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On trusting God: The Nicene Creed's opening sentence

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This research explores the meaning of the first article of the Nicene Creed ('We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible') in an attempt to interpret each word and phrase within the Creed's historical context. It then highlights the abiding relevance of this article in light of contemporary challenges, examining how the Creed continues to provide theological orientation in a culture that questions belief in one God, critiques the traditional divine attributes of fatherhood and almightiness, and faces the ecological consequences of neglecting (the non-human parts of) God's creation.

Contribution: This research argues, in particular, that the Creed portrays God as the one in whom humans can place unconditional trust.

Keywords: Nicene Creed; religious trust; monotheism; fatherhood of God; divine almightiness; omnipotence; doctrine of creation.

Introduction

The Nicene Creed is best known for its Christology. Its confession of Jesus Christ as 'eternally begotten from the Father, God from God […], begotten, not made' (partly) resolved debates that had long divided the church and charted a way forward throughout the centuries to this day. Indeed, there is no doubt that the Christological clause forms the Creed's centre of gravity. Yet the first clause of the Creed is likewise of great significance. The Dutch theologian Noordmans (1934:17–18) once compared the Creed to a bird: although its body, containing all vital organs, lies at the centre, it can only fly by means of its two wings.[1] Naturally, these wings are intricately and organically connected to the body. In this light, the present chapter focuses on the first of the Creed's three articles, while keeping the others in view. Given their triadic structure, it is indeed most appropriate to divide both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed into three articles or clauses, rather than to split them artificially into 12 (as do e.g. Pelikan 2003:541 and Van Ruler 2015; for contrary arguments, see Sarot 2024:17–21).

When speaking of the Nicene Creed (AD 325), it is necessary to distinguish it from the later and more familiar Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381). The latter is often, somewhat confusingly, referred to as the Nicene Creed, although it is in fact an expanded version of it.[2] The most striking differences between the two documents appear in the third article. When the first articles are compared, there is only one difference: the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed adds the words 'of heaven and earth' between the Nicene Creed's words 'Maker' and 'of all things visible and invisible'. This phrase was borrowed from the Creed of Jerusalem (AD 351), presumably to insert a more explicitly biblical expression alongside the more philosophically coloured 'of all things visible and invisible' (Kinzig 2024:368). This point will be discussed further below.

As this collection of articles commemorates the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed, the following discussion will focus on the 'original' Nicene Creed, that is, the shorter version of the first article. The opening clause of this Creed comprises a single sentence: 'We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things [*both*] visible and invisible' (Edwards 2021:156; Kelly 1972:215; Kinzig 2024:246–247).[3] Scholars have sought to trace this line to its earliest antecedent

1.Speaking of the Apostles' Creed, Noordmans (1934:17–18) observes that '(…) much more is being said about Jesus than about the Father and the Holy Spirit. There is no pure proportionality in the treatment. In the revelation of Jesus Christ we see the descending, the coming, the suffering. This is the real body of revelation and proclamation. In comparison to this, the confession of the Father and the Holy Spirit (…) are the wings, ranging from wall to wall, from creation to consummation, while in the midst the descendance of the Son is seen' [*author's translation*].

2.The relationship between these two creeds is more complicated than this – but it will not be discussed here (see for more on this, e.g. Kelly 1972:301–305; Kinzig 2024:363–378, esp. 378).

3.It is important to realise that the original Greek did not use capital letters for 'Father', 'Almighty', and 'Maker'. As to the Greek text, all three sources place commas after each of the words 'God', 'father', and 'almighty', and it seems these commas are original (Kelly 1972:298).

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 years: Reflections on doctrine, confession, and ecumenism', under the expert guidance of guest editors Nico Vorster, Sarel van der Walt and Nadia Marais.

and suggest that it may derive from a *regula fidei* (a 'rule of faith', i.e., an early unofficial confessional formula) containing the phrase 'I believe in one God almighty' (Kinzig 2024:253).

However that may be, in the formulation of the Nicene Creed four epithets are attributed to God: God is (1) one; (2) Father; (3) almighty; and (4) Maker of all things visible and invisible. In what follows, each of these epithets will, in turn, be examined by illuminating their meaning against the Creed's historical background. What exactly did the authors of the Creed intend by these phrases, and against which backgrounds were they formulated (§3–6)? Next, the article's continuing relevance will be explored, especially in relation to some urgent contemporary challenges (§7). First, however, it is important not to overlook the Creed's opening words (§2).

The Creed as a communal confession of trust

It is interesting that, in its original Greek form, the Nicene Creed begins with a personal pronoun in the first-person plural: 'We believe'. By contrast, the Apostles' Creed opens with 'I believe'. This difference is readily explained by their respective origins. The Apostles' Creed began as a baptismal confession, intended to be memorised by individual baptizands – each declaring, 'I believe'. The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, was the collective product of a gathering of some 250–300 bishops at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325). Although each bishop had to sign the text, it is clear why the first-person plural form was chosen: in this Creed, it is the entire church that confesses its faith.

In later credal texts, this difference has been assimilated at the expense of the communal formulation. For example, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381 – arguably the most ecumenical and influential of all Christian creeds – begins, like the Apostles' Creed, with 'I believe', at least in the Latin version that came to be used in the West. It remains important, however, to recognise that both varieties have been bequeathed to us by the early church. On the one hand, confessing the faith and believing in God is profoundly personal. Believing in God is not a matter of mere imitation but a heartfelt act of personal commitment to the triune God. On the other hand, such faith is never lived out in splendid isolation; it always unfolds within communal and, more specifically, ecclesial structures. One's personal faith awakens and matures only within the community of believers, that is, the church; and when individual faith sometimes falters, the surrounding community sustains it, even believing and worshipping, for a time, on one's behalf (cf. Mk 2:5).

