cannot even say “three” – as Basil puts it:

There is one God and Father, one Only-Begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit. We proclaim each of the *hypostases* singly (μοναχῶς); and if we must use numbers, we will not let an ignorant arithmetic lead us astray to the idea of polytheism. For we do not count by way of addition, increasing from unity to multitude; saying, “one, two, three,” or “first, second, third.” For “I,” God, “am the first and I am the last” [Is. 44:6]. We have never to this present day heard of a second God.¹⁸

When Gregory speaks of “certain continuous and uninterrupted communion” that appears in them, he is referring directly to the invariability of nature contemplated equally in each, the continuity of the being of the Father in the Son and the Spirit – not a “communion” or “community” *between* the persons, as the analogy of three distinct

¹⁸ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 18.44. *Sur le Saint Esprit*, ed. and French trans. Benoît Pruche, revised edition SC 17bis (Paris: Cerf, 2002); English trans. Stephen M. Hildebrand, *Popular Patristics Series* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011). Cf. Vladimir Lossky: “In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a *concept* of the ‘divine hypostasis,’ we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases.” Vladimir Lossky, “The Theological Notion of the Human Person,” in *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 113.

human agents might suggest and as is the case for the perichoretic unity of the three spoken about in much modern Trinitarian theology.¹⁹ When Gregory, in the final paragraphs of the letter, addresses the words of Christ about the Father being in him and he in the Father (e.g. John 10:38), he explains them, again, in terms of the Son being all that the Father is, with the exception of being the Father, the unique note demarcating "the God over all": "we see all the [attributes] of the Father in the Son, and all the [attributes] of the Son belong to the Father, since the Son remains wholly in the Father and contains the Father wholly in Himself" (*EpPet* 8). The preposition "in" is used in Scripture for the relationship between the Father and the Son, but this is not extended to the Spirit: the Father and the Son are not "in" the Spirit nor the Spirit "in" the Father or Son; the Spirit is rather "in" us, or we are "in" the Spirit, enabled in this way to call Jesus Lord and call God our Father (cf. Rom. 8:9–17; Gal. 4:6, etc).

And as such, Gregory concludes: "the Son's hypostasis becomes the shape, as it were, and *prosopon* (οἰοεὶ μορφή καὶ πρόσωπον) of the knowledge of the Father, and the hypostasis of the Father is made known in the form (μορφῆ) of the Son, while their particular [properties] abides in each to serve as a clear differentiation of the hypostases" (*EpPet* 8). There is only one *prosopon*, one face, upon which we can gaze, but doing so with the Spirit dwelling in us we look upon Christ, the image of the invisible God, and see the Father. Gregory can even assert elsewhere, that in the case of the Trinity, unlike human individuals, there is only "one *prosopon*," for we do not see the Father as a separate *prosopon* apart from, or in distinction to, the *prosopon* of the Son or the Spirit.²⁰ There is only one "form" or "figure," one *prosopon* in which God is contemplated, that of Jesus Christ, known by the Spirit to be the Son of the

¹⁹ L. Turcescu takes this passage otherwise, arguing that Gregory "intends to speak of a 'communion' between persons here and not a 'community' of substance." "The Concept of Divine Persons in Gregory of Nyssa's *To His Brother Peter, on the Difference between Ousia and Hypostasis*," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42, nos. 1–2 (1997): 78. Turcescu would differentiate between the invariable "nature" and the "certain continuous and uninterrupted communion," applying the latter phrase to the three persons rather than the nature. Yet Gregory's position is that divine nature does not exist in the abstract, but only in the three persons, and that in them we behold no variation in nature, but "a certain continuous and uninterrupted communion," a continuity which is qualified ("a certain") because it pertains only to their natural properties rather than their particular hypostatic expression of that nature. Thus Gregory can also use the expression "communion according to nature (κοινωνία κατὰ τὴν φύσιν)" to express the relationship between wine and the vine from which it is produced, as an analogy for the begetting of the Son, for "there is no difference between the moisture that exists in the vine and the wine that is produced from it" (*Against Eunomius* 3.1; GNO 1.2, 36); there is clearly no "personal" dimension involved in the "communion" spoken of by this analogy. This point is also noted by George C. Stead (George C. Stead, "Why Not Three Gods? The Logic of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Doctrine," in Hubertus R. Drobner and Christoph Klock eds., *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen Spätantike*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 12 [Leiden: Brill, 1990], 158), who comments that the term κοινωνία "stands for the 'common ownership' of these attributes, rather than a more distinctly social 'fellowship' which might be paralleled by human society at its best." Stead, however, assumes that Gregory does subscribe to a social trinitarian theology, and consequently regards him as being incoherent: "Underlying Gregory's confusion is the thought that ideal humanity, the human race at its best, would provide an analogy for the Holy Trinity" (*ibid.*, 160). Cf. Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis or Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81 (Winter 2000): 432–45.

²⁰ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *To the Greeks, On Common Notions* (GNO 3.1), 47: "All the *prosopa* of man [i.e. humanity] (τὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πρόσωπα) do not have their being directly from the same person, but some from one and others from another; as regarding the caused, the causes are many and diverse. But with regard to the Holy Trinity, this is not so: for there is one and the same *prosopon* (ἓν γὰρ πρόσωπον καὶ τὸ αὐτό), that of the Father, from whom the Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds. Therefore we properly and confidently say that the one cause, together with his caused, is one God (τὸν ἓνα αἴτιον μετὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ αἰτιατῶν ἓνα θεόν φάμεν), since he exists together with them."

Father. The one “God over all” is thus the Father, made known through the Son and the Spirit, with whom he eternally exists and without whom he is never contemplated.

If this is the scriptural and theological grammar that lies behind and reflects upon the first article of the Nicene Creed, then it seems my son was right, at least in understanding the Nicene Creed: there is not One God the Trinity, but One God Father Almighty, the one God, whose name is Father, Father of his Son, the Son of God (not God the Son), and the one from whom the Spirit originates, proceeding “from the Father” (John 15:26) and so always in relation to the Son. There is one divinity, which is beheld invariably in each. And there is the oneness in which they exist, such that there is only one *prosopon*, one image or form of the invisible God. These are three distinct categories (one God, one divinity, oneness), the confusion of which only serves to confuse!

So, to return to the article that is the subject of this essay: “One God Father Almighty.” There is an order and sequence here: the name “Father” is older (that is, logically prior) to the title “Almighty,” for the God who is identified as the Father of Christ, the Son of God, is almighty through his creative work through his Son, the Word by whom, and the Wisdom in whom, all things are made, sharing the title “Almighty” with the Son and exercising his omnipotence through the weakness of the cross such that all things are, in the end, brought into subjection to Christ as his creation, in which God will indeed be “all in all.” The implicit logic in this all-too-familiar phrase – One God Father Almighty – maintains a very precise way of naming God, as Father, and for understanding the omnipotence of the Almighty, and creation itself, that is eschatologically oriented rather than protologically. The ways in which words are used, of course, morph over time, and indeed even in the next century with Augustine.²¹ How we think words work also changes in different philosophical climates. And as Gregory the Theologian put it, our struggle is not so much about words, but about realities. Yet, as long as we confess that Jesus is the Son of God (not God the Son), we are committed to saying that the God over all is Father, that the very name of God is “Father.”

²¹ See John Behr, “Calling upon God as Father: Augustine and the Legacy of Nicaea,” in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, eds. Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 153–65.