

GLOSSARY OF TRINITARIAN TERMS

J. Scott Horrell and Michelle Jones

- Adoptionism:** A belief which viewed Jesus as merely a virtuous human being chosen by God to be elevated to divine Sonship, through being anointed with his Spirit and resurrected as Lord of the church; deemed heretical.
- Analogy:** Comparison between a known reality (e.g. *light; Son*) and another both similar yet different; analogy is neither *equivocal* (open to ambiguous, multiple interpretations) nor *univocal* (directly correspondent). Theologically, analogy is human language (e.g., *light; Son*) employed to speak of that which reflects divine reality (e.g., God as pure *light; the Son* in filial role but not physical birth from the Father).
- Anthropomorphism:** The metaphoric or analogous attribution to God of human characteristics, emotions, or activities (e.g., *God's finger; his repenting*).
- Apollinarianism:** The belief asserted by Apollinarius which argued that Jesus Christ's humanity was limited to body and emotions, not a human "higher soul"; thus, Jesus was divine only in his higher immaterial being, God on the inside, man on the outside; deemed heretical.
- Apophatic Theology:** Sometimes termed *negative theology* or the *via negativa*, apophatic theology defines God by what he is not; human language is said to be incapable of describing the infinity wonder of God, thus he is *in-finite, im-mutable*, etc.
- Apostles' Creed:** A Western statement of Christian faith based on a 2nd century Roman Creed (traditionally ascribed to the Twelve Apostles) and today nearly universally appreciated as a foundational and unifying statement of Christian belief. Its three articles devoted to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are echoed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.
- Arianism:** A belief based on the teachings of the 4th century theologian Arius which maintained that Jesus Christ was the highest of all created beings, similar but not equal in nature to God the Father; thus the Son is considered *a god* but not consubstantial with the Father; deemed heretical. See *Consubstantial; Homoousios*.
- Athanasian Creed:** Known also as the *Quicumque Vult* (Lat. "Whosoever will"), the Creed is a late 5th or 6th century Western catechism named in honor of Athanasius which states the basic tenet of Trinitarian doctrine: "the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God."
- Baptism (Trinitarian):** Water baptism that invokes, whether explicitly or implicitly (Ac 2:38; 19:3-5), the tripartite formula of the Savior in Mt 28:19, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." From the late first century, Trinitarian baptism (whatever the age or means) has served as the initial public rite of an individual's acceptance into the church.
- Binitarianism:** The belief that the Godhead consists of only the Father and the Son, thus denying the deity of the Holy Spirit; in the early church, this view was purported among *Monarchians*, some *Arians*, and the *Pneumatomachians*.
- Cappadocian Fathers:** 4th Century Eastern theologians Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, whose influence helped toward the full adoption of Nicene Trinitarian orthodoxy, the defeat of Arianism, and introduction to what some term the *Social Model* of the Trinity.
- Cataphatic Theology:** (Gr. *kataphasis*, affirmation) In contrast to *apophatic* (or *negative*) theology, this line of thought is employed to describe God in positive language,

particularly based on God's own self-disclosure in the language of Scripture (e.g., God is eternal, holy, love, etc.)

Chalcedonian Definition: The edict of the 4th Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon (451) generally accepted in the East and West that affirms the divine and human natures of Christ are united in his single person (*hypostasis*), thus in *hypostatic union*. It stands as the definitive statement of Christology against both exaggerated separateness of natures (Nestorianism) and exaggerated commingling of natures (Eutychianism). See *Eutychianism; Hypostasis, Nestorianism*.

Circumincession and Circuminsession: (Gk. *perichoresis*) Latin terms describing the interrelation, mutual immanence, and interpenetration of the members of the Godhead; this is the basis for declaring that in every action of a member of the Godhead all three persons are present. *Circuminsession* accentuates "the abiding reality; *Circumincession* the dynamic circulation of Trinitarian life from each to the others" (M. O'Carroll, *Trinitas: A Theological Encyclopedia*, 69). See *Perichoresis*.

Constantinopolitan Creed (381): Also called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, this statement of faith reaffirmed and strengthened the Nicene Creed (325) especially in the East, also expanding the confession regarding Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary. While not well documented until later, the Constantinopolitan Creed effected the Athanasian insistence of the primacy of Scripture as well as the final defeat of Sabellianism and Arianism. See *Nicean Creed*.

Consubstantial: English translation of the Greek word *homoousios*, meaning "of one and the same substance or being"; it is used in the Nicene Creed to describe the essential divine equality the Son with the Father, as against the Arian *homoiousios* ("of similar substance") and *anomois* ("of different substance"). See *Homoousios, Essence, Nature, Ousia, Substance*.