The communal nature of the Creed carries another implication. It reminds us that faith is not a matter of private invention. Within the church, we do not confess our own beliefs, irrespective of others. Rather, the 'we' of the Creed implies a shared orientation: we look in the same direction and hold one another accountable in doing so. Fellow Christians may trust that we are on the same page when it comes to the core of the Christian faith as expressed in the Creed. As Williams (2007:8) observes, the plural form reveals why one can rely on one another within the Christian community, for 'it sets out what Christians can expect each other to take for granted'; they all work 'with the same hope and the same assumptions'.

While modern thinking tends to interpret 'believing in x' propositionally, that is, as asserting that x exists (e.g. believing that unidentified flying objects [UFOs] exist), the Greek word for 'believe' goes beyond this, expressing an act of trust. In John 9:35, when Jesus, using the same verb found in the Creed, asks the man whom he healed of blindness whether he 'believes' in the Son of Man, Jesus is not inquiring whether the man acknowledges the existence of such a figure, but whether he 'is ready to *trust* the Son of Man, that is, Jesus' (Williams 2007:5 [*italics original*]; cf. Morgan 2022 for the crucial role of trust in the New Testament at large). Likewise, the Creed primarily speaks the language of trust: in whom do we ultimately place our trust? Who is the one who enables us to live without cynicism or scepticism, but trustful? Thus, the opening words of the Creed suggest that believing in God is not merely a matter of acknowledging that the universe contains a mysterious, triune being alongside the habitual things everyone can see. Rather, it opens 'a series of statements about where I find the anchorage of my life, where I find solid ground, home' (Williams 2007:6).

From this anchorage we are inspired to act in harmony with what we confess, that is, in accordance with the Creed's affirmation of God's surprising and saving love in Jesus Christ. It is therefore mistaken to complain that three centuries after the Sermon on the Mount 'when the Nicene Creed became the official oath of Christendom, there was not a single word in it about what to do, only words about what to believe' (Myers 2009:14). For what we do and believe is inseparably connected (even if imperfectly so), both being grounded in the One in whom we trust.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that the Creed uses the word 'in' to describe the relationship between the believer and God (Van Ruler 2015:9–12).[4] It does not say 'we believe God', or 'we believe that God exists', but 'we believe in God'. In this context, this 'in' is profoundly relational. It suggests communication and communion between the believer and God, and even the believer's commitment to God as in a marriage vow (Sarot 2024:12–13).

But who is this God? Let us now consider how the Creed proceeds to identify God.

Believing in one God

In the Nicene Creed, God is first and foremost confessed as one – or, rather, it is affirmed that there is only one God. Unlike the Apostles' Creed, which lacks a numerical qualifier, the Nicene Creed explicitly includes it, and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed has preserved it.[5] In doing so, it

4.It is typical of Van Ruler (2015) that he has separate small chapters on almost every single word of the Creed, including small words like 'in' and 'and'.

5.Interestingly, this runs parallel to the article on the church, where the Nicene Creed also has the numeric indicator 'one' which we do not find in the Apostles' Creed.

immediately affirms that Christianity is a monotheistic religion. By its belief in the one God, early Christianity not only distinguished itself from pagan polytheism but also rejected dualistic worldviews such as those of Marcionism and Gnosticism (Kelly 1977:87; see further below). More specifically, in confessing God as one, the church aligned itself with the faith of Israel as witnessed in the Hebrew Bible: 'O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, (…), you are God, you alone' (Is 37:16 – NRSV). Although the Council of Nicaea has often been accused of fostering anti-Judaist sentiments, especially in its decision to separate the celebration of Easter from the Jewish Passover (cf. Gosker 2025), in the first article of its Creed it unreservedly identifies with the religion of the Jews. At the same time, it resonates with developments within the Hellenistic world – especially among intellectual elites – where traditional cosmogonic myths with their multitude of deities and demi-gods were being replaced by belief in a single divine being. Let us now explore both connections in a little more detail.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that the Nicene Creed *begins* with the confession of the one God. It does not open with a confession of Jesus, nor with the message of the gospel. Of course, these affirmations soon follow; yet the distinctive particularity of the gospel is preceded by the church's confession of Israel's God. The word 'one', in particular, safeguards the indissoluble link of Christianity with the Hebrew Bible. The famous words of Deuteronomy 6:5 – the primordial creed of Judaism – find resonance in the first article: 'Listen Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One' (HCSB). Endorsing this core confession of Judaism and thereby affirming the Old Testament as its multifaceted elaboration, is not a later addition for a Christian but a starting point. As Barr (1966:149) once observed: 'In so far as a position is Christian, it is related to the Old Testament from the beginning.' It could hardly be otherwise, because Jesus himself consistently directed attention to God and to God's kingdom as they figure in the Hebrew Bible – and in doing so, at times, even pointed away from himself (Lk 18:19). Yet throughout history this truth has often been neglected or distorted – most blatantly among the *Deutsche Christen* in the 20th century.

