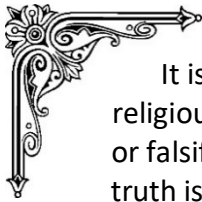


Chapter 1

Heresies in the Early Church

DENNIS A. WRIGHT, DMin

1



It is important to distinguish between apostasy and heresy as religious terms. Heresy is commonly understood as a deviation from, or falsification of, biblical truth. It presupposes that a biblical body of truth is valid for all and that no one has the right or authority to alter it. It also assumes that there is a criterion to distinguish truth from its falsification or deviation.

In Christian history two specific instruments have been credited with that authority. The first was the teaching ministry of the Christian church. That is to say, the church through its religious leaders interpreted and defined truth for believers. This understanding was rejected by the Reformers.

The second instrument is Scripture. The Bible is the only and exclusive instrument by which truth is defined and falsehood identified. The Reformers have embraced this last position. Apostasy incorporates the view of heresy just summarized, but points to the moment when the presence of heresy is so abundant and radical that individuals are considered to be fully separated from biblical truth, and from Christ as the truth. In that case there is a falling away from the truth and from God's saving grace. Apostasy is the result of a slow process of spiritual defection from biblical truth.

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez ¹



¹ Rodríguez, Á. M. (2020). "What Is Apostasy?" In *Perplexing Doctrinal Questions Answered*. Faithlife.

Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism

FIRST CENTURY		
HERESY	REJECTED BY	DESCRIPTION
Docetism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief of Docetism holds that Jesus Christ did not have a real physical body, but only an apparent or illusory one. ²
SECOND CENTURY		
Montanism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A movement that emphasizes the importance of prophecy and ecstatic experiences. ³
Adoptionism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God from eternity, but was adopted by God at some point in his life. ⁴
Universalism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that all people will eventually be saved. Universalists believe that God's love is so great that no one will be excluded from salvation. ⁵
Valentinianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A Gnostic heresy that taught that the world was created by a series of emanations from the supreme being. Valentinians believed that salvation came from knowledge of the true nature of the universe.
Sabellianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three distinct persons, but are simply different manifestations of the same divine being. ⁶

² "Docetism." *Britannica*. Retrieved May 24, 2023.

³ "Montanism." "[Montanism | History, Teachings, Heresy, Founder, & Facts](#)." *Britannica*. Retrieved May 22, 2023.

⁴ Macquarrie, John (2003). *Christology Revisited*. SCM Press, 63.

⁵ "Universalism." *Britannica*. Retrieved May 24, 2023.

⁶ Henry, Wace. *Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature*. Delmarva Publications, 27.

Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism

Gnosticism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A complex system of thought that teaches that the material world is evil and that salvation can be achieved through knowledge (<i>gnosis</i>). ⁷
Marcionism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A heresy that arose in the 2 nd Century AD. Marcionists believed that the God of the Old Testament was a different god from the God of the New Testament. ⁸
Monarchianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A heresy that taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all the same being. Monarchians were also known as Unitarians. ⁹
Modalism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	Modalism is the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different <i>modes</i> of God, as opposed to a Trinitarian view of three distinct persons within the Godhead. ¹⁰
Patripassianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that the Father and Son are not two distinct persons, and both God the Father and the Son suffered on the cross as Jesus. ¹¹
Psilanthropism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Jesus is “merely human”: and that he never became divine, or that he never existed prior to his birth as a man. ¹²
Sethianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	Sethianism was a Second Century Gnostic movement that believed in a supreme God, Sophia, the Demiurge, and <i>gnosis</i> as the path to salvation. ¹³
Basilidean	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental	Basilidean was a Gnostic Christian sect founded by Basilides of Alexandria.

⁷ King, Karen L. (2003). *What is Gnosticism?* Harvard University Press.

⁸ Lieu, Judith (2015-03-26). *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*. Cambridge University Press.

⁹ “Monarchianism.” *Britannica*. Retrieved May 24, 2023.

¹⁰ Hayes, Jerry L. (2015-09-30). *Godhead Theology: Modalism, The Original Orthodoxy*. CreateSpace.

¹¹ Sarot, Marcel (1990). *“Patripassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God. Some Historical and Systematic Considerations”*. *Religious Studies*. **26** (3): 363–375.

¹² Machen, J. Gresham (1987). *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. James Clarke, 22–36.

¹³ Rasimus, Tuomas (2009-10-31). *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence*. BRILL.

Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism

	Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	Basilidians believed that the material world was created by an evil demiurge and that the goal of salvation was to escape from this world and return to the spiritual realm. ¹⁴
THIRD CENTURY		
Novatianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A movement that arose in response to the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. Novatians believed that Christians who had lapsed during the persecution could not be forgiven. ¹⁵
FOURTH CENTURY		
Arianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Jesus Christ is not fully divine but is a created being. ¹⁶
Donatism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A movement that arose in North Africa in the Fourth Century AD. Donatists believed that the Roman Catholic Church had become corrupt and that only the Donatists were the true Christians. ¹⁷
Apollinarianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Jesus did not have a human mind or soul, but only a human body. ¹⁸
Tritheism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that there are three gods, rather than one God in three persons. ¹⁹
Collyridianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental	The belief is that the Trinity consists of the Father, Son, and Mary and that the Son

¹⁴ "CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Basilides." www.newadvent.org. Retrieved June 6, 2023.

¹⁵ "Novatian and Novatianism." *Catholic Answers*. Retrieved May 24, 2023.

¹⁶ Williams, Rowan (2002-01-24). *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

¹⁷ "Donatist." *Britannica*. Retrieved May 22, 2023.

¹⁸ "Apollinarianism." *Catholic Answers*. Retrieved May 24, 2023.

¹⁹ "Tritheism." *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved May 24, 2023.

Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism

	Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	results from the marital union between the other two. ²⁰
Binitarianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	Binitarianism is a Christian heresy that teaches that there are only two persons in the Godhead: the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is not considered to be a separate person, but rather an aspect of the Son or the Father. ²¹
Subordinationism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A heresy that teaches that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not co-equal with the Father. Subordinationists believe that the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father in either nature, role, or both. ²²
Anomoeanism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	A heresy that taught that Jesus was not fully divine, but was a created being. Anomoeans also believed that Christ could not be like God because he lacked the quality of self-existence. ²³
Antidicomarians	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches	Antidicomarians also called Dimoerites, were a Christian sect active from the Third to the Fifth Centuries who rejected the perpetual virginity of Mary. They were condemned by St. Epiphanius of Salamis in the Fourth Century. ²⁴
FIFTH CENTURY		
Nestorianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Jesus Christ was two persons, the divine Son of God and the human Jesus of Nazareth. Nestorius said that the Virgin Mary is not the Mother of God (<i>Theotokos</i>) because she gave birth to the human part of Jesus, not the divine Son of God, and called her <i>Christotokos</i> . Nestorianism was condemned as a heresy by the Council of

²⁰ "Collyridianism." *Catholic Answers*. Retrieved June 2, 2023.

²¹ Boyarin, Daniel (2010-11-24). *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 120.

²² "Subordinationism | Christianity." *www.britannica.com*. Retrieved June 2, 2023.

²³ "Anomoean | Monophysite, Miaphysite, Dyophysite." *www.britannica.com*. Retrieved August 25, 2023.

²⁴ Shipman, Andrew Jackson (1907). "Antidicomarianites." *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1.

		Ephesus (431). ²⁵
Pelagianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that humans can be saved by their own efforts, without the need for God's grace. ²⁶
Eutychianism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Christ is in one nature and of two, with the humanity of Christ subsumed by the divinity. ²⁷
Monophysitism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Christ has only one nature, which is divine. ²⁸
Miaphysitism	Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, mainline Protestantism	The belief that Christ is fully divine and fully human, in one nature (<i>physis</i>). ²⁹

The purpose of this chapter is to present a timeline and an overview of the various theological heresies that the early Church faced during the first five centuries of her existence. Some are far more serious than others and did, in fact, impact the early church in drastic ways. Several will be given a more extensive treatment in a later chapter.

FIRST CENTURY HERESIES

Docetism

Docetism (Koinē Greek: δοκεῖν/δόκησις *dokeîn* “to seem, “*dókēsis* apparition, phantom”)³⁰ was the doctrine that the phenomenon of Jesus, his historical and bodily existence, and

²⁵ Chesnut, Roberta C. (1978). “The Two Prosopa in Nestorius’ “Bazaar of Heracleides.” *The Journal of Theological Studies*. 29 (2):392–409.

²⁶ “Pelagianism.” *Britannica*. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

²⁷ “Eutychianism.” *Catholic Answers*. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

²⁸ “Monophysite.” “Monophysite | Definition, History, & Beliefs.” *Britannica*. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

²⁹ “Miaphysitism.” *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*. “The Universal Church and Schisms.” Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Midlands, U.K.

³⁰ González, Justo L. (2005). *Essential Theological Terms*. Westminster John Knox Press, 46–47: “A term derived from the Greek *dokein*, to seem, or to appear.” Strecker, Georg (2000). Horn, Friedrich Wilhelm (ed.). *Theology of the New Testament*. 438.

above all the human form of Jesus, was mere semblance without any true reality.³¹ Thus, Jesus was pure spirit and his physical form an illusion. Broadly stated, Docetism is the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human.

The word *Δοκηταί* *Dokētaí* (“Illusionists”) referring to early groups who denied Jesus’s humanity, first occurred in a letter by Bishop Serapion of Antioch (197–203),³² who discovered the doctrine in the Gospel of Peter, during a pastoral visit to a Christian community using it in Rhodus, and later condemned it as a forgery.³³ It appears to have arisen over theological contentions concerning the meaning, figurative or literal, of a sentence from the Gospel of John: “the Word was made Flesh,”³⁴

Docetism was unequivocally rejected at the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325³⁵ and is regarded as heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, Armenian Apostolic Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church,³⁶ and many Protestant denominations that accept and hold to the statements of these early church councils, such as Reformed Baptists, Reformed Christians, and all Trinitarian Christians.

SECOND CENTURY HERESIES

Montanism

Montanism, known by its adherents as the New Prophecy, was an early Christian

³¹ Brox, Norbert (1984). “Doketismus’ – eine Problemanzeige.” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*. 95. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 306. Schneemelcher, Wilhelm; Maurer, Christian (1994) [1991]. “The Gospel of Peter.” In Schneemelcher, Wilhelm; Wilson, McLachlan (eds.). *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and related writings*. Vol. 1. Westminster John Knox Press, 220.

³² Breidenbaugh, Joel R. (2008). “Docetism”. In Hindson, Ed; Caner, Ergun; Verstraete, Edward J. (eds.). *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics: Surveying the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity*. Harvest House Publishers, 179–181.

³³ Ehrman, Bart D. (2005). *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and The Faiths We Never Knew* (2 ed.). Oxford University Press., 16. Foster, Paul (2009). *The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. Vol. 201. Oxford University, 79. Serapion first approved its use, and only reversed his opinion on returning to his bishopric in Antioch, after being informed of its contents. He wrote a “Concerning the So-Called Gospel of St Peter”, which is alluded to in Eusebius’s *Church History* VI 12.3–6.

³⁴ Smith, William George; Wace, Henry, eds. (1877). *A dictionary of Christian biography, literature, sects and doctrines*. John Murray, 867–870.

³⁵ Ridgdon, Lloyd V. J. (2001). Ridgdon, Lloyd V. J. (ed.). *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*. Palgrave Macmillan, xv.

³⁶ Arendzen, J.P. (2012) [1909]. “Docetae”. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5. Robert Appleton Company.

movement later referred to by the name of its founder, Montanus. Montanism originated in Phrygia, a province of Anatolia, and flourished throughout the region, leading to the movement being referred to elsewhere as Cataphrygian (meaning it was “from Phrygia”) or simply as Phrygian.

Montanus was a recent convert when he first began prophesying, supposedly during the proconsulate of Gratus in a village in Mysia named Ardabau; no proconsul and village so named have been identified, however.³⁷ Some accounts claim that before his conversion to Christianity, Montanus was a priest of Apollo or Cybele.³⁸ Montanus believed he was a prophet of God and that the Paraclete spoke through him.