Divinization (deification): Developing through the early Christian centuries, especially in the East, the theology of divinization affirms that believers are to "participate in the divine nature" (2Pe 1:4), infused by the divine presence, hence becoming *godly, godlike, indeed gods and God* by grace. Later Eastern fathers ascribed such Christian deification to the penetration of the *divine energies*, thus distinguishing between the absolute Trinitarian persons and the divine nature that infuses the believer.

Deism: Until the 17th century synonymous with *theism*, the term Deism came to distinguish a view that affirms that a Supreme Being created the world but has little or no direct involvement in that creation; knowledge of this God comes through natural reason as opposed to divine revelation. Nevertheless humankind has obligation to worship, live ethically, and repent of sin in light of eventual divine judgment.

Demiurge: An often Platonic view of a god or God as one who crafts the visible world as a sculptor would shape a piece of stone or clay (cf. Heb 11:10, *demiourgos, builder*); the term is also used in Gnostic philosophical systems to describe an inferior or "lesser" being as creator of the world but inferior to the supreme God.

Docetism: A Christianized form of Gnosticism on the periphery of the early church which believed that the divine Jesus only *appeared* to have a human form; because the physical world is perceived as evil, it was unthinkable that the divine incarnate in human flesh (cf. 1Jn 1:1-4); deemed heretical. See *Gnosticism*.

Doxology: (Gk. *doxa* and *logos*, "words of praise") An ascription of glory to God, often traced to the Greater Doxology, or *Gloria in Excelsis*: "Glory be to God on high" and to the 4th century Lesser Doxology, or *Gloria Patri*: "Glory be to the Father, and

to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”

Ebionism: A primarily second century belief among peripheral groups in the Jewish diaspora that viewed Jesus Christ as an exceptional prophet (similar to John the Baptist)—human but not divine; Ebionites strictly adhered to Jewish law and rejected Paul’s writings.

Economic Trinity: Expressed as early as Hippolytus and Tertullian, it is a view of the Trinity focused on the functional acts (*economies*) of the Godhead in the creation and salvation of the world; this perspective is distinguished from that of the *immanent Trinity* (the Godhead in itself, transcendent, and outside all created reality); contemporary Trinitarianism debates the relation of the two. See *Immanent Trinity*.

Essence: (Gk. *ousia*, being; Lat. *substantia*, substance) The requisite fundamentals that constitute a static reality; in theology, the divine essence denotes that which constitutes the basic *nature, substance*, or fundamental character of the divine being, i.e., the Godness of God. See *Consubstantial, Homoousios, Nature, Ousia, Substance*.

Eutychianism: Contra Nestorius in the early 5th century, Eutyches promulgated the belief that Christ had “two natures before, but only one after, the Union” in the Incarnation; the divine and human natures commingled, each assuming the characteristics of the other; deemed heretical, the view continued as *Monophysitism*. See also *Chalcedonian Definition; Nestorianism*.

Filioque: The Latin word meaning “and from the Son” added by the West to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed at the Council of Toledo (589) to express the double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father *and from the Son*. The term was contested from the East as diminishing the full personal deity of the Spirit and led to the schism of Orthodoxy from Roman Catholicism.

Generation: Owing to Origen, the Nicene and Christian tradition affirms *the eternal generation of the Son* from the Father, as expression of Ps 2:7 (“today I have begotten thee”) and its citations in the NT and, again, the Gk. *monogenes* (trad. “only begotten”; lit. “one and only”). Some question the exegetical bases of eternal generation; others see it as broadly expressing the ontological relations of the Son and the Father. See *Logos Christology*.

Gnosticism: A non-Christian religio-philosophic movement especially evident during the early centuries C.E. which claimed that matter was evil and salvation was available only through *gnosis*, an illumination or revealed knowledge given esoterically. See *Docetism*.

Homoousios: Greek word meaning “of one and the same substance or being” as contrasted to *homoiousios* (“of a similar substance or being”) as applied to the Son’s divine nature in relation to that of the Father. See *Consubstantial, Essence, Nature, Ousia, Substance*.

Hypostasis: The Greek word variously renders “person,” “substance,” “subsistence.” In Heb 1:3 it denotes “substance,” “actuality or reality of something.” The term was appropriated by the church fathers in two ways: first by the Cappadocians to denote the personal objective realities that share the same nature, that is, the *persons* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as individual divine realities; second by Chalcedon to mean the one *person (hypostasis)* of Christ as having two unconfused but inseparable natures. (E. Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 443-45)

Immanence: God’s omnipresence in and with his creation, as contrasted with divine *transcendence*.