Secondly, the Creed's emphasis on the oneness of God also served as a common denominator with the Greco-Roman intellectual world of the time. As Moltmann (1981) argued:

> [*F*]rom the time of the Christian apologists onwards, Christians won over the educated in the Roman Empire by proclaiming the One God: 'ΕΙΣ ΘΕΟΣ'. It was the acceptance of philosophical monotheism and the idea of the universal monarchy of the one God that made Christianity a 'world religion'. (p. 130)

Moltmann goes on to point out that the doctrine of the Trinity did not leave this common notion of the one God untouched, but in fact Christianised it. From a Christian perspective, God can no longer be understood apart from Jesus Christ (Moltmann 1981:132), who, as the Nicene Creed declares, is equally God with the Father. Yet this new way of understanding God did not imply that Nicene Christianity abandoned monotheism, as Moltmann (1981:129–150) suggests.[6] Rather, it conceived of itself as a *specific form* of monotheism (Schwöbel 2001). Both Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament presuppose a concept of monotheism sufficiently nuanced and differentiated to encapsulate multiple identities ('hypostases') within the one divine being. Thus, while Christians may articulate the threeness of God in strongly relational or social terms, the Creed does not permit them to set their trinitarianism in opposition to monotheism – for, as it emphatically states, 'we believe in one God' (cf. Van den Brink 2014:348).

This one God is then further identified by three predicates: Father, Almighty, and Maker of all things visible and invisible. What do these phrases mean, and how are they related to one another? Let us examine each of them in turn.

Father

Although not without meaning, the term 'God' remains somewhat vague and indefinite. To believe in God can signify vastly different things: it may be understood in terms of pantheism, deism, or Anselmian *perfect being theology*, among others. It may even carry little significance for everyday life – much as believing in the existence of the planet Jupiter means little to most people. It is therefore understandable that the Creed does not leave matters at this simple confession but provides further clarification of who this God is. The first addition is 'Father'. By calling God 'Father', God is given a face (Van Ruler 2015:17), becoming personal and relational. Regardless of how mixed our experiences with our biological fathers may be, we can relate to a father – and most fathers do, indeed, relate to their children.

How, then, is this reference to God as Father to be understood? Two possibilities present themselves, and the difference between them is theologically more significant than is often recognised. When the Creed adds 'the Father' to its confession of God, does this mean that the one God of Israel and Creator of the universe is compared to a father? Or does the Creed at once reveal its trinitarian character by distinguishing God as Father, Son, and Spirit, so that the first Person of the Trinity is here designated as Father?[7] In other words, is God confessed as the Father of the eternal Son, or as the father of the entire universe, including all humankind?

There is merit in both interpretations. Given that many early Christian confessions arose from baptismal interrogations, it seems plausible that the Nicene Creed refers here to the first Person of the Trinity when speaking of 'God the Father'. As Matthew 28:20 shows, the structure of baptismal formulae was already (proto-)trinitarian early on. Indeed, later Christian sermons and commentaries on the Creeds

6.Compare section V 1: 'A Criticism of Christian Monotheism' of this publication.

7.Here lies the relevance of reading a book on the Creed: every time when we hear or sing the Creed in the liturgy, we are confronted with this underlying ambivalence – something we may only notice in our more attentive moments. Usually, however, there is little opportunity to pause and reflect, because the reading or singing immediately continues and the next part of the liturgy begins. Yet it remains vital to understand what one confesses in and with the church.

understood 'Father' as naming the first Person of the Trinity (Kelly 1972:134).[8] Turning this into an anti-Judaist argument, Cyril of Jerusalem writes in his *Catechetical Lectures* (ca. 350): 'By adding "in one God, Father", we combat the Jews who deny the Only-begotten Son of God' (VII, 4–5).

Indeed, such interpretations are found mainly in *later* commentaries, written after the trinitarian dogma had become firmly established in the church (i.e. by the end of the 4th century). Earlier commentaries, by contrast, generally display the alternative interpretation. To be sure, the distinction was not a rigid binary. For example, the 2nd-century text known as *2 Clement* contains multiple references to God as the Father of all Christians, while, in the same period, Ignatius often understood God's Fatherhood as referring to Jesus as the Son of God. Yet J.N.D. Kelly (1972:135–136) makes it clear that, at the time of the Creed's formation, the term 'father' referred above all to 'God in His capacity as Father and creator of the universe'. According to him, this was the predominant – although not the exclusive – meaning of the term in 2nd-century Christianity. It therefore was most likely the primary sense intended by the framers of the Creed. In that case, their statement was hardly controversial, as the belief in God's universal fatherhood was shared both by contemporary Hellenistic Jews, such as Philo, and by 'enlightened religious people generally' (Kelly 1972:136). Within this socio-cultural milieu, many agreed that God was Father in the sense of being the source and origin of all human beings and of the entire universe.

The word 'father' in the sense of *maker* or *creator* also occurs frequently in Scripture. In the Old Testament, Isaiah 64:8 ('O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay'; cf. Is 63:16) provides a striking example, as do Job 38:28 and Malachi 2:10. In the New Testament, one may think of 1 Corinthians 8:6: '[…] for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist', as well as a non-Pauline text such as James 1:17 (see Seitz 2001:18 for some of these references). Above all, however, we are reminded of the poignant and consistent way in which Jesus addressed God as father and invited his followers to do likewise. In all these instances, the term alludes to the act of bringing into existence and to the care that is characteristic of a father.