As the name “New Prophecy” implied, Montanism was a movement focused around prophecy, specifically the prophecies of the movement’s founders which were believed to contain the Holy Spirit’s revelation for the present age.³⁹ Prophecy itself was not controversial within Second century Christian communities.⁴⁰ Jerome wrote: “we tell them [Montanists] that we do not so much reject prophecy—for this is attested by the passion of the Lord—as refuse to receive prophets whose utterances fail to accord with the Scriptures old and new.”⁴¹

However, the New Prophecy, as described by Eusebius of Caesarea, departed from Church tradition:⁴²

And he [Montanus] became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning.—*Eusebius of Caesarea*.⁴³

Adoptionism

Adoptionism, also called dynamic monarchianism, is an early Christian nontrinitarian

³⁷ Tabbernee, William (1997), *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism*, *Patristic Monograph Series*, Georgia: Mercer University Press, pp. 12, 19 note 8. 37

³⁸ Tabbernee (2009), 19 note 2. Claim made in *Dialogue Between a Montanist and an Orthodox* (4.4) and possibly alluded to by St. Jerome (385), Schaff (ed.), *To Marcella* (Letter 41).

³⁹ Tabbernee (2009), 68.

⁴⁰ Ash, James L Jr (June 1976), “The Decline of Ecstatic Prophecy in the Early Church”, *Theological Studies*, 37 (2): 236.

⁴¹ Jerome (385), Letter 41.2.

⁴² Tabbernee (2009), 12, 37.

⁴³ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Chapter 16. The Circumstances related of Montanus and his False Prophets.” *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 5.

theological doctrine,⁴⁴ subsequently revived in various forms, which holds that Jesus was adopted as the Son of God at his baptism, his resurrection, or his ascension. Adoptionism is one of two main forms of monarchianism (the other being modalism, which considers God to be one while working through the different “modes” or “manifestations” of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, without limiting his modes or manifestations).

Adoptionism denies the eternal pre-existence of Christ, and although it explicitly affirms his deity subsequent to events in his life, many classical trinitarians claim that the doctrine implicitly denies it by denying the constant hypostatic union of the eternal Logos to the human nature of Jesus.⁴⁵ Under adoptionism, Jesus is divine and has been since his adoption, although he is not equal to the Father, per “my Father is greater than I”⁴⁶ and as such is a kind of subordinationism. (However, the quoted scripture can be orthodoxically interpreted as the fact that in the Trinity the Father is the source without origin, while the Son eternally receives the divinity from the Father.) Adoptionism is sometimes, but not always, related to a denial of the virgin birth of Jesus.

A form of adoptionism surfaced in Unitarianism during the Eighteenth Century as denial of the virgin birth became increasingly common, led by the views of Joseph Priestley and others. Other modern equivalents include: liberal theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolph von Harnack, and John AT Robinson.

A similar form of adoptionism was expressed in the writings of James Strang, a Latter Day Saint leader who founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite) after the death of Joseph Smith in 1844. In his *Book of the Law of the Lord*, a purported work of ancient scripture found and translated by Strang, he offers an essay entitled “Note on the Sacrifice of Christ” in which he explains his unique (for Mormonism as a whole) doctrines on the subject. Jesus Christ, said Strang, was the natural-born son of Mary and Joseph, who was chosen from before all time to be the Savior of mankind, but who had to be born as an ordinary mortal of two human parents (rather than being begotten by

⁴⁴ Williams, D. H. (2012) [2011]. “Adoptionism”. *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. The paucity of extant evidence makes an exact knowledge about the views of what modern scholars have dubbed “adoptionist” or ‘dynamic’ monarchianism uncertain. No documents written by adherents to this strain of Christian theology have survived. As a result, we cannot say what constituted a purely adoptionist viewpoint or how closely associated it was with what is typically called ‘modalism’. True to its emphasis on divine monotheism, ‘adoptionism’ opposed any substantial division within God when it came to the incarnation of Christ as the Logos of God. As a result, the Jesus of the Gospels was a man empowered by the one God.

⁴⁵ González, Justo L. (2005). *Essential Theological Terms*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 139.

⁴⁶ John 14:28. Ed Hindson, Ergun Caner (editors) (2008). *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics: Surveying the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity*, Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 16.

the Father or the Holy Spirit) to be able to truly fulfill his Messianic role.⁴⁷ Strang claimed that the earthly Christ was in essence “adopted” as God’s son at birth, and fully revealed as such during the Transfiguration.⁴⁸ After proving himself to God by living a perfectly sinless life, he was enabled to provide an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of men, prior to his resurrection and ascension.⁴⁹

Universalism

Christian universalism is a school of Christian theology focused around the doctrine of universal reconciliation—the view that all human beings will ultimately be saved and restored to a right relationship with God. “Christian universalism” and “the belief or hope in the universal reconciliation through Christ” can be understood as synonyms.⁵⁰ Opponents of this school, who hold that eternal damnation is the ultimate fate of some or most people, are sometimes called “infernalists.”⁵¹

The term Christian universalism was used in the *Christian Intelligencer* in the 1820s by Russell Streeter—a descendant of Adams Streeter who had founded one of the first Universalist Churches on September 14, 1785.⁵² Some Christian universalists claim that in Early Christianity (prior to the 6th century), this was the most common interpretation of Christianity.⁵³ This claim, however, has no basis in fact.

According to the *New Schaff–Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1912), over the first five hundred years of Christian history there are records of at least six theological schools: four of these schools were Universalist (one each in Alexandria, Antioch,

⁴⁷ Book of the Law, 157–158, note 9.

⁴⁸ Book of the Law, 165–166.

⁴⁹ Book of the Law, 155–158.

⁵⁰ MacDonald, Gregory (2011). *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1. At the most simple level Christian universalism is the belief that God will (or, in the case of “hopeful universalism”, might) redeem all people through the saving work of Christ.

⁵¹ Kilby, Karen (16 March 2020). “Against the Infernalists”. *Commonweal*.

⁵² Russell Streeter 1835, Familiar conversations: in which the salvation of all mankind is..., page 266: “We now come to those distinguished men, Murray and Winchester, who, as our opposers would have people believe, were the inventors and first preachers of Christian Universalism”; *The Christian repository*: volume 9, page 218 Church of the United Brethren in Christ (1800–1889), 1829 “In a piece entitled Christian Universalism, in the *Christian Intelligencer*, volume 3d, page 4, he wrote the following: “The Editor,” speaking of himself, “deems it a solemn obligation to protest against proceedings calculated to make an...”; *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*: volumes 26–28 Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, 1999 “The adoption of the name Christian Universalist can, nevertheless, be explained plausibly in the context of Dean’s debate with Aesop.”

⁵³ Hanson, John Wesley (2008). *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During its First Five Hundred Years*. Boston & Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1899.

Caesarea, and Edessa–Nisibis), one taught conditional immortality (in Ephesus), and the last taught eternal Hell (in Carthage or Rome). However, the *Encyclopedia* also notes that most contemporary scholars would take issue with classifying these early schools as Universalist.⁵⁴

Valentinianism

11

Valentinianism was one of the major Gnostic Christian movements. Founded by Valentinus in the Second century AD, its influence spread widely, not just within Rome but also from Northwest Africa to Egypt through to Asia Minor and Syria in the East.⁵⁵ Later in the movement's history it broke into an Eastern and a Western school. Disciples of Valentinus continued to be active into the Fourth century AD, after the Roman Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380), which declared Nicene Christianity as the State church of the Roman Empire.⁵⁶

The doctrine, practices and beliefs of Valentinus and the Gnostic movement that bore his name were condemned as heretical by proto-orthodox Christian⁵⁷ leaders and scholars. Prominent Church Fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome wrote against Gnosticism. Because early church leaders encouraged the destruction of Gnostic texts, most evidence for the Valentinian theory comes from its critics and detractors, most notably Irenaeus, since he was especially concerned with refuting Valentinianism.

The theology that Irenaeus attributed to Valentinus is extremely complicated and difficult to follow. Human beings have a material nature and a spiritual nature. The work of redemption is said to be accomplished by freeing the spiritual nature from the material nature. And the only way to achieve true *gnosis* (knowledge) is by recognizing the Father as the source of divine power. According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians believed that at the beginning there was a Pleroma (literally, a 'fullness'). At the center of the Pleroma was the primal Father or *Bythos*, the beginning of all things who, after ages of silence and contemplation, projected thirty *Aeons*, heavenly archetypes representing fifteen syzygies or sexually complementary pairs. Among them was *Sophia*. Sophia's weakness, curiosity and passion led to her fall from the Pleroma and the creation of the world and man, both

⁵⁴ "Christian Universalism." *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1912). New York, London: Funk & Wagnalls, 96.

⁵⁵ Green, Henry A. (1985). *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 244.

⁵⁶ Green (1985), 245.

⁵⁷ The term "proto-orthodox Christianity" or "proto-orthodoxy" describes the early Christian movement that was the precursor of Christian orthodoxy. Older literature often referred to the group as "early Catholic" in the sense that their views were the closest to those of the more organized Catholic Church of the Fourth and Fifth centuries. The term "proto-orthodox" was coined by Bentley Layton (a scholar of Gnosticism and a Coptologist at Yale).

of which are flawed. Valentinians identified the God of the Old Testament as the Demiurge,⁵⁸ the imperfect creator of the material world.

Man, the highest being in this material world, participates in both the spiritual and the material nature. The work of redemption consists in freeing the former from the latter. One needed to recognize the Father, the *depth of all being*, as the true source of divine power in order to achieve *gnosis* (knowledge).⁵⁹ The Valentinians believed that the attainment of this knowledge by the human individual had positive consequences within the universal order and contributed to restoring that order,⁶⁰ and that *gnosis*, not faith, was the key to salvation. Clement wrote that the Valentinians regarded Catholic⁶¹ Christians “as simple people to whom they attributed faith, while they think that *gnosis* is in themselves. Through the excellent seed that is to be found in them, they are by nature redeemed, and their *gnosis* is as far removed from faith as the spiritual from the physical.”⁶²

Sabellianism

In Christian theology, Sabellianism is the belief that there is only one Person (‘hypostasis’ in the Greek language of the fourth century Arian Controversy) in the Godhead. For example, Hanson defines Sabellianism as the “refusal to acknowledge the distinct existence of the Persons” and “Eustathius was condemned for Sabellianism. His insistence that there is only one distinct reality (hypostasis) in the Godhead, and his confusion about distinguishing Father, Son and Holy Spirit laid him open to such a charge.”⁶³ Condemned as heresy, Sabellianism has been rejected by the majority of Christian churches.

Sabellianism is one of “The Seven Deadly Sins.” See Chapter 6, for a more extensive presentation.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism (from Ancient Greek: γνωστικός, (*gnōstikós*), Koine Greek: [ɣnosti'kos], ‘having

⁵⁸ Goodrick-Clarke, Nickolas (2002). *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity*. New York & London: New York University Press, 182.

⁵⁹ Pagels, Elaine (1979). *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 37.

⁶⁰ Holroyd, Stuart (1994). *The Elements of Gnosticism*. Dorset: Element Books Limited, 37.

⁶¹ NOTE: This is *not* a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. The word means “Universal.”

⁶² Roukema, Riemer (1998). *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 130.

⁶³ Hanson, Richard Patrick Crosland (1988). *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 318-381.

knowledge') is a collection of religious ideas and systems that coalesced in the late First Century AD among Jewish and early Christian sects. These various groups emphasized personal spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) above the proto-orthodox teachings, traditions, and authority of religious institutions.

Gnostic cosmogony generally presents a distinction between a supreme, hidden God and a malevolent lesser divinity (sometimes associated with the biblical deity Yahweh)⁶⁴ who is responsible for creating the material universe. Consequently, Gnostics considered material existence flawed or evil, and held the principal element of salvation to be direct knowledge of the hidden divinity, attained via mystical or esoteric insight. Many Gnostic texts deal not in concepts of sin and repentance, but with illusion and enlightenment.⁶⁵

Chapter 2 presents a thorough examination of Gnosticism.