- Immanent Trinity:** The view that centers on the Trinity in and of itself, i.e., as present (*immanent*) only to itself—a view occasionally expressed in Scripture (Jn 1:1-2,18); thus it focuses on the internal relations between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Traditionally, the *Immanent Trinity* is assumed as the ontological basis for the Economic Trinity, a posture being questioned by some today. See *Economic Trinity*.
- Incarnation:** (Lat. *in + caro, carnis*, “flesh”) The Son’s act of “taking flesh,” i.e., a full human nature; thus, as Tertullian and later Chalcedon articulated, in the one person Jesus Christ exists the fullness of deity and of humanity (two natures). See *Apollinarianism, Chalcedonian Definition, Hypostasis, Nicene Creed*.
- Logos Christology:** The conception of Christ that sees the Son as the pre-existent divine *Word* (Jn 1:1-3) or expression of God, especially based on the Prologue of the Gospel of John. With both Gk and Heb entailing rich conceptions of *logos*, 2nd and 3rd century Apologists speculated that the Son was originally only latent in the Father, implying the personal inferiority (*subordination*) of the Son. Nicea insisted on coeternal equality of the Son’s nature and person as God. See *Generation*.
- Modalism:** Advocated especially in the 3rd century, it constitutes a form of *Monarchianism* in which God diversely manifests himself as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, thus denying eternal distinctions of three persons within the Godhead; the divine names denote only manifestations or modes of expression of a single-personed God. Deemed heretical. See *Monarchianism, Patripassionism, Sabellianism*.
- Monarchianism:** A diverse effort especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries that emphasizes the *one* principle (*arche*) or *monarchy* of God such that it denies the personal distinctiveness of the divine Son and the Holy Spirit in relation to God the Father; expressions include *Adoptionism, Modalism, and Sabellianism*, deemed heretical.
- Monotheism:** The belief in one (and only one) personal, omnipotent, omniscient God who created the universe and everything in it, as in classical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; as distinct from *Pantheism, Panentheism, polytheism, and atheism*.
- Montanism:** The doctrine of Montanus, a converted priest from a frenetic sect of Asia Minor (c. 155) who claimed special anointing of the Holy Spirit through prophecy, glossalalia, and rigid moral standards by which he challenged the “lax” church; he claimed the old dispensations were now superceded by the law of the Spirit, and that the New Jerusalem would soon be instituted in his home town in Phrygia.
- Nature:** The fundamental properties, “material” reality, or inherent character that constitutes an individual being; used theologically to signify the being or substance of the three persons of the Godhead; largely synonymous with *Essence, Ousia, Substance*; see also *Consubstantial, Homoousios*.
- Neo-Platonism:** As articulated by Plotinus (d. 270), a dominant Greek philosophy from the 3rd to the 6th centuries that taught that everything that exists comes from the ineffable One—a single, impersonal, transcendent source, from which all beings derive. A person “must gradually divest his experience of all that is specifically human, so that in the end, when all attributes have been removed, only God is left.” (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed., 960). See *Platonism*.
- Nestorianism:** A Christological view supposedly purported by Nestorius (d. 451) that defended the full humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, but seemed to have so separated the two natures as to lose the single self-consciousness of the Savior; deemed heretical by the West at Chalcedon, Nestorian faith extended into the East and continues today as Assyrian Christianity. See *Chalcedonian Definition, Hypostasis*.
- Nicene Creed (325):** The definitive standard of Trinitarian faith set forth at the Nicene (or 1st Ecumenical) Council that declares the consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the