In this light, it is noteworthy that the phrase 'Creator of heaven and earth' was added to the Apostles' Creed only at a relatively late stage, as its earlier forms lacked it. Presumably, it was only when the connotation of 'Father' shifted from 'maker of all things' to 'Father of the eternal Son' that 'an awkward gap in its teaching' (Kelly 1972:374) was perceived. This gap was subsequently closed by adding an explicit affirmation of God's creatorship (Sarot 2024:39, referring to Westra 2002:222–225) – a statement that also found its way into the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381).

8.Kelly (1972:101) is speaking of the Roman Creed here, an ancient (late 2nd or 3rd century) precursor of the Apostles' Creed. However, given the similarity of expressions (which is especially clear in the wording of the first article), the Roman Creed arguably influenced formulations in the Eastern creeds.

Almighty

In the Nicene Creed (as in the Apostles' Creed), the Greek word behind 'almighty' is *pantokrator*. This term appears more than 150 times in the Septuagint – the standard Greek translation of the Old Testament – rendering two common Hebrew phrases: *'el shaddai* (traditionally translated into English as 'God Almighty'; e.g. Gn 17:1) and *yhwh tseva'ot* (Lord of hosts). In the New Testament, *pantokrator* occurs only nine times, mostly in liturgical contexts in the book of Revelation (cf. Ortiz & Keating 2024:49). Nowhere in the Bible is the term found in close association with the word 'Father', nor does the phrase 'Father Almighty' appear in pre-Nicene patristic literature. This suggests that their juxtaposition in the various creeds was intentional, and that they should therefore be interpreted in relation to one another (Holland 1973:264; contra Kelly 1972:132 and Sarot 2024:35–36; but cf. Sarot's excursus on 37–39).

This insight, together with what emerged in the previous section about the original meaning of the term 'Father' in the Creed, has led interpreters to a clear understanding of what was meant by *pantokrator*. Whereas 'Father' referred to God as the Maker and Creator of the cosmos, 'Almighty' complemented this by designating God's ongoing upholding and governance of the universe. Indeed, in many patristic texts *pantokrator* carries precisely this sense of 'all-ruling' or 'all-encompassing' (Kelly 1972:137; Van den Brink 1993:52–53). It is therefore important to note that the term was not initially synonymous with the Latin *omnipotens*, which expressed a capacity ('being able to do everything') rather than an activity. Instead, just like 'Father', *pantokrator* pointed to an ongoing divine action: 'sustaining and governing everything' (cf. Van den Brink 1993:55–57). To put this in later doctrinal terms, *pantokrator* referred to God's providential work in sustaining, upholding, and guiding the universe. Consequently, to confess God as 'the Father Almighty' expressed the church's faith in God's powerful and continuing care for what God had created. In this light, the Creed's uniting of the terms 'Father' and 'almighty' in one phrase makes perfect sense.[9]

It is often asked why, out of all God's many attributes – love, justice, holiness, omniscience, and so on – only one, namely omnipotence, is mentioned in the Creed. Yet, as we now see, this was not in fact the case: 'almighty' does not refer to an attribute but to an activity of God. This changed only later, when in the West *pantokrator* was rendered in Latin as *omnipotens* (Kelly 1972:372). This translation was not incorrect, as *omnipotens* indeed meant something akin to 'ruling over all things' (which is also the literal meaning of *pantokrator*). By Augustine's time, however, the word had come to be understood more literally as 'being able to do all things'. While this notion was indeed latent in *omnipotens*, it was not what the makers of the Creed had intended;

9.When the Arians denied that the title *pantokrator* belonged to the Son as well as to the Father, Athanasius started to highlight the universal dominion of Jesus, arguing from texts like Matthew 28:18, Revelations 1:8, et cetera, that Jesus as well is *pantokrator*. Subsequently, this view became a hallmark of orthodoxy, even to such an extent that the Son ended up as the primary bearer of the title in byzantine iconography (see Van den Brink 1993:59).

otherwise, they would have used the Greek *pantodynamos*. Over time, therefore, the idea of God's almightiness became detached from its reference to God's concrete acts of creation and preservation and generalised into a concept of God's unlimited power. Augustine was aware of this development, but regarded the new understanding of omnipotence as a welcome enrichment: 'But who is omnipotent, than He who can do all things!' (Augustine 1968:197; *De Trinitate* IV 20, 27).

At this point, theologians – Augustine seemingly the first among them – were confronted with the well-known conceptual paradoxes raised by the notion of divine omnipotence, beginning with the biblical affirmation that there are several things God *cannot* do, such as lie or deny himself (Kelly 1972:138–139), and culminating in the medieval riddles asking whether God could create a stone so heavy that God could not lift it. This is not to suggest that this way of interpreting divine omnipotence was a later intrusion into Christian thought; Christian discourse about God's power had been varied from the beginning. Yet the fact that a more general philosophical analysis (in terms of the capacity to do all things logically possible and consistent with God's nature) gradually took precedence over the original interpretation centred on God's providential care for creation had an impact on the nature of Christian spirituality. The notion of God's almightiness became severed from God's fatherly care and absolutised, so that, in the medieval period, it even provoked anxiety that God's power might override God's goodness, rendering God untrustworthy.