Marcionism

Marcionism was an early Christian dualistic belief system that originated with the teachings of Marcion of Sinope in Rome around AD 144.⁶⁶ Marcion was an early Christian theologian, evangelist, and an important figure in early Christianity.⁶⁷ He was the son of a bishop of Sinope in Pontus. About the middle of the Second century (140–155) he traveled to Rome, where he joined the Syrian Gnostic Cerdo.^{68 69}

Marcion preached that the benevolent God of the Gospel who sent Jesus Christ into the world as the savior was the true Supreme Being, different and opposed to the malevolent

⁶⁴ Pagels, Elaine (1989). "One God, One Bishop: The Politics of Monotheism." *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 28–47.

⁶⁵ Pagels (1989), xx.

⁶⁶ 115 years and 6 months from the Crucifixion of Jesus, according to Tertullian's reckoning in *Adversus Marcionem*, XV.

⁶⁷ Dunn, James D. G. (2016). "The Apostle of the Heretics: Paul, Valentinus, and Marcion". In Porter, Stanley E.; Yoon, David (eds.). *Paul and Gnosis. Pauline Studies*. Vol. 9. Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 105–118.

⁶⁸ Cerdo (Greek: Κέρδων) was a Syrian Gnostic who was deemed a heretic by the Early Church around the time of his teaching, circa AD 138. Cerdo started out as a follower of Simon Magus, like Basilides and Saturninus, and taught at about the same time as Valentinus and Marcion. According to Irenaeus, he was a contemporary of the Roman bishop Hyginus, residing in Rome as a prominent member of the Church until his forced expulsion therefrom.

He taught that there were two gods, one that demanded obedience while the other was good and merciful. According to Cerdo, the former was the God of the Old Testament who had created the world. He also said that the latter God was superior but that he was only known through his son, Jesus. Like later Gnostics, he was a docetist who rejected the bodily resurrection of the dead.

⁶⁹ *History of the Christian Church*, Volume II: Ante-Nicene Christianity. AD 100–325. Marcion and his School by Philip Schaff.

Demiurge or creator god, identified with the Hebrew God of the Old Testament.⁷⁰ He considered himself a follower of Paul the Apostle, whom he believed to have been the only true apostle of Jesus Christ.

Marcionism is one of “The Seven Deadly Sins: Heresies that Nearly Destroyed Christianity.” See Chapter 5, for a more extensive presentation.

Monarchianism

Monarchianism is a doctrine that emphasizes God as one indivisible being,⁷¹ in direct contrast to Trinitarianism, which defines the Godhead as three co-eternal, consubstantial, co-immanent, and equally divine hypostases.

During the patristic period, Christian theologians attempted to clarify the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁷² Monarchianism developed in the Second century and persisted further into the Third century. Monarchianism (from the Greek *monarkhia*, meaning “ruling of one,” and *-ismos*, meaning “practice or teaching”) stresses the absolute, uncompromising unity of God in contrast to the doctrine of the Trinity,⁷³ which is often lambasted as veiled tritheism by nontrinitarian Christians and other monotheists.⁷⁴

Modalism

Modalism, also known as Modalistic Monarchianism or Oneness Christology, is a Christian theology upholding the oneness of God as well as the divinity of Jesus. As a form of Monarchianism, it stands in contrast with Trinitarianism. Followers of Modalistic Monarchianism considers themselves to be strictly monotheistic, similar to Jews and Muslims. Modalists consider God to be absolutely one and believe that He reveals Himself to creation through different “modes” (or “manifestations”), such as the Father,

⁷⁰ BeDuhn, Jason (2015). “The New Marcion” (PDF). *Forum*. 3 (Fall 2015): 165.

⁷¹ Gerber, Simon (2018). “Monarchianism”. In Hunter, David G.; van Geest, Paul J. J.; Lietaert Peerbolte, Bert Jan (eds.). *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers; *Encyclopædia Britannica*: Monarchianism; “Monarchianism” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2005). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷² McGrath, Alister E. (2013). *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Second ed.). Wiley-Blackwell, 54.

⁷³ Tuggy, Dale (2020). “Trinity” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

⁷⁴ di Berardino, Angelo; Studer, B (2014). *Encyclopedia of ancient Christianity*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Son, and the Holy Ghost, without limiting His modes or manifestations.⁷⁵ However, Merriam-Webster defines Modalistic Monarchianism as “Monarchianism holding that Jesus Christ was not a distinct person of the Trinity but was rather one of three successive modes or manifestations of God.”⁷⁶ The term Modalism was first used by Trinitarian scholar Adolf von Harnack, referencing this belief.

In this view, all the Godhead is understood to have dwelt in Jesus from the incarnation as a manifestation of Yahweh of the Old Testament. The terms “Father” and “Son” are then used to describe the distinction between the transcendence of God and the incarnation (God in immanence).⁷⁷ Lastly, since God is a spirit, it is held that the Holy Spirit should not be understood as a separate entity but rather to describe God in action.

Modalistic Monarchianism is closely related to Sabellianism and Patripassianism, two ancient theologies condemned as heresy in the Great Church and successive state church of the Roman Empire.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Bernard, David (1993). “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost”. *The Oneness of God*. Weldon Spring, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, Word Aflame Press. “The Bible speaks of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as different manifestations, roles, modes, titles, attributes, relationships to man, or functions of the one God, but it does not refer to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as three persons, personalities, wills, minds, or Gods. God is the Father of us all and in a unique way the Father of the man Jesus Christ. God manifested Himself in flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, called the Son of God. God is also called the Holy Spirit, which emphasizes His activity in the lives and affairs of mankind. God is not limited to these three manifestations; however, in the glorious revelation of the one God, the New Testament does not deviate from the strict monotheism of the Old Testament. Rather, the Bible presents Jesus as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Jesus is not just the manifestation of one of three persons in the Godhead, but He is the incarnation of the Father, the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Truly, in Jesus dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” ***Be a Berean! This is the error of Oneness Pentecostalism!***

⁷⁶ “Definition of Modalistic Monarchianism” in *Merriam-Webster*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

⁷⁷ “Monarchianism | Christianity” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. “Modalistic Monarchianism took exception to the ‘subordinationism’ of some of the Church Fathers and maintained that the names Father and Son were only different designations of the same subject, the one God, who ‘with reference to the relations in which He had previously stood to the world is called the Father, but in reference to his appearance in humanity is called the Son.’ It was taught by Praxeas, a priest from Asia Minor, in Rome about 206 and was opposed by Tertullian in the tract *Adversus Praxeum* (c. 213), an important contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity.”

⁷⁸ “Sabellianism” in *Catholic Answers*. Retrieved July 20, 2024. In 382 the Council of Rome, with Pope Damasus I presiding, condemned the heresy, stating, “We anathematize those also who follow the error of Sabellius in saying that the same one is both Father and Son” (Tome of Pope Damasus, 2); “Sabellianism”. *Banner of Truth USA*. (May 18, 2016). Retrieved July 20, 2024. The revelations of Father and Son therefore, to Sabellius, belonged to the past, and the Church now was the Church of the Spirit, and after the end of the age, there would just be God, who would be neither Father, Son, nor Spirit. His teaching was rightly condemned by the Church, which understood that it strikes at the very foundations of Christianity.

It should be noted that the United Pentecostal Church of today openly teaches modalism. T.D. Jakes, pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas, is perhaps the best known modern example of one who teaches modalism. Other modern equivalents: Oneness Pentecostals; Unitarianism. Branhamism (Oneness Theology of William Branham), and Swedenborgianism.

Patripassianism

In Christian theology, historically patripassianism (as it is referred to in the Western church) is a version of Sabellianism in the Eastern church (and a version of modalism, modalistic monarchianism, or modal monarchism). Modalism is the belief that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three different modes or emanations of one monadic God, as perceived by the believer, rather than three distinct persons within the Godhead and that there are no real or substantial differences between the three, such that the identity of the Spirit or the Son is that of the Father.⁷⁹

In the West, a version of this belief was known pejoratively as patripassianism by its critics (from Latin *patri-*, “father”, and *passio*, “suffering”) because they alleged that the teaching required that since God the Father had become directly incarnate in Christ, the Father literally sacrificed himself on the cross.⁸⁰

From the standpoint of the doctrine of the Trinity, with one divine being existing in three persons, patripassianism is considered heretical by some Christian churches since “it simply cannot make sense of the New Testament’s teaching on the interpersonal relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit.”⁸¹ In this, patripassianism asserts that God the Father—rather than God the Son—became incarnate and suffered on the cross for humanity’s redemption. This amplifies the personhood of Jesus Christ as the personality of the Father, but is seen by trinitarians as distorting the spiritual transaction of atonement that was taking place at the cross, which the Apostle Paul described: “God [the Trinity] was reconciling the world to himself in Christ [the Son], not counting people’s sins against them. [...] God [the Trinity] made him who had no sin [Jesus of Nazareth] to be sin for us, so that in him [the Son] we might become the righteousness of God [the Trinity].”⁸²

⁷⁹ Stokes, G.T. (1877-1887). “Sabellianism” ed. William Smith and Henry Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*. London: John Murray, 567.

⁸⁰ Cairns, Alan (2002). *Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 285.

⁸¹ Trueman, Carl R (November 2014). Glomsrud, Ryan (ed.), “Trinitarianism 101”, *Modern Reformation* 23:6, 16–19.

⁸² 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Patripassianism is attested as early as the Second century; theologians such as Praxeas speak of God as unipersonal.⁸³ Patripassianism was referred to as a belief ascribed to those following Sabellianism, after a chief proponent, Sabellius, especially by the chief opponent Tertullian, who also opposed Praexas. Sabellius, considered a founder of an early movement, was a priest who was excommunicated from the Church by the Bishop of Rome Callixtus I in 220 and lived in Rome. Sabellius advanced the doctrine of one God sometimes referred to as the “economic Trinity” and he opposed the orthodox doctrine of the “essential Trinity,” Praxeas and Noetus were some major followers.

Psilanthropism

Denial of the virgin birth of Jesus is found among various groups and individuals throughout the history of Christianity. These groups and individuals often took an approach to Christology that understands Jesus to be human, the literal son of human parents.⁸⁴ This heresy claimed that Jesus Christ was merely human since he either never became divine or because he did not exist prior to his incarnation.

In the Nineteenth Century, this view was sometimes called psilanthropism, a term that derives from the combination of the Greek ψιλός (*psilós*), “plain”, “mere” or “bare,” and ἄνθρωπος (*ánthrōpos*) “human.” Psilanthropists then generally denied both the virgin birth of Jesus and his divinity. Denial of the virgin birth is distinct from adoptionism and may or may not be present in beliefs described as adoptionist.

The group most closely associated with denial of the virgin birth were the Ebionites. However, Jerome does not say that all Ebionites denied the virgin birth, but only contrasts their view with the acceptance of the doctrine on the part of a related group, the Nazarenes.⁸⁵

The view was rejected by the ecumenical councils, especially in the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325), which was convened to deal directly with the nature of Christ’s

⁸³ Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, Ch. 1.

⁸⁴ McGuckin, John Anthony (2004). *The Westminster handbook to patristic theology*, 286; Wiley, Tatha (2003). *Thinking of Christ: proclamation, explanation, meaning*, 257.

⁸⁵ Machen, J. Gresham (1958) [First pub. Harper: 1930]. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. London: James Clarke & Co. 22–36. Apparently Jerome does not say in so many words that the Ebionites denied the virgin birth. But he seems to contrast their view with the acceptance of the doctrine on the part of the Nazarenes. In one place, Epiphanius says that he does not [...] the terminology (at least) differs; for by these writers those who accepted the virgin birth are called “Nazarenes,” while the term Ebionites is reserved for those who denied it. Epiphanius’ terminology has been followed by some scholars[.]; Ådna, Jostein (2005). *The Formation of the Early Church*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 269. “...he makes a distinction between two kinds of Ebionites: one group denied the virgin birth, others did not. When describing the latter group, Eusebius notes that, despite the fact that they accepted the virgin birth, they were still heretics...”

divinity.⁸⁶

In the last two years, several noted Biblical scholars, churchmen, and theologians have notably rejected the virgin birth of Jesus. This list, though not complete, includes:

- * Albrecht Ritschl, nineteenth-century German Lutheran theologian, considered one of the fathers of Liberal Protestantism.⁸⁷
- * Harry Emerson Fosdick, American Baptist pastor, prominent proponent of Liberal Protestantism. In a famous 1922 sermon delivered from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church in New York, titled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”, Fosdick called the Virgin Birth into question, saying it required belief in “a special biological miracle.”⁸⁸
- * Fritz Barth, Swiss Reformed minister, and father of Karl Barth. Fritz’s views cost him at least two significant promotions.⁸⁹
- * James A. Pike, Episcopal bishop of California (1958–1966), who first declared his doubt about the Virgin Birth in the December 21, 1960 issue of the journal *Christian Century*.⁹⁰
- * Martin Luther King’s private writings show that he rejected biblical literalism; he described the Bible as “mythological”, doubted that Jesus was born of a virgin and did not believe that the story of Jonah and the whale was true.⁹¹
- * John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal bishop of Newark, author of *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, who following feminist scholar Jane Schaberg, wrote that, “A God who can be seen in the limp form of a convicted criminal dying alone on a cross on Calvary can surely also be seen in an illegitimate baby boy born through

⁸⁶ Carr, A. Wesley (2005). *Angels and Principalities*, Cambridge University Press, 131.