- Son with the Father, while anathematizing the views of Arius. See *Arianism, Consubstantial, Homoousios*.
- Ontology:** Literally, the “study of being,” the philosophical investigation of the fundamental properties that constitute the nature of existence; popularly, the *ontological Trinity* is synonymous with the *Immanent Trinity*.
- Ousia:** The Greek word for “being” or “substance,” parallel with the Latin *substantia*. See *Essence, Nature, Substance*.
- Panentheism:** Denoting at least two perspectives, panentheism can mean that (1) God includes the world as part of the divine being, the world being God, yet God exists as more than the world; or (2) combining classical theism with pantheism, the view that God infiltrates all things, but that his Being is more than the universe.
- Pantheism:** The view that God is everything and everything is God; the pantheist seeks to deny (transcend) individual consciousness so as to obtain oneness with the All-Inclusive. Some forms of pantheism understand the world as illusion, the only reality being God; other forms identify the world (universe) itself as God.
- Patripassianism:** The belief associated with Modalism that the Father (*patri*) became incarnate, was born of a virgin, and suffered (*passion*) and died on a cross; i.e., a denial of the eternal personal distinction between the Father and the Son; deemed heretical. See *Modalism, Sabellianism*.
- Perichoresis:** (from Gk. *peri* “around” + *choreuo* “dance in chorus”) A doctrine evident in the Cappadocians and developed by John of Damascus, that each member of the Godhead indwells or interpenetrates the other without confusion of personal distinction (Jn 14:9-11; 17:21). See Latin *Circumincession and Circuminsession*.
- Person:** Concepts of person (Gk. *prosopon, hypostasis, Lat. persona*) have differed from Boethian individual rationality to Buddhist and postmodern visions of a mere knot of social relationships. From a Trinitarian perspective, person is best conceived as *a center of self-consciousness existing in relationship to others*; this entails (1) full self-consciousness (“I am”), (2) the I-Thou reality of *self* distinct from other persons (“the Word was with God”); and (3) the capacity of *perichoresis* (“I am in the Father and the Father in me”). See *Hypostasis, Substance*.
- Platonism:** Inspired by Plato in the 4th c. B.C., Platonism’s supreme Idea of the Good, eternal realities above the present world, and the creation of the world were attractive bridges for the Apologists to argue for Christian faith, with sometimes reciprocal influences such as divine impassibility and a Platonic theory of knowledge. See *Neo-Platonism*.
- Pneumatomachians:** (Lit. “Spirit-fighters”) Those aligned with Macedonius of Constantinople (also called *Macedonians*) who affirmed the *homoousios* of the Father and the Son, but denied the personal deity of the Holy Spirit; deemed heretical. See *Binitarianism*.
- Procession:** (Gk. *ekporeuomai, Jn 15:26; Lat. processio, “to emanate from another”*) In Trinitarian theology, as the Son is eternally generated from the Father, so the Holy Spirit eternally comes forth (*proceeds*) from the Father—“and [in Western theology] the Son” (Lat. *filioque*). The procession of the Spirit (or in the West the double procession) has traditionally distinguished the eternal relations of the Spirit within the Godhead. See *Filioque*.
- Psychological Model of Trinity:** Articulated by Augustine, this perspective suggests that since the human being is created in the *imago dei* and since God is Trinity, then human nature (expressed in activity) will reflect a threefoldness, e.g. in mind, knowledge, love of self; etc. Until recently, the West has preferred emphasizing

the personal unity of God in the three “subsistencies” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. See *Social Model of Trinity*.

Sabellianism: A 3rd century form of Modalism popularized by Sabellius, the teaching denied three distinct persons of the Trinity and, some surmise, posited three successive modes of divine manifestation from the Father of the OT, to the Son of the Gospels, to the Holy Spirit of Acts and the present age; deemed heretical. See *Modalism, Monarchianism*.

Social Model of Trinity: Loosely attributed to the Cappadocians but also expressed by Augustine, the Social Model explains the Trinity in terms of human relationships: e.g., Adam, Eve, and Seth (Basil); Lover, Beloved, Love itself (Augustine). Eastern Orthodoxy prioritizes the three persons (*hypostases*) over singularity of substance, affirms that each person shares the same attributes, locates divine unity in *perichoresis*, and often attributes ontological priority to the Father as the eternal source (*fons totius divinitatis*) of the full eternal deity of the Son and the Spirit. See *Cappadocians, Perichoresis, Psychological Model*.

Subordinationism: A view that holds that the Son or the Holy Spirit are inferior to the Father in nature or are less than co-equal in glory, as such deemed heretical. The term might also be used, not in terms of essential inequality of nature or glory, rather in terms of Trinitarian function, either temporarily in the economies of salvation, or even regarding eternal roles the members of the Godhead, e.g., *eternal subordination* of the Son to the Father; this latter meaning has been common in the history of both Eastern and Western Christianity.

Substance: (Lat. *substantia*, “that which stands under”) The Latin term *substantia* and *persona* and the Greek terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* were deemed equivalent in Trinitarian discussion for the East and West by Pope Damasus (366-84). See *Essence, Nature, Ousia, Person*.

Theophany: A manifestation of God in audible or usually visible form, conceivably in “heaven” as well as on earth (e.g., Ex 3:2-6; Da 7:9-10; Rev 4:2ff); such appearances are contrasted with the Incarnation which secured permanent union between the eternal Son and a human nature. See *Incarnation*.

Transcendence: The superiority of God over and apart from his created world; God is uniquely “other” from all created existence. See *Immanence*.

Trisagion: The Greek term for “thrice holy,” i.e., the ascription to the One on the heavenly throne as “Holy, holy, holy” (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8); also ancient liturgy as the response, “Holy God, holy mighty, holy immortal, have mercy on us.”

Tritheism: (Lat. “three gods”) Heterodox theology in various forms through Christian history that deny the consubstantiality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; unity is sacrificed to affirm divine diversity; deemed heretical. See *Consubstantial*.

Unitarianism: Various expressed since the 16th century, the belief that denies the Trinity and deity of Christ, while affirming a single personal God; deemed heretical. See *Deism, Monarchianism*.