Maker of all things

As noted earlier, the Nicene Creed did not yet include a reference to God as Maker or Creator of heaven and earth. This phrase would only appear later in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which adopted it from one or more earlier credal texts.[10] What was already present in the Nicene Creed, however, and retained in the later Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, was a reference to God as the 'Maker of all things visible and invisible'. This expression had been integral to almost all Eastern creeds and also reflected the Christian faith of the Western church, as evidenced by the eventual inclusion of 'Creator of heaven and earth' in the Apostles' Creed.

Belief in God as the Creator of the universe is consistently affirmed in both Eastern and Western patristic sources. It has often been proposed that credal statements summarising this belief were formulated for polemical reasons – namely to clearly demarcate the church's belief over against Gnosticism and Marcionism (cf. for example Coetzee 2008; Ortlund 2025:ch. 3). Yet there is scant evidence to support this view. It is far more plausible that these affirmations appear in the creeds simply because they expressed what it means and had always meant to be a Christian.

10.Kelly (1972:303) deems the difference between the Nicene Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed at this point 'of little or no significance'. It might be observed, though, that the phrase 'of heaven and earth' firmly grounds the more philosophical formulation in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament, in particular, abounds in references to God as the Maker and Creator of all that exists. As we have seen, the church understood itself as firmly rooted in the Old Testament. It did not regard its relation to the Old Testament as a problem to be solved; rather, the Old Testament was its point of departure. The challenge was not to reconcile the Old Testament with the gospel, but the reverse – to align faith in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit with the Old Testament's confession of the almighty Creator of heaven and earth (Childs 1992:226).[11] This explains why the vast majority of the creeds begin with a straightforward declaration concerning the one God of Israel as the Maker of heaven and earth.

Meanwhile, the formulation 'of all things visible and invisible' is intriguing, as it resonates with – if not directly quotes – Colossians 1:16. In this text, the invisible things are specified as 'thrones or dominions or rulers or powers'. Kinzig (2024:621) captures the consensus in observing that the invisible things refer to 'angels and spirits'. The phrase thus reflects an openness here to realities beyond what the eye can see – to the spiritual world – which was a reality to the early Christians as much as it was to many of their contemporaries. The early Christians inhabited what has often been described as an 'enchanted world'. They were aware of creation's invisible dimension, which goes beyond human comprehension. As Williams (2007) comments:

> The phrase is a helpful reminder that creation is more than we get our minds around. […] The world is not simply what we can manage and use for ourselves; there are unfathomable dimensions to it, hidden realities, hidden connections […]. Things in the universe exist in relation to the Creator before they exist in relation to us, so that a degree of reverence and humility is appropriate when we approach anything in the created order. (pp. 49–50)

In particular, Williams (2007:51) highlights the Christian teaching about angels in this regard – mysterious beings that 'belong to a different order' and can 'be at least a powerful symbol for all those dimensions of the universe about which we have no real idea'.

The reference to God as Maker of all *visible* things is equally significant. Although, as we have seen, this phrase need not be read as a polemical response to either Gnosticism or Marcionism; it stands in sharp contrast to the dualism characteristic of these worldviews. The Creed arose and functioned within a cultural environment in which such dualist alternatives held strong appeal. Dualist cosmologies denied that all that exists was created by one almighty God. Instead, they claimed that the lower, namely the material parts of the universe were produced at best by a lesser, imperfect demi-god, or at worst, by a hostile spiritual power. Thus, the visible realm in particular, being subject to frailty, suffering, decay, and death, was thought to derive from a being other than the good God who had sent Jesus Christ into the world. It is easy to see why such rival systems

11.Childs is drawing on the work of German patristic scholar Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen here.

attracted followers: if the God who sent Jesus into the world had not created the material universe, then this God could not be held responsible for suffering and evil. By dividing the responsibility for creation among different divine powers, the thorny problem of theodicy was disentangled in an unambiguous way.

Yet the church resisted this tempting simplification for two principal reasons. Firstly, it was neither willing nor able to renounce its roots in the Old Testament, for it was the God of the Old Testament whom Jesus worshipped and proclaimed as his, and our, Father. As we have already noted, the Old Testament unequivocally affirms this God as the sole Maker of heaven and earth. Secondly, the dualist solutions proposed by Gnosticism and Marcionism carried a heavy price – as dualist cosmologies always do. If God did not create the entire universe but was in some way dependent on other divine forces, how could believers place their full trust in this God? Ultimately, one could never be sure whether such a God was truly able to save us, or merely another victim of the way things go. Thus, the reliability of the gospel itself required the doctrines of divine creation and almightiness to stand firm. With a minimum of words, the first article of the Nicene Creed articulates this deep-seated Christian conviction clearly and unambiguously.

These reflections lead almost naturally to a consideration of the contemporary relevance of the universal church's belief in this 'one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things both visible and invisible'.

Contemporary challenges and abiding relevance

The relevance of the Nicene Creed's confession of God can be brought to light in various ways, each shaped by one's personal and cultural situatedness. As it is impossible to be exhaustive, a selection must be made. In what follows, the focus will be on four ways in which this confession is challenged by patterns of thought that have emerged in the modern West. Firstly, belief in God is no longer self-evident within the post-secular Western context. Secondly, even where faith in God remains a live option, many find it difficult to speak of this God as Father, as the Creed does. Thirdly, the addition of the word 'almighty' seems to heighten the difficulty, raising yet another set of problems. Fourthly, and finally, to confess God as Maker of all things poses its own challenge, because it calls for a lifestyle that is at odds with late-modern Western consumerism.