⁸⁷ Frei, Hans Wilhelm (March 18, 2018). “Albrecht Ritschl, “*Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

⁸⁸ Mohler Jr, R. Albert (December 24, 2003). “Can a Christian deny the Virgin Birth?” *BaptistPress.com*. First Person. Southern Baptist Convention. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

⁸⁹ Dustin Resch (2016), *Barth’s Interpretation of the Virgin Birth: A Sign of Mystery*. New York: Routledge. “...to have cost him at least two significant promotions. Even given the unhappy consequences of Fritz Barth’s denial of the virgin birth, such a position was well established in the mainstream of European biblical and theological scholarship.”

⁹⁰ Robertson, David M. (2004). *A Passionate Pilgrim: A Biography of Bishop James A. Pike*. New York: Knopf; Douthat, Ross (2012). *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. New York: Free Press, 89–90.

⁹¹ Chakko Kuruwila, Matthai (January 15, 2007). “Writings show King as liberal Christian, rejecting literalism”. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Archived from the original on June 29, 2022. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

the aggressive and selfish act of a man sexually violating a teenage girl.”⁹²

- ✧ Marcus J. Borg, prominent member of the Jesus Seminar, author of numerous books, and co-author of *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, who viewed the birth stories as “metaphorical narratives”, and stated, “I do not think the virginal conception is historical, and I do not think there was a special star or wise men or shepherds or birth in a stable in Bethlehem. Thus I do not see these stories as historical reports but as literary creations.”⁹³
- ✧ John Dominic Crossan, prominent member of the Jesus Seminar, author of *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, who has stated, “I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus’ status and not a biological statement about Mary’s body. It is later faith in Jesus as an adult retrojected mythologically onto Jesus as an infant.”⁹⁴
- ✧ Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar, and author of *Honest to Jesus*, who has asserted, “We can be certain that Mary did not conceive Jesus without the assistance of human sperm. It is unclear whether Joseph or some other unnamed male was the biological father of Jesus. It is possible that Jesus was illegitimate.”⁹⁵
- ✧ Jane Schaberg, feminist biblical scholar and author of *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, who contended that Matthew and Luke were aware that Jesus had been conceived illegitimately, probably as a result of rape, and had left hints of that knowledge, even though their main purpose was to explore the theological significance of Jesus’ birth.⁹⁶
- ✧ Uta Ranke-Heinemann, who contends that the virgin birth of Jesus was meant—and should be understood—as an allegory of a special initiative of God, comparable to God’s creation of Adam, and in line with legends and allegories of antiquity.⁹⁷
- ✧ David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham from 1984 until 1994, was the first senior Anglicanclergyman to come to the attention of the UK media for his position that “I wouldn’t put it past God to arrange a virgin birth if he wanted. But I don’t think he

⁹² Spong, John Shelby (1992). *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, HarperSanFrancisco, 185.

⁹³ Borg, Marcus J. (1998). “The Meaning of the Birth Stories”, in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, HarperSanFrancisco, 179.

⁹⁴ Crossan, John Dominic (1994). *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, HarperSanFrancisco, 23.

⁹⁵ Funk, Robert W. (1996). *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium*. HarperSanFrancisco, 294.

⁹⁶ Schaberg, Jane (1987). *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*. Harper & Row, 33-34. [Reprint: Crossroad, 1990. Expanded 20th Anniversary Edition: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006.]

⁹⁷ Ranke-Heinemann, Uta (1990). *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*. Garden City: Doubleday.

did.”⁹⁸

- * Gerd Lüdemann, German New Testament scholar and historian, member of the Jesus Seminar, and author of *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*, argued that early Christians had developed the idea of a virgin birth as a later “reaction to the report, meant as a slander but historically correct, that Jesus was conceived or born outside wedlock. It has a historical foundation in the fact that Jesus really did have another father than Joseph and was in fact fathered before Mary’s marriage, presumably through rape.”⁹⁹
- * Robin Meyers, United Church of Christ minister, proponent of Progressive Christianity, and author of *Saving Jesus From the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. Asserts that “A beautiful, but obviously contrived, tale is the virgin birth, which may have been used to cover a scandal.”¹⁰⁰

Sethianism

Sethianism was Gnostic heresy which believed that the serpent (Satan) in the Garden of Eden was an agent of God, who helped bring knowledge of truth to humanity through the fall. The Sethians (Greek: Σεθιανοί) were one of the main currents of Gnosticism during the Second and Third century AD, along with Valentinianism and Basilideanism. According to John D. Turner, it originated in the Second century AD as a fusion of two distinct Hellenistic Judaic philosophies and was influenced by Christianity and Middle Platonism.¹⁰¹ However, the exact origin of Sethianism is not properly understood.¹⁰²

Gnostic Sethianism contained a doctrine of cosmic ages that Manichaeism developed as a cosmogony after the Zoroastrian model, using peripheral older Iranian traditions in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Sogdian forms. For three generations there has been scholarly debate about an Iranian background for Gnosticism. The question is a good one as concerns the *salvator-salvandus* idea, the heavenly journey of the soul, anticosmic dualism, and the dualism of light and darkness. Iranian influence would be on the nonhistorical surface, but Iranian (mostly Zoroastrian or Zurvanite) structures of thought

⁹⁸ Nineham, Dennis (September 4, 2016). “The Right Rev David Jenkins obituary.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

⁹⁹ Lüdemann, Gerd (1998). *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*. London: SCM Press; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 60, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Meyers, Robin R. (2009). *Saving Jesus From the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. HarperOne, 40.

¹⁰¹ Turner, John D. (2001), *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, Presses Université Laval, 257.

¹⁰² Rasimus, Tuomas (October 31, 2009). *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Retaining Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence*. Leiden: Brill, 9.

played a role in dialectical historical processes that in many places led to central Gnostic statements.¹⁰³

Sethianism attributed its *gnosis* to Seth, third son of Eve and Adam, and Norea, wife of Noah, who also plays a role in Mandeism and Manicheanism. The Sethian cosmogonic myth gives a prologue to Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, presenting a radical reinterpretation of the orthodox Jewish conception of creation, and the divine's relation to reality. The Sethian cosmogony is most famously contained in the *Apocryphon of John*, which describes an Unknown God.¹⁰⁴ Many of the Sethian concepts derived from a fusion of Platonic or Neoplatonic concepts with the Old Testament, as was common in Hellenistic Judaism, exemplified by Philo (20 BC–AD 40).

The addition of the prologue radically alters the significance of events in Eden. Rather than emphasizing a fall of human weakness in breaking God's command, Sethians (and their inheritors) emphasize a crisis of the Divine Fullness as it encounters the ignorance of matter, as depicted in stories about Sophia. Eve and Adam's removal from the Archon's paradise is seen as a step towards freedom from the Archons. Therefore, the snake in the Garden of Eden becomes a heroic, salvific figure rather than an adversary of humanity or a "proto-Satan." Eating the fruit of Knowledge is the first act of human salvation from cruel, oppressive powers.

Interestingly, a form of Sethianism still exists in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons). Despite their claims to the contrary, Mormonism has a faulty Christology, thus making the LDS Church a cult of Christianity and not historically Christian in their theology. Whereas Sethianism considers the snake in the Garden of Eden as a "heroic, salvific figure," Mormonism teaches that the snake was actually Lucifer, who they maintain was also a "son of God," and the brother of Jesus.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe said that "in Joseph Smith's philosophy of existence Adam and Eve were raised to a foremost place among the children of men, second only to the Savior. Their act was to be acclaimed. They were the greatest figures of the ages. *The so-called 'fall' became a necessary, honorable act in carrying out the plan of the*

¹⁰³ Colpe, Carsten (1999–2003). "Iranian Religions," In *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (2:737). Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill.

¹⁰⁴ In contrast to cataphatic theology, which describes God through a series of positive statements such as omniscient and omnipotent, the Sethian mythology approaches God by Apophatic theology ("negative theology"), stating that God is immovable, invisible, intangible, ineffable.

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, Milton R. (1945). *The Gospel Through the Ages*. Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallace, 15. "The appointment of Jesus to be the savior of the world was contested by one of the other sons of God. He was called Lucifer, son of the morning."

Almighty."¹⁰⁶ Sterling W. Sill, a member of the First Quorum of Seventy, added, "Adam fell, but he fell upward. Jesus says to us, 'Come up higher.'"¹⁰⁷

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and this form of Gnosticism is still among us.

Basilideanism

22

The Basilidians or Basilideans were a Gnostic sect founded by Basilides of Alexandria in the Second century. Basilides claimed to have been taught his doctrines by Glaucus, a disciple of Peter, though others stated he was a disciple of the Simonian Menander.

Basilides enjoined on his followers, like Pythagoras, a silence of five years. They kept the anniversary of the day of the baptism of Jesus as a feast day¹⁰⁸ and spent the eve of it in reading. Basilides also instructed his followers not to scruple eating things offered to idols. The sect had three grades—material, intellectual and spiritual—and possessed two allegorical statues, male and female. The sect's doctrines were often similar to those of the Ophites¹⁰⁹ and later Jewish Kabbalah.

Basilideanism survived until the end of the Fourth century as Epiphanius knew of Basilideans living in the Nile Delta. It was however almost exclusively limited to Egypt, though according to Sulpicius Severus it seems to have found an entrance into Spain through a certain Mark from Memphis. Jerome states that the Priscillianists were infected with it.

The descriptions of the Basilidian system given by our chief informants, Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses*) and Hippolytus (*Philosophumena*), are so strongly divergent that they seem to many quite irreconcilable. According to Hippolytus, Basilides was apparently a pantheistic evolutionist; and according to Irenaeus, a dualist and an emanationist. Historians such as Philip Shaff have the opinion that "Irenaeus described a form of Basilideanism which was not the original, but a later corruption of the system. On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria surely, and Hippolytus, in the fuller account of his *Philosophumena*, probably drew their knowledge of the system directly from Basilides' own work, the *Exegetica*, and hence represent the form of doctrine taught by Basilides

¹⁰⁶ Widtsoe, John A. (1951). *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth, Prophet of God*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 160.

¹⁰⁷ Sill, Sterling W. (July 31, 1965). *Deseret News*, Church Section, July 31, 1965, page 7.

¹⁰⁸ Clement, *Stromata*. i. 21 § 18.

¹⁰⁹ A Gnostic heretical sect which held that the God who forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge is the enemy, while the serpent (Satan) who tempted them was a hero. This sort of reversal of good and evil is typical and common across Gnostic heresies.

himself,”¹¹⁰

The fundamental theme of the Basilidean system is the question concerning the origin of evil and how to overcome it.¹¹¹ A cosmographical feature common to many forms of Gnosticism is the idea that the *Logos Spermatikos* is scattered into the sensible cosmos, where it is the duty of the Gnostics, by whatever means, to recollect these scattered seed-members of the Logos and return them to their proper places¹¹² (cf. the *Gospel of Eve*¹¹³).

“Their whole system,” says Clement, “is a confusion of the *Panspermia*¹¹⁴ (All-seed) with the *Phylokrinesis* (Difference-in-kind) and the return of things thus confused to their own places.”

