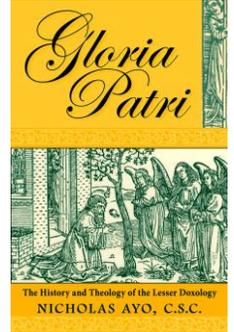


The Evolution of 'Gloria Patri'

The other day I had a brief, but spirited conversation with a church member on why – a couple of years ago – I had suggested changing the Gloria Patri to say “**Word** without end,” rather than the traditional “**world** without end.”

My justification at that time was that the Latin version of the Gloria that concludes with, “**forever and ever, amen**,” had somehow been mistranslated into English as, “**world without end**,” which I thought had dramatically changed the meaning of the prayer. Since this latest discussion ended with, “*well you don't change an author's words without permission*,” I promised to further research the history of the Gloria and if wrong to publicly eat crow. Today, here is my report and crow is definitely not on the menu. You may ask, where I got my information? Simple, I bought the book which you are now also welcome to read.



In summary the Gloria Patri is among the oldest prayers of the Christian faith, praising our Triune God; it has existed in many forms, in a multitude of languages ever since. But before going further, here are two bits of cautionary advice:

- First, that **prayer shapes theology as theology shapes prayer**, meaning that the words you say will shape what you believe. Thus it is a wise thing to think critically about all such phrases before committing them to memory.
- Second, that **when translating from a fixed language such as Latin, to an ever evolving language such as English, any effort in keeping close to the original meaning will require that you must constantly update your word choices**; which is one reason why we have so many translations of the English Bible. Thus with these two thoughts in mind, let's dive into the evolution of the Gloria Patri.

In its very earliest form this was a simple Greek prayer of praise

Glory be to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit

Which is a beautiful way of expressing the interworking of the Trinity, emphasizing both the redemptive role of Christ Jesus in our salvation, as well as the ongoing sanctification of the church by the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, *no one comes to the Father except through me* (John 14:6).

However, by 300 A.D. the church was being torn apart by the **Arian controversy**; a heresy that is still kept alive in Jehovah's Witness theology today. **The main argument being whether Jesus was always co-existent and co-equal with God the Father, or was simply God's first creation.** After two universal church councils concluded that the Bible authoritatively taught both the Son and the Holy Spirit were always co-existent and co-equal partners with the God the Father, Church leaders became quite argumentative over whether the Gloria Patri should be changed to express this theology more clearly (Nicea, 325a.d & Constantinople,

381a.d.). It was a Cappadocian priest, Basil the Great, who resolved this argument by suggesting a substitution of the word "and" for "through," before Jesus and removal of the word "in," before the Holy Spirit, thus making all three members of the Trinity completely equal in the prayer, which then read (Treatise on the Holy Spirit, 375a.d.) ...

Glory be to the Father And to the Son and to the Holy Spirit

This satisfied the church and is still the way we say the first part of Gloria Patri to this day.

The next and biggest change came in the sixth century as the monastic movement was turning all such spoken prayers into Gregorian chant. As a way of "Christianizing" the text, Catholic monks were required to sing the Gloria Patri at the end of every reading from the Psalms. But since Gregorian chants need an antiphonal response, a second phrase was added: ***forever and ever, amen***. This additional phrasing is also quite Biblical because it was often used both in the Old and New Testaments when declaring God's glory (1 Chronicles 29:10, Galatians 1:5, 1 Timothy 1:17, etc.).

But since this short second phrase didn't quite balance with the rhythm of the first and since Arianism was still plaguing Christianity, to make the eternity of Jesus and the equality of the Trinity emphatic, the church added yet another phrase that was lifted from the opening of the Gospel of John, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God*.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As was in the beginning, is now and will be forever and ever, Amen.

So now the second expanded phrase became: *as was in the beginning, is now and will be forever and ever, amen*, which is the way the Latin version of the Gloria is still sung to this day. With only a slight variation, this is also the way the English version is sung in the Catholic Church.

But before we go further, remember that this second phrase, *As was in the beginning, is now and will be forever and ever*, was originally meant as a way of **emphasizing the eternal character of Jesus**, which is what makes the current English version that we sing in the Protestant Church so confusing. As Nicholas Ayo, the author of *Gloria Patri*, noted, *The various translations into English of [this second Latin phrase] have caused considerable controversy* (p.30).

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. world without end. Amen

How then did “*forever and ever,*” become “*world without end?*” For that answer we need to move forward another thousand years to 1535 and Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was busy helping Henry VIII break the Anglican Church away from Rome.

Cranmer’s English translation which was published in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, became the standard English form of the prayer and is still sung in most mainline Churches to this day. For his translation work, Cranmer depended heavily on an earlier Anglo-Saxon version of the Gloria which used “**world**” as a reference to **a period of time**. This older prayer read, *As hyt was yn the begynnyng, so now, and euer, **and in the world of worlds*** (pg 37). (As it was in the beginning, is now and ever and in the world of worlds,)

While we still occasionally use “world” as a reference to time, such as “*the world of tomorrow,*” this is an very archaic use of the word; when hearing “world,” few people these days would think of much more than the planet. Which is where a modern theological problem now shows itself.

A liberal interpretation of Revelation, chapter 20, teaches that Jesus would return after the Millennium, which would be a golden age when Christian ethics prospered. In 1850’s America, this interpretation became popular among those reform movements promoting abolitionism and the Social Gospel; their goal was to make the world better and better until we usher in God’s Millennium. This of course is not only bad Biblical exegesis, as a theology it was quickly bankrupted by the First and Second World Wars.

Still this idea of a never-ending world that has continued as such from the beginning of time works well with both the wording of Cranmer’s version and with modern concepts of evolution versus creationism. Thus, an uneducated recitation of Cranmer’s Gloria would lead one to think that it is this world, which has been the same from the beginning and will go on forever. This brings to mind the Apostle Peter’s warning that *in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’* (2 Peter 3:3-4). The Bible assures us that just as the first world was destroyed by flood, our current world still has a pending date with fire (2 Peter 3:6-7).

Which brings us back to those two opening cautions that.

- That **Prayer shapes theology as theology shapes prayer**, meaning that the words you say will shape what you believe.
- And, **when translating from a fixed language such as Latin, to an ever evolving language such as English, any effort in keeping close to the original meaning will require that you must constantly update your word choices.**

When lauding the eternal glory of our Triune God, there is no way that "*world without end*" can replace "*forever and ever.*" Two years ago I knew both this and of the errors of Post Millennialism, but I didn't know all the other history of the Gloria, which is why at the time I suggested that **we change just one word**, so that "*world without end*" became "*Word without end*" thus clearly once again tying the second phrase back to the person of Jesus as presented in the Gospel of John.

Now that we know the rest of the story, perhaps we should rejoin our Catholic brethren in singing the Gloria Patri the way it has almost always has been sung for the past 1,500 years. Or, perhaps we should write our own new version of the Gloria. Of course both ways would require radically changing a recitation that we have been repeating weekly since our youth. Thus perhaps changing a single word with a newly educated understanding of the significance of that change would be sufficient. What do you think? ... Word without end. Amen.