Belief in God

Earlier on we characterised the Nicene Creed as a 'communal confession of trust' and emphasised that it is not primarily about endorsing a set of propositional statements, but about trust. This is what is implied in the opening words 'we believe'. Christian faith is a profoundly relational 'love affair' with God (Brümmer 2008:142). Yet this cannot be set in opposition to believe in God's existence, for it is impossible to trust and love a God whose existence one denies. The statement 'We believe in one God' therefore also carries propositional content: it claims this one God truly exists (cf. Sarot 2024:33–34).

Today, however, we live in an age of 'buffered selves' (Taylor 2007:37–42 and passim), in which many people are insulated from any living awareness of the divine. And to the extent that there remains some openness to a transcendent realm, many prefer to allude to it in vague and impersonal terms. In their estimation, the word 'God' – whose capitalisation implies a proper name – seems too definite and concrete. There must be something more than we can see, but 'I'd rather not call it "God"', is what one can often hear in Western societies. Theologians have, of course, proposed alternative terms, such as the 'Ground of Being' or the 'Eternal', while philosophers prefer concepts like the 'Absolute' or the 'highest Good'. Christians can indeed learn from these qualms and reservations when it comes to confessing God. To some extent, they represent a legitimate reaction against naïvely crude and anthropomorphic depictions of God, for example that of the old man with a white beard, or the one who distributes cancer cells. Although such portrayals are, of course, caricatures, it is important to realise that God should not and cannot be domesticated in any way. God transcends all our modes of understanding, for *Deus semper maior* – God is always greater.

Yet such considerations have not prevented the church from affirming its belief in a personal God without shyness or reticence. In doing so, the first Christians adopted an outspoken worldview that was by no means universally shared. In a world where many deities vied for acceptance (cf. Ac 17), proclaiming faith in one God was a counter-cultural act. And yet, as we have seen, Christians were not alone in their monotheism: both Jews and enlightened Hellenistic Greeks did the same. Today the situation is strikingly similar. It remains deeply counter-cultural – in fact, in many Western contexts it requires a 'coming out' – to confess belief in God. Many Westerners even assume that science or philosophy has proven God's non-existence. This is by no means the case, but it illustrates how the boldness embodied in the Nicene Creed remains as pertinent as back then for those who profess faith in a personal God.

At the same time, Christians are not the only ones who make such a confession, for they share belief in God as almighty Father and Creator with both Jews and Muslims. To be sure, profound differences divide these traditions, as will become clear in the Creed's second article. Yet in this chapter we have sought to recover the original meaning of the first article and have found that, initially, 'Father' did not yet designate the first Person of the Trinity. Rather, it functioned as a biblical root metaphor for the one God – a metaphor honouring God as the source of all finite beings and of humanity in particular. While Christians part company here with their agnostic, atheistic, and 'spiritual' contemporaries, they share a sense of awe and reverence for God with other monotheistic believers. In an age of intensifying global

polarisation, this shared ground should not be dismissed but rather cherished – just as Paul in Acts 17, and the early Christian creeds began their confession by recognising the overlap of their beliefs with those of other monotheists.

The Father?

Calling God 'Father' is by no means as self-evident today as it was in the 4th century. Should we continue to prioritise this appellation, or should it now be regarded as one metaphor among many others – and presumably not even the most fitting one, especially for those who have mixed experiences with their biological fathers? More generally, if we refer to God exclusively in masculine terms such as 'Father' and 'Son', does this not make it difficult for women to relate to God in meaningful ways? This concern is reinforced by the discovery that theological language is never 'innocent' (Soskice 1985:62–63). If God is spoken of solely in male metaphors and images, it becomes almost inevitable that male and God become conflated in the imagination, thereby lending implicit support to male domination. In this respect, feminist theologians have illuminated how male-centred God-talk has often been intertwined with patterns of sexism, patriarchy, and the subordination of women – both within and beyond the Christian tradition.

Various responses have been offered to this complex issue (cf. for example Kärkkäinen 2007:194–198). Some argue that these phenomena are examples of unfortunate and sinful abuses of Christian God-talk, which do not rule out its proper use. Thus, we should retain the traditional terminology (Father, Son, etc.), as it has been revealed to us in the Bible and faithfully interpreted in the Christian tradition as an appropriate way of speaking about God. At the same time, however, we must insist that such language in no way legitimises oppression or discrimination against women.

Others, however, maintain that this strategy is inadequate and risks perpetuating the very problems it seeks to address. They therefore propose that we acknowledge the traditional terms as metaphors rather than literal descriptions, and that they may legitimately be augmented or – more radically – replaced by alternative expressions, whether feminine or gender-neutral: 'Mother', 'Parent', 'Friend', 'Creator', 'Source', or 'Ground of Being' and others.