THIRD CENTURY HERESIES

Novatianism

Novatianism or Novationism was an early Christian sect devoted to the theologian Novatian (c. 200–258) that held a strict view that refused readmission to communion of *lapsi* (those baptized Christians who had denied their faith or performed the formalities of a ritual sacrifice to the pagan gods under the pressures of the persecution sanctioned by Emperor Decius in AD 250). The Church of Rome declared the Novatianists heretical following the letters of Saint Cyprian of Carthage¹¹⁵ and Ambrose written against them.¹¹⁶

Novatian theology was heavily influenced by Tertullian, and made heavy use of his

¹¹⁰ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, page 178, note 7.

¹¹¹ Epiphanius, *Haer.* xxiv. 6.

¹¹² Pulver, Max (1955). “Jesus’ Round Dance and Crucifixion.” In Campbell, Joseph (ed.). *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 177. But in Gnosticism ... the suffering of the Redeemer implies not his real death, but his descent into the hyle (matter) and the gathering of the spermata in the hyle.

¹¹³ The Gospel of Eve is an almost entirely lost text from the New Testament apocrypha, which may be the same as the also lost Gospel of Perfection.

¹¹⁴ Panspermia [from Ancient Greek πᾶν (*pan*) ‘all’, and σπέρμα (*sperma*) ‘seed’] is the hypothesis that life exists throughout the Universe, distributed by space dust, meteoroids, asteroids, comets, and planetoids, as well as by spacecraft carrying unintended contamination by microorganisms, known as directed panspermia. The theory argues that life did not originate on Earth, but instead evolved somewhere else and seeded life as we know it.

¹¹⁵ “*Catholic Encyclopedia: Novatian and Novatianism.*” NewAdvent.org. 1911-02-01. Archived from the original on April 3, 2019. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

¹¹⁶ “*Church Fathers: Concerning Repentance, Book I (Ambrose).*” www.newadvent.org. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

writings.¹¹⁷ Novatian's strict views existed before him and may be found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*.¹¹⁸ After his death, the Novatianist sect spread rapidly and could be found in every province and were very numerous in some places. Those who allied themselves with his doctrines were called *Novatianists*, but they called themselves *καθαροί* (*katharoi*) or "Purists" (not to be confused with the later Cathars)¹¹⁹ to reflect their desire not to be identified with what they considered the lax practices of a corrupted and what was hitherto a universal Church.

While Novatian had refused absolution to the *lapsi* (those who had renounced their Christianity under persecution but later wanted to return to the church), his followers extended the doctrine to include all mortal sins (idolatry, murder, and adultery, or fornication). Most of them forbade second marriage. They always had a successor of Novatian at Rome and were everywhere governed by bishops. Novatianism survived until the eighth century.¹²⁰

FOURTH CENTURY HERESIES

Arianism

Arianism (*Ἀρειανισμός*, *Areianismós*)¹²¹ is a Christological doctrine considered heretical by all modern mainstream branches of Christianity.¹²² It is first attributed to Arius (c. AD 256–336),¹²³ a Christian presbyter who preached and studied in Alexandria, Egypt. Arian theology holds that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who was begotten by God the Father with the difference that the Son of God did not always exist but was

¹¹⁷ "Novatian." earlychristianwritings.com. Retrieved July 25, 2024; Novatian (translated by Robert Ernest Wallis (2012). *The Sacred Writings of Novatian* (Annotated ed.). Jazzybee Verlag.

¹¹⁸ Stokes, G. T. (1911). "Novatianus and Novatianism", *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography*, (Henry Wace, ed.). London: John Muray.

¹¹⁹ "Philip Schaff: ANF05. Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix— Christian Classics Ethereal Library". www.ccel.org. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

¹²⁰ "Novatian." earlychristianwritings.com. Retrieved July 25, 2024.

¹²¹ Brennecke, Hanns Christof (2018). "Arianism". In Hunter, David G.; van Geest, Paul J.J.; Lietaert Peerbolte, Bert Jan (eds.). *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers.

¹²² Witherington, B. (2007). *The Living Word of God: Rethinking the Theology of the Bible*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 241.

¹²³ Berndt, Guido M.; Steinacher, Roland (2014). *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (First ed.). London and New York: Routledge; Kohler, Kaufmann; Krauss, Samuel. "ARIANISM". *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Kopelman Foundation. Archived from the original. Retrieved August 3, 2024.

begotten/made¹²⁴ before time by God the Father;¹²⁵ therefore, Jesus was not coeternal with God the Father, but nonetheless Jesus began to exist outside time.¹²⁶

There was a controversy between two interpretations of Jesus's divinity (Homoousianism and Arianism) based upon the theological orthodoxy of the time, one trinitarian and the other also a derivative of trinitarian orthodoxy,¹²⁷ and each of them attempted to solve its respective theological dilemmas.¹²⁸ Homoousianism was formally affirmed by the first two ecumenical councils;¹²⁹ since then, Arianism has been condemned as "the heresy or sect of Arius."¹³⁰ Trinitarian (Homoousian) doctrines were vigorously upheld by Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria, who insisted that Jesus (God the Son) was "same in being" or "same in essence" with God the Father. Arius stated: "If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not."¹³¹ The ecumenical First Council of Nicaea of 325 declared Arianism to be a heresy.

According to Everett Ferguson, "The great majority of Christians had no clear views about the nature of the Trinity and they did not understand what was at stake in the issues that surrounded it."¹³²

The modern equivalent to Arianism: Jehovah's Witnesses conform exactly; a similar position exists in Christadelphians and extreme Unitarians. Also, the Children of God, International Church of Ageless Wisdom, and The Way International.

Arianism was one of the most significant heresies that the Church faced in her early years.

¹²⁴ Davis, Leo Donald (1990). *The first seven ecumenical councils (325–787) p. 52: their history and theology*. Georgetown University Law Library. Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press. Arius used the two words as synonyms.

¹²⁵ Davis (1990). *The first seven ecumenical councils*. Arius believed that Jesus came into existence before time existed.

¹²⁶ Newman, John H. (1833). *The Arians of the Fourth Century, Their Doctrine, Temper, and Conduct, Chiefly as Exhibited in the Councils of the Church, Between AD 325 & AD 381*. London: J.G. & F. Rivington, Chapters 1-5. Jesus was considered a creature but not like the other creatures.

¹²⁷ Phan, Peter C. (2011). *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge University Press, 6.

¹²⁸ Galli, Mark and Ted Olsen (2000). "Athanasius: Five-Time Exile for Fighting 'Orthodoxy'." In *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 17-19.

¹²⁹ These were the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and the Council of Constantinople in AD 381.

¹³⁰ Johnson, Samuel (1828). *A Dictionary of the English Language: In Which the Words Are Deduced from their Originals; and Illustrated in Their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers*. London: Reeves and Turner.

¹³¹ Galli (2000), 17-18.

¹³² Ferguson, Everett (2005). *Church History*. Vol. 1: From Christ to pre-Reformation. New York: Harper Collins, 267.

Accordingly, a much more detailed explanation of Arianism can be found in Chapter 7.

Donatism

Donatism was a Christian sect leading to a schism in the Church, in the region of the Church of Carthage,¹³³ from the fourth to the sixth centuries. Donatists argued that Christian clergy must be faultless for their ministry to be effective and their prayers and sacraments to be valid.¹³⁴ Donatism had its roots in the long-established Christian community of the Roman province Africa Proconsularis (present-day Tunisia, the northeast of Algeria, and the western coast of Libya) and Mauretania Tingitana (roughly with the northern part of present-day Morocco),¹³⁵ in the persecutions of Christians under Diocletian. Named after the Berber Christian bishop Donatus Magnus, Donatism flourished during the fourth and fifth centuries.¹³⁶ Donatism mainly spread among the indigenous Berber population,¹³⁷ and Donatists were able to blend Christianity with many of the Berber local customs.¹³⁸

The Roman governor of North Africa, lenient to the large Christian minority under his rule throughout the Diocletianic Persecutions,¹³⁹ was satisfied when Christians handed over their scriptures as a token repudiation of faith. When the persecution ended, Christians who did so were called *traditores*¹⁴⁰ — “those who handed (the holy things) over” — by their critics (who were mainly from the poorer classes).¹⁴¹

Like third-century Novatianism, the Donatists were rigorists; the church must be a church of “saints” (not “sinners”), and sacraments administered by *traditores* were invalid.

¹³³ The Church of Carthage, also known as the Archdiocese of Carthage, was a Latin Church established in Carthage, Roman Empire, in the Second century. [The Latin Church (Latin: *Ecclesia Latina*) is the largest of the 24 autonomous churches within the Roman Catholic Church].

¹³⁴ Thompson, J. (2022). *Lists from Church History*. Faithlife.

¹³⁵ Nelson, Harold D. (1985). *Morocco, a Country Study*. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Press, 8.

¹³⁶ Cantor, Norman F. (1994). *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. New York: Harper Perennial, 51f.

¹³⁷ Falola, Toyin (2017). *Ancient African Christianity: An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition*. Abingdon, England: Taylor & Francis, 344-345.

¹³⁸ Wilhit, David E. (2002). *Key Events in African History: A Reference Guide*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 68.

¹³⁹ Gaddis, Michael (2005). *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 29. The Diocletianic or Great Persecution was the last and most severe persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire.

¹⁴⁰ *Traditor*, plural: *traditores* (Latin), is a term meaning “the one(s) who had handed over” and defined by Merriam-Webster as “one of the Christians giving up to the officers of the law the Scriptures, the sacred vessels, or the names of their brethren during the Roman persecutions.” The word *traditor* comes from the Latin *transditio* from *trans* (across) + *dare* (to hand, to give), and is the source of the modern English words *traitor* and *treason*.

¹⁴¹ Cantor (1994), 51.

In 311 Caecilian (a new bishop of Carthage) was consecrated by Felix of Aptungi, an alleged *traditor*. His opponents consecrated Majorinus, a short-lived rival who was succeeded by Donatus.¹⁴²

Two years later, a commission appointed by Pope Miltiades condemned the Donatists. They persisted, seeing themselves as the true Church with valid sacraments. Because of their association with the Circumcellions,¹⁴³ the Donatists were repressed by Roman authorities. Although they had local support, their opponents were supported by Rome and by the rest of the Catholic Church. The Donatists were still a force during the lifetime of Augustine of Hippo, and disappeared only after the seventh- and eighth-century Muslim conquest. The Donatists refused to accept the sacraments and spiritual authority of priests and bishops who were *traditores* during the persecution. The *traditores* had returned to positions of authority under Constantine I; according to the Donatists, sacraments administered by the *traditores* were invalid.¹⁴⁴

Augustine of Hippo campaigned against Donatism as bishop; through his efforts, orthodoxy gained the upper hand. According to Augustine and the church, the validity of sacraments was a property of the priesthood independent of individual character. Influenced by the Old Testament, he believed in discipline as a means of education.¹⁴⁵

In his letter to Vincentius, Augustine used the New Testament Parable of the Great Banquet to justify using force against the Donatists: “You are of opinion that no one should be compelled to follow righteousness; and yet you read that the householder said to his servants, ‘Whomsoever ye shall find, compel them to come in.’”¹⁴⁶

In 409, Emperor Honorius’s secretary of state, Marcellinus of Carthage, issued a decree

¹⁴² Chapman, John (1909). “Donatists.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Public domain.

¹⁴³ The Circumcellions or Agonistici [A’Becket, John Joseph (1913). “Agonistici”. In Herbermann, Charles (ed.). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company] (as called by Donatists) were bands of Roman Christian radicals in North Africa in the early to mid-Fourth century. [Cross, F.L. ed. (2005). “Circumcellions”. *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church*. New York: Oxford University Press.] They were considered heretical by the Roman Church. They were initially concerned with remedying social grievances, but they became linked with the Donatist sect. They condemned poverty and slavery, and advocated canceling debt and freeing slaves [Durant, Will (1972). *The Age of Faith*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 47-48]. The term “Circumcellions” may have been coined or mocked by critics who referred to them as “*circum cellas euntes*”, they go around larders, because “they roved about among the peasants, living on those they sought to indoctrinate” [A’Becket (1913)].

¹⁴⁴ Chapman (1909).

¹⁴⁵ Brown, P. (1967). *Augustine of Hippo*. London: Faber & Faber.

¹⁴⁶ Augustine. “How it is legitimate to ‘coerce’ Donatist Christians to join the Catholic Church.” Archived from the original on September 25, 2014. Retrieved August 3, 2024.

which condemned the Donatists as heretical and demanded that they surrender their churches. This was made possible by a *collatio* in which St. Augustine legally proved that Constantine had chosen the Nicene church over the Donatists as the imperial church. The Donatists were persecuted by the Roman authorities to such a degree that Augustine protested their treatment.

The effects of Augustine's theological success and the emperor's legal action were somewhat reversed when the Vandals conquered North Africa. Donatism may have also gradually declined because Donatists and orthodox Catholics were equally marginalised by the Arian Vandals,¹⁴⁷ but it survived the Vandal occupation and Justinian I's Byzantine reconquest. Although it is unknown how long Donatism persisted, some Christian historians believe that the schism and its ensuing unrest in the Christian community facilitated the seventh-century Muslim conquest of the region.¹⁴⁸

Apollinarianism

Apollinarism or Apollinarianism is a Christological heresy proposed by Apollinaris of Laodicea (died 390) that argues that Jesus had a human body and sensitive human soul, but a divine mind and not a human rational mind, the Divine Logos¹⁴⁹ taking the place of the latter.

The Trinity had been recognized at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, but debate about exactly what it meant continued. A rival to the more common belief that Jesus Christ had two natures (human and divine) was monophysitism ("one nature"), the doctrine that Christ had only one nature. Apollinarism and Eutychianism were two forms of monophysitism. Apollinaris's rejection of Christ having a human mind was considered an over-reaction to Arianism and its teaching that Christ was a lesser god.¹⁵⁰

Theodoret charged Apollinaris with confounding the persons of the Godhead and giving in to the heretical ways of Sabellius.¹⁵¹ Basil of Caesarea accused him of abandoning the literal sense of the scripture and taking it up wholly with the allegorical sense. His views were condemned in a Synod at Alexandria, under Athanasius of Alexandria, in 362, and later subdivided into several different heresies, the main ones of which were the

¹⁴⁷ Mitchell, Stephen (2007). *A History of the Later Roman Empire*. Hoboken: Blackwell, 282.

¹⁴⁸ Fuerbringer, L., Thomas Engelder, and Paul E. Kretzmann (1927). "Donatism." *Concordia Cyclopedia*, St. Louis: Concordia, 213.

¹⁴⁹ In Christianity, the Logos (Greek: Λόγος, literally: 'word, discourse, or reason') is a name or title of Jesus Christ, seen as the pre-existent second person of the Trinity.

¹⁵⁰ McGrath, Alister (1998). *Historical Theology, An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Chapter 1.

¹⁵¹ See Chapter 6 for an in-depth analysis of Sabellianism.

Polemians and the Antidicomarianites.

Apollinaris, considering the rational soul and spirit as essentially liable to sin and capable, at its best, of only precarious efforts, saw no way of saving Christ's impeccability and the infinite value of Redemption, except by the elimination of the human spirit from Jesus' humanity, and the substitution of the Divine Logos in its stead. Apollinarism was declared to be a heresy in 381 by the First Council of Constantinople and virtually died out within the following decades.¹⁵²

There are no known movements related to Apollinarianism, but this heresy is held by some individuals. The idea of Christ having a kind of divine or heavenly flesh, rather than a real human nature, reappeared in some radical Anabaptists in the Reformation and was condemned by Calvin.

Tritheism

Tritheism (from Greek τριθεΐα, "three divinity"¹⁵³) is a polytheistic nontrinitarian Christian conception of God in which the unity of the Trinity and, by extension, monotheism are denied. It asserts that, rather than being single God of three eternally consubstantial *Persons*, the Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit are three ontologically separate Gods.¹⁵⁴ It represents more of a "possible deviation" than any actual school of thought positing three separate deities.¹⁵⁵ It was usually "little more than a hostile label"¹⁵⁶ applied

¹⁵² Sollier, Joseph Francis (1907). "Apollinarianism." In Herbermann, Charles (ed.). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company.

¹⁵³ Kazhdan, Alexander (1991). "Tritheism." In Kazhdan, Alexander (ed.). *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵⁴ Slick, Matt (December 15, 2008). "Tritheism." *Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry*. Retrieved August 4, 2024. Tritheism has taken different forms throughout the centuries. In the early church, the Christians were accused of being tritheists by those who either refused to understand or could not understand the doctrine of the Trinity. In the late 11th century, a Catholic monk of Compiègne in France, Roscelin, considered the three Divine Persons as three independent beings, and that it could be said they were three gods. He maintained that God the Father and God the Holy Ghost would have become incarnate with God the Son unless there were three gods.

Present day Mormonism is tritheistic – but with a twist. Mormonism teaches that there are many gods in the universe, but they serve and worship only one of them. The godhead for earth is to them really three separate gods: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Father used to be a man on another world who brought one of his wives with him to this world—they both have bodies of flesh and bones. The son is a second god who was literally begotten between god the father and his goddess wife. The holy ghost is a third god. Therefore, in reality, Mormonism is polytheistic with a tritheistic emphasis.

¹⁵⁵ Vannier, Marie-Anne (2005) [2002], "Tritheism." In André Vauchez (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co.

¹⁵⁶ Wildberg, Christian (2018), "John Philoponus." In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University.

to those who emphasized the individuality of each *hypostasis*¹⁵⁷ or divine person—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—over the unity of the Trinity as a whole. The accusation was especially popular between the Third and Seventh Centuries AD.¹⁵⁸

In the history of Christianity, various theologians have been accused of lapsing into tritheism. Among the earliest were the monophysites John Philoponos (died c. 570) and his followers, such as Eugenios and Konon of Tarsos.¹⁵⁹ They taught that the common nature of the Trinity is an abstraction; so that, while the three persons are *consubstantial*,¹⁶⁰ they are distinct in their *properties*. Their view was an attempt to reconcile Aristotle with Christianity. This view, which was defended by Patriarch Peter III of Antioch, was condemned as tritheism at a synod in Alexandria in 616. It was again condemned as tritheism at the Third Council of Constantinople in 680–681.¹⁶¹

In Late Antiquity, several heretical movements criticized Orthodoxy as equivalent to tritheism. The Sabellians, Monarchians and Pneumatomachoi labelled their opponents tritheists. Jews and Muslims frequently criticized Trinitarianism as merely dressed-up tritheism.¹⁶² Groups accused by the orthodox of tritheism include the Anomoeans and Nestorians.

Collyridianism

Collyridianism (or Kollyridianism) was an alleged Early Christian movement in Arabia whose adherents apparently worshipped the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, as a goddess.¹⁶³ The existence of the sect is subject to some dispute by scholars, as the only

¹⁵⁷ Hypostasis (plural: hypostases), from the Greek ὑπόστασις (*hypóstasis*), is the underlying, fundamental state or substance that supports all of reality. It is not the same as the concept of a substance. In Christian theology, the Holy Trinity consists of three hypostases: that of the Father, that of the Son, and that of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁵⁸ Kazhdan (1991).

¹⁵⁹ Kazhdan (1991).

¹⁶⁰ Consubstantiality, a term derived from Latin: *consubstantialitas*, denotes identity of substance or essence in spite of difference in aspect. *Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary*: "of the same substance, nature, or essence, esp. of the Trinity," "united in one common substance" It appears most commonly in its adjectival form, "consubstantial," from Latin *consubstantialis*, and its best-known use is in regard to an account, in Christian theology, of the relation between Jesus Christ and God the Father.

¹⁶¹ Cross, F.L. and Livingstone, E.A., eds. (2009) [2005]. "Tritheism." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Third rev. ed.), Oxford University Press.

¹⁶² Tuggy, Dale (2016), "Trinity: Judaic and Islamic Objections." In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University.

¹⁶³ Block, Corrie (2013). *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*. New York: Routledge, 186; Neuwirth, Angelika (2016). *Qur'anic Studies Today*. New York: Routledge, 301. The Collyridians, an Arabian female sect of the fourth century, offered Mary cakes of bread, as they had done

contemporary source to describe it is the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis, published in approximately AD 376.¹⁶⁴

According to Epiphanius, certain women in largely-pagan Arabia syncretised indigenous beliefs with the worship of Mary and offered little cakes or bread-rolls.¹⁶⁵ The cakes were called *collyris* (Greek: κολλυρίς) and are the source of the name *Collyridians*.¹⁶⁶ Epiphanius stated that Collyridianism originated in Thrace and Scythia although it may have first travelled to those regions from Syria or Asia Minor.¹⁶⁷

The adoption of the mother of Jesus as a virtual goddess may represent a reintroduction of aspects of the worship of Isis. According to Sabrina Higgins, “When looking at images of the Egyptian goddess Isis and those of the Virgin Mary, one may initially observe iconographic similarities. These parallels have led many scholars to suggest that there is a distinct iconographic relationship between Isis and Mary. In fact, some scholars have gone even further, and have suggested, on the basis of this relationship, a direct link between the cult of Mary and that of Isis.”¹⁶⁸ Conversely, Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel dispute the idea that Christianity copied elements of Isis’s iconography, saying that the symbol of a mother and her child is part of the universal human experience.¹⁶⁹ However, a number of years ago Alexander Hislop wrote a book called *The Two Babylons* in which he traced Mariolatry not only to Isis worship in Egypt, but all the way back to the Tower of Babel and to Nimrod, Semiramis and Tammuz.¹⁷⁰ In all fairness, modern scholars are skeptical of Hislop’s claims, yet there do seem to be parallels that beg further research.

Theologian Karl Gerok disputed the existence of the Collyridians, describing it as improbable that a sect composed only of women could have lasted for as long as described by Epiphanius.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, Protestant writer Samuel Zwemer pointed out

to their great earth mother in pagan times. Epiphanius, who opposed this heresy, said that the Trinity must be worshipped but Mary must not be worshipped.

¹⁶⁴ Block (2013), 186; Saint Epiphanius (2013) [c. 375]. “*The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III. De Fide*,” (Translated by Frank Williams) Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies. Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 79.

¹⁶⁵ Saint Epiphanius (2013), 637.

¹⁶⁶ Carroll, Michael P. (1992-05-05). *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins*. Princeton University Press, 43.

¹⁶⁷ Saint Epiphanius (2013), 637.

¹⁶⁸ Higgins, Sabrina (2012). “Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactans- Iconography.” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 3–4.

¹⁶⁹ Olson, Carl and Sandra Miesel (2004). *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

¹⁷⁰ Hislop, Alexander (1959). *The Two Babylons: or the Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife*. Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers.

¹⁷¹ Block (2013).

that the only source of information about the sect came from Epiphanius.¹⁷²

In his 1976 book *The Virgin*, historian Geoffrey Ashe advanced the hypothesis that the Collyridians represented a parallel Marian religion to Christianity, founded by first-generation followers of the Virgin Mary, whose doctrines were later subsumed by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431.¹⁷³ Historian Averil Cameron has been even more skeptical about whether the movement ever existed and noted that Epiphanius is the only source for the group and that later authors simply refer to his text.¹⁷⁴

Binitarianism

Binitarianism is a Christian theology of two persons, personas, or aspects in one substance/Divinity (or God). Classically, binitarianism is understood as a form of monotheism—that is, that God is absolutely one being—and yet with binitarianism there is a “twoness” in God, which means one God family. The other common forms of monotheism are “unitarianism,” a belief in one God with one person, and “trinitarianism,” a belief in one God with three persons.

Larry W. Hurtado of the University of Edinburgh uses the word “binitarian” to describe the position of early Christian devotion to God, which ascribes to the Son (Jesus) an exaltedness that in Judaism would be reserved for God alone, while still affirming as in Judaism that God is one and is alone to be worshiped. He writes:

...there are a fairly consistent linkage and subordination of Jesus to God ‘the Father’ in these circles, evident even in the Christian texts from the latter decades of the First century that are commonly regarded as a very ‘high’ Christology, such as the Gospel of John and Revelation. This is why I referred to this Jesus-devotion as a ‘binitarian’ form of monotheism: there are two distinguishable figures (God and Jesus), but they are posited in a relation to each other that seems intended to avoid the ditheism of two gods.¹⁷⁵

Hurtado does not describe binitarianism as antithetical to Nicene Christianity but rather as an indication that early Christians (before Nicaea) were monotheistic (as evidenced by their singular reference to the Father as God) yet also devoted to Jesus as pre-existent, co-

¹⁷² Block (2013).