What we have seen above, however, points towards a *middle way* between these two positions. When the Nicene Creed was composed, the term 'Father' referred to God as the Maker of the universe. In this sense, the term was clearly used metaphorically: it was drawn from the realm of human fatherhood and then, by singling out certain aspects of its ordinary meaning (particularly, 'being the source of someone' and 'taking proper care of someone') applied to God. Other aspects of the mundane meaning of 'father', such as being male, sexual, or embodied, were not extrapolated to God. Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that God transcends gender and sexual differentiation (cf. for example Geitz 1995:19; Sarot 2024:31). While the term 'father' undoubtedly retained links with the patriarchal structures of Israelite clans, its theological basis lay in its ability to express God's covenantal initiative and care for Israel (Pannenberg 1988:261–262).[12]

Moreover, the Bible employs a rich variety of metaphors and similes in its portrayal of God. Although God is never directly called 'Mother', female imagery is not eschewed in this connection. Commenting on Isaiah 49:15, Calvin observes that God 'did not satisfy himself with proposing the example of a father (…), but in order to express his very strong affection, he chose to liken himself to a mother' (Calvin n.d.:22). Given today's heightened awareness of the risks inherent in using exclusively male language for God, there may be sound reasons to foreground such female and gender-neutral depictions of God more consistently than has been done in the past.[13]

We have also seen, however, that the meaning of 'Father' in the Creed soon shifted towards a trinitarian connotation, with 'God the Father' now referring to the first Person of the Trinity. Historically, this development can be traced back to Jesus himself: 'On the lips of Jesus, "Father" became a proper name for God. It ceased to be simply one designation among others' (Pannenberg 1988:262). Indeed, it is remarkable that in the New Testament Jesus refers to God as 'Father' no less than 170 times, inviting his pupils and, through them, all subsequent believers to use this deeply personal name in their prayers (Sarot 2024:25–29). In this light, God is arguably called 'Father' in a non-metaphorical sense, which we indicate by capitalising the term. Consequently, the word applies only secondarily, and metaphorically, to human males who have children. As Paul writes: 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood (…) takes its name' (Eph 3:14–15).[14]

Thus, to discover what 'father' truly means, we must look to how God *acts* as Father. This has been illuminated by Jesus, for example in his parables – most supremely, perhaps, in the parable of the prodigal son (Muis 2021:139–140). Here notions of love, fidelity, care, and even intimacy occupy the centre stage of the meaning of 'father'. From this basic meaning, all human distortions of fatherhood – including the abuse and subjugation of women – should be exposed and condemned for what they are.

Given that God transcends all human understanding, it has been a challenge from the very beginning of Christianity to speak appropriately of the mystery of God. Our own guesses are insufficient, for we are utterly dependent on how God chooses to present himself to us. For Christians, the way in which Jesus discloses God as his, and our, Father remains irreplaceable. As DiNoia (1992) observes,

12.The risk that sexual connotations might be implied (like in polytheistic religions) even seems to explain the infrequency of the use of 'Father' for God in the Old Testament (Pannenberg 1988:261).

13.For many, this is also a reason to avoid using male personal pronouns for God.

14.Like other translations, NRSV reads 'family' instead of 'fatherhood', but this obscures the strong etymological connection between the Greek word (*patria*) and Father (*pater*).

> […] we know that the first person is the Father because the Son calls him by that name. […] This consideration supports a decisive case against the substitution of the name 'Mother' for 'Father' when speaking of the first person of the Trinity. (pp. 184–185)

The Nicene Creed reminds us of this in the almost self-evident way it refers to God as 'Father'. It then immediately expands upon the meaning of this true fatherhood by confessing that 'because of us humans and because of our salvation', moved by love and mercy, this God became human in the Son, Jesus Christ, who 'was crucified for us'.[15]

In a moving recent reflection, British theologian Durber (2023) – writing from within a church tradition often inclined to critique Nicaea – admits finding it difficult,

> to know what to say about the 'maleness' of Nicaea, in terms of both those who had a voice there [*all male*, GvdB] and the theological language they used of Father and Son. (p. 211)

Yet, having studied the Creed more closely, she suggests that before turning away from Nicaea, we should 'discern what of Christ is there' (Durber 2023:211). In my view, she strikes the heart of the matter. By doing so, we may discover how 'even those male bishops were attempting to do something countercultural and radical to challenge a Roman culture that was far from affirming of women (…) and that inspired a violent masculinity' (Durber 2023:212). In other words, the God confessed in the Creed is the God who brings salvation to women as well as to men.

Almighty?

In calling God the Father 'almighty', the Creed does not imply that this title applies exclusively to God the Father and not to the Son or the Spirit too. In fact, later theological reflection led to the opposite conclusion, namely that 'almighty' refers to all three persons of the Godhead, while it may be most fittingly 'appropriated' to the Father (Burnaby 1959:25–26). As we have already seen, the term 'almighty' (Greek: *pantokrator*) in the Creed originally referred to God's ongoing providential care for creation rather than to God's unrestricted power. While this distinction may alleviate contemporary concerns about the title, it certainly does not remove them entirely.

This may be illustrated by briefly engaging with a recent plea to jettison the doctrine of God's almightiness.[16] In 2023, ex-evangelical theologian Thomas Oord published a book in which he speaks bluntly against the notion of 'omnipotence'. By this term, Oord (2023:3) means both the idea that God exerts total control over all circumstances, as well as the belief that God can do absolutely everything. So, in terms of the distinction made above, he targets both the original sense of almightiness as God's all-ruling providence and the later interpretation of omnipotence as God's unlimited power to bring things about. According to Oord, omnipotence in all its forms should be considered obsolete: the notion should be 'dead to us', and its 'corpse' should be buried 'for good'. The time has even come 'to commit *dictiocide*: to kill "omnipotence"' (Oord 2023:74). Instead, Oord (2023:120) proposes that we should rather ascribe 'amipotence' to God – a neologism by which he 'wants to stress the priority of love over power in God'. In his view, to describe God as almighty negates human freedom and renders the problem of evil intractable, as an almighty God would then be directly responsible for all evil. As Oord puts it, an almighty God 'must *want* AIDS as punishment' (Oord 2023:102; [*italics original*]).

None of these conclusions follows (Van den Brink 2025:423).[17] Yet the point to be made here is that Oord is by no means the first to discover that affirming God's almightiness is far from obvious. Christians have recognised early on that this confession immediately provokes the question of God's responsibility for evil, and they have long wrestled with this issue. As we have seen, during the church's first centuries, it was tempting to adopt the Gnostic and Marcionite view that a God of love could not at the same time be the almighty Creator of a world so marred by evil and imperfection. Over against such claims, however, the church maintained that the loving Father of Jesus Christ is none other than the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Unfortunately, Oord does not explore the reasons behind this decision. As we have observed, they were twofold. Firstly, the church shared Israel's belief that God sovereignly brought about 'heaven and earth' and continues to exercise providential authority over them. As one of the earliest Christians expressed it, God 'has the power (…) to make all things subject to himself' (Phlp 3:21). Secondly, the church recognised that this issue carried profound existential significance. For if God were not almighty, it would make little sense to entrust one's life to God, because it would remain uncertain whether a God who is dependent on 'creaturely conditions' (Oord 2023:114) could ultimately save us. For the church, this was a price too high to pay, given the importance of God's trustworthiness.

Therefore, in the face of recurrent temptations to abandon the phrase, the church continued to affirm its faith in God as 'almighty Father'. As we have seen, these two words belong inseparably together. God is not *omnipotent* in an absolute context-free sense; rather, God is *almighty* precisely as our Father – the one in whom we may place unconditional trust, both in life and in the hour of death – as countless believers have done throughout the centuries. Even today, the Creed encourages us to follow their example.

Maker of all things?

Let us finally consider, albeit briefly, the contemporary relevance of the closing phrase of Nicene's first article:

15.See later chapters in this volume for further exploration of these lines.

16.In these paragraphs, some ideas from an earlier piece were adopted (Van den Brink 2025).

17.For example, Oord's understanding of divine power in relation to human freedom is conceptually confused, as it suggests that power operates as a zero-sum game – something it clearly does not. If I have the power to mow a lawn, that does not prevent others from having the same power. Likewise, if God possesses 'all power', this does not negate humans to still exercise real powers of their own. (Van den Brink 1993:122–124, 223).

'Maker of all things visible and invisible'. Much could be said about this statement, for it encapsulates the core of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation – a doctrine that has generated a host of ramifications over time. For example, it not only introduced in the world a fundamental distinction between Creator and creation, between God and world, but it also provided some crucial conceptual preconditions for the later rise of modern science.[18] Here, however, I will limit myself to two other ramifications that bear directly upon contemporary challenges.

Firstly, it is important to observe that the Creed declares *that* God made all things – or, as the later addition puts it, created heaven and earth. Like most other creeds, the Nicene Creed says nothing about *how* God did this. This silence may well reflect the fact that the *how* was not a contested issue at the time of composition. Yet, as we have seen, the Creed's content cannot be explained merely in terms of the polemical controversies of its day. The Creed's primary aim was to give voice in positive terms to the faith entrusted to the church. For Christians, therefore, it is fair to say that the 'that' of divine creation is far more important than the 'how'. Indeed, 'that' is a matter of confession; the 'how' is not.

This is not to say that the 'how' is unimportant. Rather, it means that Christians may have different views regarding the processes through which the universe and all that is in it came into being and the time it required. No single theory of origins can claim to represent the one and only Christian perspective. If they confess that God is the Creator of all things, young- and old-earth creationists, adherents of intelligent design, and theistic evolutionists may – and indeed should – mutually acknowledge one another as fellow Christians. Debates about the relationship between faith and science, especially regarding cosmic and human origins, are important and have definitely theological stakes. Yet they should not be used as a yardstick to determine 'who is in and who is out'. Realising this point would reduce a lot of heated intra-Christian debates on issues of cosmic and human origin to their proper proportions. As we have seen, belief in God as Creator of heaven and earth was far from uncontested in the era of the Creed, yet the church held fast to it with confidence. Today, the situation is similar: the conviction that God created the universe remains the distinctive belief that unites Christians amid their differences – and one that may still be proclaimed with confidence in an increasingly sceptical age.

Secondly, if God created the world, then the world must be fundamentally good and meaningful (cf. Van Ruler 2023). Therefore, it is worthy of protection. This may sound like a truism. Yet it is troubling how consistently Christians have downplayed this corollary of the Christian belief in God as Creator. Especially since the Industrial Revolution in the north-western world, Christians have contributed no less than others to the grave ecological degradation that we face today. Confessing God as Creator, however, is not a neutral or optional statement of belief; it carries direct implications for one's approach to the created world. For it clearly implies that we shall be engaged in proper care for creation, especially in an age when planetary boundaries are being exceeded, the planet's life-support systems are jeopardised, anthropogenic mass extinction of species continues, and the climate crisis causes profound and potentially irreversible ecological disruption. Clearly, not only angels but also these planetary boundaries and life-supporting earth systems belong to the wonderful 'invisible things' that God has created and that call forth our awe. To live the Nicene Creed – rather than merely recite it – therefore includes recovering the rightful place of the earth within God's economy (cf. for example Conradie 2015) and reorienting our priorities accordingly.

18.The seminal paper pointing this out is Foster (1934).

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