¹⁷³ Carroll, Michael P. (1992). *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 43.

¹⁷⁴ Cameron, Averil (2004), “The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making,” *Studies in Church History*, 39:1–21.

¹⁷⁵ Hurtado, Larry W. (2003). *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 52–53.

eternal, the creator, embodying the power of God, by whom the Father is revealed, and in whose name alone the Father is worshiped. He writes, “The central place given to Jesus ... and ... their concern to avoid ditheism by reverencing Jesus rather consistently with reference to ‘the Father’, combine to shape the proto-orthodox ‘binitarian’ pattern of devotion. Jesus truly is revered as divine.”¹⁷⁶

The classic theory of Christian binitarian theology (assumed by most dictionary definitions) asserts that some early Christians conceived of the Spirit as going out from God the creator, and is the creator: a person of God’s being, which also lived in Jesus (or, from other sources, appears to be thought of as Jesus’s pre-existent, divine nature). This view further asserts that the same Spirit is given to men, making them a new creation and sharers in the same hope of resurrection and exaltation. This interpretation of early Christian belief is often cited in contrast to trinitarianism. However, trinitarians cite the same sources as examples of pre-Nicene Christian monotheism, which is not orthodoxy but “proto-orthodox”—that is, one of several versions among Christians which explain monotheism as a plurality (Father, Son, Spirit) in one being, prior to orthodoxy’s settlement in Christianity.

By the time of the Arian controversy, some bishops defended a kind of “dual” conception of deity, which is sometimes called “Semi-Arian.” Macedonianism (the Pneumatomachi) typifies this view, which some prefer to call “binitarian” as at that time the Semi-Arians were the main binitarians. None of the Semi-Arian views were strictly monotheistic (one being). All asserted that the God who speaks and the Word who creates are two beings similar to one another, of similar substance (*homoiousia* [ὁμοιούσια]), and denied that they are one and the same being, or two persons of the same substance (*homoousia* [ὁμοούσια]) in which two are distinguished, as Nicaea eventually held.

After the 325 Council of Nicaea defeated Arianism, the Council of Constantinople was called in 381 to attempt to deal with the binitarians, who were referred to as “Semi-Arians,” However, as the Trinity was finalized at this time as official Christian doctrine, the offended Semi-Arians walked out. “They rejected the Arian view that Christ was created and had a different nature from God (*anomoios* [ἀνόμοιος]—dissimilar), but neither did they accept the Nicene Creed which stated that Christ was ‘of one substance (*homoousios* [ὁμοούσιος]) with the Father’. Semi-Arians taught that Christ was similar (*homoios* [ὅμοιος]) to the Father, or of like substance (*homoiousios* [ὁμοιούσιος]), but still subordinate.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Hurtado (2003), 618.

¹⁷⁷ Pfandl, Gerhard (June 1999), *The Doctrine of the Trinity Among Adventists*. Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute.

In the mid-Fourth century, orthodox apologist Epiphanius of Salamis noted, “Semi-Arians ... hold the truly orthodox view of the Son, that he was forever with the Father ... but has been begotten without beginning and not in time ... But all of these blaspheme the Holy Spirit, and do not count him in the Godhead with the Father and the Son.”¹⁷⁸

After Ellen G. White gained influence in the American Adventist movement, in 1858 the binitarian Church of God (Seventh Day) was founded in the U.S. mid-western states of Michigan and Iowa having split from those Adventists who in 1863 founded the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Later, in 1897, White published a pamphlet declaring the Holy Spirit “the third person of the Godhead,” Andrews University, an Adventist institution for higher learning, suggests that the Seventh-day Adventists were inclined towards binitarianism before this, which Gerhard Pfandl terms “Semi-Arian.”¹⁷⁹

By the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, binitarianism was held by a relatively small group of church denominations. At present, it is a theology essentially held only by some 7th Day Church of God groups. The three largest church denominations that appear to hold a binitarian view today are the General Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day) – with other Church of God (7th Day) groups remaining unitarian – the United Church of God, and the Living Church of God (the latter two originating from the Worldwide Church of God). Other groups, scattered spin-offs from the breakup of the previously sabbatarian Worldwide Church of God founded by Herbert W. Armstrong,¹⁸⁰ also hold to a binitarian view of God. The sabbatarian Churches of God persist in their worship of Jesus and the Father; insisting that, in their worship of the “plural” God, “Elohim” (Gods), as multiple separate and individual God-beings of which only the Father and Son are now very God, they are practicing monotheism in the sense that “Elohim” is one family unit. Adherents of these churches believe they will eventually be born into that family as children of God at a resurrection of the dead at the second coming of Christ. They also believe that others will follow as children of God after Christ rules on Earth and teaches the correct way to live and follow him. These same groups insist certain human beings may eventually be gifted with all the attributes of the Father and Jesus. These humans who may enter the “God family” are currently only those found to be attending the congregations that openly support “pluralism”, but after Jesus’s return salvation shall be offered to all during the Great White Throne Judgment, which is a form of universal reconciliation.¹⁸¹ God’s plural identification in Genesis as “Elohim”, as the Father and the Word or Logos (John 1:1–18) who became the Son of God, the firstborn of many brethren, leaves room for untold numbers to be added to God’s family. This

¹⁷⁸ Saint Epiphanius (2013), 471-472.

¹⁷⁹ Pfandl (June 1999).

¹⁸⁰ Herbert W. Armstrong held numerous heretical views!

¹⁸¹ Also known as Universalism.

binitarian view posits that humanity eventually will have access to become members of God's family in their own right each with the power of the Holy Spirit, however, not equal to Father or Son. As part of the binitarian view it is also believed that, as the Bible states, the Father is greater than Jesus.¹⁸²

It should also be noted that Lecture 5 in the *Lectures on Faith*¹⁸³ of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also teaches a two-person Godhead: "There are two 'personages', the Father and the Son, that constitute the "supreme power over all things" (Lecture 5:2, Q&A section).

Subordinationism

Subordinationism is a Trinitarian doctrine wherein the Son (and sometimes also the Holy Spirit) is subordinate to the Father, not only in submission and role, but with actual ontological subordination to varying degrees.¹⁸⁴ It posits a hierarchical ranking of the persons of the Social Trinity, implying ontological subordination of the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹⁸⁵ It was condemned as heretical in the Second Council of Constantinople.¹⁸⁶

It is not to be confused with Arianism, as Subordinationism has been generally viewed as closer to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan view. While Arianism was developed out of it, it did not confess the personality of the Holy Spirit and the eternity of the Son.¹⁸⁷

According to the *Oxford Encyclopedia*: Subordinationism means to consider Christ, as Son of God, as inferior to the Father. This tendency was strong in the Second- and Third-Century theology. It is evident in theologians like Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen,

¹⁸² Armstrong, Herbert W. (1985). *Mystery of the Ages*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 7:294–306.

¹⁸³ *Lectures on Faith* is a set of seven lectures on the doctrine and theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, first published as the doctrine portion of the 1835 edition of the canonical Doctrine and Covenants (D&C), but later removed from that work by both major branches of the faith. The lectures were originally presented by Joseph Smith to a group of elders in a course known as the "School of the Prophets" in the early winter of 1834–35 in Kirtland, Ohio.

¹⁸⁴ Papandrea, James Leonard (2012). *Reading the Early Church Fathers: From the Didache to Nicaea*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

¹⁸⁵ Giles, Kevin (2012). *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology*. Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁸⁶ Jowers, Dennis W. and H. Wayne House (2012). *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?: Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers; Origen (2010). *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*. Washington: CUA Press.

¹⁸⁷ Beisner, E. Calvin (2004-02-10). *God in Three Persons*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers; Ramelli, Ilaria L. E., J.A. McGuckin, and Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski (2021). *T&T Clark Handbook of the Early Church*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Novatian, and Irenaeus. Irenaeus, for example, commenting on Christ's statement, "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), has no difficulty in considering Christ as inferior to the Father.¹⁸⁸

The *Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* defines subordinationism: The term is a common retrospective concept used to denote theologians of the early church who affirmed the divinity of the Son or Spirit of God, but conceived it somehow as a lesser form of divinity than that of the Father. It is a modern concept that is so vague that is that it does not illuminate much of the theology of the pre-Nicene teachers, where a subordinationist presupposition was widely and unreflectively shared.¹⁸⁹

The mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity may be described as the teaching that God is three distinct hypostases or persons who are coeternal, coequal, and indivisibly united in one being, or essence (from the Greek *ousia*).

The three largest denominations that do not accept the Trinity doctrine are The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses and the *Iglesia ni Cristo*.¹⁹⁰ The Socinians also do not accept the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Anomoeanism

The Anomoeans,¹⁹¹ also known as Heterousians, Aetians, or Eunomians, were a sect that held to a form of Arianism, that Jesus Christ was not of the same nature (consubstantial) as God the Father nor was of like nature (homoiousian), as maintained by the semi-Arians.

An Anomoean, (from Greek *anomoios*, "unlike"), was any member of a religious group of the Fourth Century (during the reign of Constantius II)¹⁹² that represented an extreme

¹⁸⁸ Simmonetti, M. (1992). Berardino, Angelo Di (ed.). *Encyclopedia of the early church*. Vol. 2. Translated by Walford, Adrian. New York: Oxford University Press, 797.

¹⁸⁹ McGuckin, John A. (2004). "Subordinationism." *The Westminster handbook to patristic theology*. Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 321. This handbook refers to subordination as "retrospective" and a "modern concept" because it is only able to define this term with the hindsight of the developments of the fourth century.

¹⁹⁰ Halsey, A. (13 October 1988). *British Social Trends since 1900: A Guide to the Changing Social Structure of Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 518. His so called 'non-Trinitarian' group includes the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christadelphians, Christian Scientists, Theosophists, Church of Scientology, Unification Church (Moonies), the Worldwide Church of God and so on.

¹⁹¹ Also spelled Anomeans.

¹⁹² Constantius II (Latin: *Flavius Julius Constantius*; Greek: Κωνσταντίος (*Kōnstantios*); August 7, 317 – November 3, 361) was Roman emperor from 337 to 361. He was a son of Constantine the Great, who

form of Arianism, a Christian heresy that held that the essential difference between God and Christ was that God had always existed, while Christ was created by God. Aëtius, the founder of the Anomoeans, reasoned that the doctrine carried to its logical conclusion must mean that God and Christ could not be alike. Because *agennēsia* (“self-existence”) is a part of the essence of God, Christ could not be like God because he lacked this necessary quality. Aëtius’ chief convert and the second leader of the movement was Eunomius, after whose death (c. 394) the Anomoeans soon disappeared.¹⁹³

The semi-Arians condemned the Anomoeans in 395 at the Council of Seleucia, after the Anomoeans had previously condemned the semi-Arians in the Councils of Constantinople (360) and Antioch (341); erasing the word ὅμοιος (*omoios*) from the formula of Rimini and that of Constantinople and protesting that the Word had not only a different substance but also a will different from that of the Father. From that, they were to be called ἀνόμοιοι (*anomoioi*).

Antidicomarians

The Antidicomarians or Antidicomarianites,¹⁹⁴ also called Dimoerites,¹⁹⁵ were a Christian sect active from the Third to the Fifth century.¹⁹⁶ Their name was invented by an opponent, Epiphanius of Salamis, who described them as heretical in his *Panarion*.¹⁹⁷ The existence of the Antidicomarians as an organized sect may be doubted, as it is attested only in Epiphanius, but the doctrines he attributes to them were certainly matters of live debate in the late Fourth century.¹⁹⁸

The Antidicomarians refused to accord any special status to Mary, mother of Jesus, and rejected the doctrine of her perpetual virginity. They considered Joseph to be a widower with six children from a previous marriage. At first, they rejected the virgin birth and considered Joseph the father of Jesus.

Some —but not all—of the Church fathers were the first to affirm that the mother of Jesus

elevated him to the imperial rank of *Caesar* on November 8, 324 and after whose death Constantius became *Augustus* on September 9, 337.

¹⁹³ *Encyclopædia Britannica*: “Anomoean.”

¹⁹⁴ Greek ἀντιδικομαριανῖται, literally “opponents of Mary”, from ἀντίδικος ‘adversary’ + Μαρία ‘Mary’ (Oxford English Dictionary).

¹⁹⁵ Saint Epiphanius (2013), §§77–78. Epiphanius uses the term Dimoerite for both the Apollinarians and the Antidicomarians.

¹⁹⁶ Brackney, William H. (2012). *Historical Dictionary of Radical Christianity*. Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 31.

¹⁹⁷ Luomanen, Petri (2012) *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects and Gospels*. Leiden: Brill, 77n.

¹⁹⁸ Shoemaker, Stephen J. (2008). “Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the Early Dormition Narratives: The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 16:3, 371–401.

the Christ was not only a virgin at the time he was born but ever afterwards. A denial of the virginity of Mary at the time of her conception had indeed been made by the Corinthians and Ebionites, who, in the First and Second centuries, asserted that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary by natural generation.¹⁹⁹

Later, however, they came to accept the virgin birth, but held that Joseph and Mary had normal sexual relations after Jesus' birth.²⁰⁰ They then viewed the brothers of Jesus mentioned in the New Testament as Mary and Joseph's other children. The sect can be seen as a reaction to the rise of Marian devotion and celibacy.²⁰¹ According to Epiphanius, the Antidicomarians attributed their position to Apollinaris of Laodicea. He wrote a letter defending the majority opinion about Mary to the Christians of Arabia, a copy of which he included in his *Panarion*.²⁰²

The view that the brothers of Jesus were the children of Mary and Joseph was held independently of the Antidicomarian sect in the early church: Tertullian, Hegesippus and Helvidius held it,²⁰³ while Origen mentions it.²⁰⁴ Helvidius denied the concept of the perpetual virginity of Mary on the ground of the words of the Apostle Matthew, that Joseph "did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus." (Matthew 1:25 NLT); which implied that he knew her afterwards, and that a first-born son inferred a second-born.²⁰⁵ The Antidicomarian position on Mary became standard in Protestantism.²⁰⁶

FIFTH CENTURY HERESIES

Nestorianism

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Nestorianism as: "The doctrine of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (appointed in 428), by which Christ is asserted to have had

¹⁹⁹ Strong, James and McClintock, John (1880). *The Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

²⁰⁰ Brackney (2012), 31

²⁰¹ Limberis, Vasiliki (1994). *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Making of Christian Constantinople*. London and New York: Routledge, 119–120.

²⁰² Saint Epiphanius (2013), §§77–78.

²⁰³ Cross, F.L., ed. (2005). "Brethren of the Lord." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁰⁴ Origen (1996). Lienhard, Joseph T. (ed.). *Homilies on Luke*. The Fathers of the Church Series. Vol. 94. Catholic University of America Press.

²⁰⁵ Strong (1880).

²⁰⁶ Brackney (2012), 31.

distinct human and divine persons.”²⁰⁷ Nestorianism is attested primarily by works of Nestorius (died c. 450), and also by other theological and historical sources that are related to his teachings in the fields of Mariology and Christology. His theology was influenced by teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), the most prominent theologian of the Antiochian School.

Nestorian Mariology rejects the title *Theotokos* (‘God-bearer’) for Mary, thus emphasizing distinction between divine and human aspects of the Incarnation. Nestorian Christology promotes the concept of a prosopic²⁰⁸ union of two persons (divine and human) in Jesus Christ,²⁰⁹ thus trying to avoid and replace the concept of a hypostatic union of two natures. The distinction is between “two persons in one” and “two natures in one person.” This Christological position is defined as *radical dyophysitism*,²¹⁰ and differs from orthodox dyophysitism,²¹¹ that was reaffirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Such teachings brought Nestorius into conflict with other prominent church leaders, most notably Cyril of Alexandria, who issued 12 anathemas against him (430). Nestorius and his teachings were eventually condemned as heretical at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and again at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. His teachings were considered as heretical not only in Chalcedonian Christianity, but even more in Oriental Orthodoxy.²¹²

Nestorianism is one of “The Seven Deadly Sins” and is covered more thoroughly in Chapter 9.

Pelagianism

Pelagianism is a Christian theological position that holds that the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden did not taint human nature and that humans by divine grace have free will to achieve human perfection. Pelagius (c. 355 – c. 420), an ascetic and philosopher from the British Isles, taught that God could not command believers to do the impossible,

²⁰⁷ “Nestorianism.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁰⁸ Prosopon originally meant “face” but is used as a theological term in Christian theology as designation for the concept of a divine person. The term has a particular significance in Christian triadology (study of the Trinity), and also in Christology.

²⁰⁹ Chesnut, Roberta C. (1978). “The Two Prosopa in Nestorius’ Bazaar of Heracleides.” *The Journal of Theological Studies*. 29, 29:392–409.

²¹⁰ Burgess, Stanley M. (1989). *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 90, 229, 231.

²¹¹ Dyophysitism (from Greek: δυοφυσιτισμός “two natures”) is the Christological position that Jesus Christ is one person of one substance and one hypostasis, with two distinct, inseparable natures, divine and human. It is related to the doctrine of the hypostatic union. Those who insisted on the “two natures” formula were referred to as *dyophysites*.

²¹² Meyendorff, John (1989). *Imperial unity and Christian divisions: The Church 450–680 A.D.* Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press.

and therefore it must be possible to satisfy all divine commandments. He also taught that it was unjust to punish one person for the sins of another; therefore, infants are born blameless. Pelagius accepted no excuse for sinful behavior and taught that all Christians, regardless of their station in life, should live unimpeachable, sinless lives.

- * Pelagius believed that original sin was not transmitted from Adam and Eve to their children (and thereby to us).
- * Baptism was not considered necessary, and people could be “saved” by their own efforts, that is, they did not necessarily require the grace of God.
- * Pelagianism was succeeded by Semi-Pelagianism and then by Arminianism.

It has been suggested that, to a large degree, “Pelagianism” was defined by its opponent Augustine, and exact definitions remain elusive. Although Pelagianism had considerable support in the contemporary Christian world—especially among the Roman elite and monks—it was attacked by Augustine and his supporters, who had more Biblical views on grace, predestination and free will. By arguing from scripture Augustine proved victorious in the Pelagian controversy; Pelagianism was decisively condemned at the 418 Council of Carthage and Pelagius was anathematized as a Heretic. Pelagianism is still regarded as heretical by the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

For centuries afterward, “Pelagianism” was used in various forms as an accusation of heresy for Christians who hold unorthodox beliefs. However, some recent liberal scholarship has offered a different opinion. Many scholars recognize that Pelagianism is rampant in the modern church, having come roaring back to center stage 200 years ago thanks to the aberrant teaching of Charles Grandison Finney. Nevertheless, while many modern churches embrace Pelagianism it is still based upon a very shaky foundation, Biblically speaking.

Pelagianism is one of “The Seven Deadly Sins” that is covered more thoroughly in Chapter 8. Of these seven major heresies, Pelagianism is without a doubt the most dangerous of them all.

Eutychianism

Eutychianism, also known as Real Monophysitism,²¹³ refers to a set of Christian

²¹³ Hannah, John D. (2019). *Invitation to Church History: World: The Story of Christianity*. Kregel Academic, 153; van Loon, Hans (2009). *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*. BRILL, 33; Theodorus (Cantuariensis); Hadrianus; Becher (1994). *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian*. Cambridge University Press, 11.

theological doctrines derived from the ideas of Eutyches of Constantinople (c. 380 – 456). Eutychianism is a monophysite²¹⁴ understanding of how the human and divine relate within the person of Jesus Christ, with Christ being *in* one nature and *of* two, with the humanity of Christ subsumed by the divinity. Eutychians were often labelled Phantasiasts by their adversaries, who accused their Christology of reducing Jesus' incarnation to a phantasm.²¹⁵

At various times, Eutyches taught that the human nature of Christ was overcome by the divine or that Christ had a human nature but it was unlike the rest of humanity. One formulation is that Eutychianism stressed the unity of Christ's nature to such an extent that Christ's divinity consumed his humanity as the ocean consumes a drop of vinegar. Eutyches maintained that Christ was *of* two natures but not *in* two natures: separate divine and human natures had united and blended in such a manner that although Jesus was *homoousion*²¹⁶ with the Father, he was not *homoousion* with the man.²¹⁷

Eutychianism was rejected at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451 and the statement of faith known as the Chalcedonian Creed. The reaction against Eutychianism also led to the schism with Oriental Orthodoxy.

Monophysitism

Monophysitism or monophysism (Greek *μόνος* *monos*, “solitary”²¹⁸ and *φύσις* *physis*, “nature”) is a Christology that states that there was only one nature—the divine—in the person of Jesus Christ, who was the incarnated Word.²¹⁹

The First Council of Nicaea (325) declared that Christ was both divine (*homoousios*, consubstantial, of one being or essence, with the Father) and human (was incarnate and became man). In the fifth century a heated controversy arose between the bishops and theological schools of Antioch and Alexandria about how divinity and humanity existed

²¹⁴ Monophysitism states that there was only one nature—the divine—in the person of Jesus Christ, who was the incarnated Word.

²¹⁵ Minov, Sergey (2017). “Date and Provenance of the Syriac Cave of Treasures: A Reappraisal.” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 20:1, 129–229, esp. at 141–145.

²¹⁶ *Homoousion* (Greek: ὁμοούσιον, ‘same in being, same in essence’, from ὁμός, *homós*, ‘same’ and οὐσία, ‘being’ or ‘essence’) is a Christian theological term, most notably used in the Nicene Creed for describing Jesus (God the Son) as “same in being” or “same in essence” with God the Father (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ).

²¹⁷ Christie-Murray, David (1976). *A History of Heresy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²¹⁸ “Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, “μόνος”. www.perseus.tufts.edu.

²¹⁹ Espin, Orlando O. and Nickoloff, James B. (2007). *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 902.

in Christ,²²⁰ with the former stressing the humanity, the latter the divinity of Christ. Cyril of Alexandria succeeded in having Nestorius, a prominent exponent of the Antiochian school, condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and insisted on the formula “one *physis* of the incarnate Word”, claiming that any formula that spoke of two *physeis* represented Nestorianism. Some taught that in Christ the human nature was completely absorbed by the divine, leaving only a divine nature. In 451, the Council of Chalcedon defined that in Christ there were two *natures* united in one *person*.²²¹

Miaphysitism

Miaphysitism is the Christological doctrine that holds Jesus, the “Incarnate Word, is fully divine and fully human, in one ‘nature’ (*physis*).”²²² It is a position held by the Oriental Orthodox Churches and differs from the Chalcedonian position that Jesus is one “person” (Greek: ὑπόστασις) in two “natures” (Greek: φύσεις), a divine nature and a human nature (dyophysitism). While historically a major point of controversy within Christianity, several modern declarations by both Chalcedonian and miaphysite churches state that the difference between the two Christological formulations does not reflect any significant difference in belief about the nature of Christ.²²³

The word *miaphysite* derives from the Greek μία (*mía*, “one”) and φύσις (*phúsis*, “nature, or substance”). Miaphysite teaching is based on Cyril of Alexandria’s formula μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη, meaning “one *physis* of the Word²²⁴ of God made flesh” (or “... of God the Word made flesh”).

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 used *physis* to mean “nature” (as in “divine nature” and “human nature”), and defined that there is in Jesus one *hypostasis* (person) but two *physeis* (natures). It is disputed whether Cyril used *physis* in that sense. John Anthony McGuckin says that in Cyril’s formula “*physis* serves as a rough semantic equivalent to *hypostasis*.”²²⁵

²²⁰ Campbell, Ted (1996). *Christian Confessions: A Historical Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 43.

²²¹ Kleinhenz, Christopher (2004). *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Routledge, 762.

²²² “The Universal Church and Schisms.” *Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Midlands, UK*.

²²³ Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. “Agreed Statements between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (June 1989 & September 1990)” (PDF); Rowell, Geoffrey; Bishoy of Damietta; Gabriel, Abba (17 October 2014). “Agreed Statement by the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission” (PDF). Anglican Communion. Cairo, Egypt. Retrieved August 16, 2024.

²²⁴ In Christianity, the Logos (Λόγος, ‘word, discourse, or reason’) is a name or title of Jesus Christ, seen as the pre-existent second person of the Trinity.

²²⁵ McGuckin, John. *St. Cyril of Alexandria’s Miaphysite Christology and Chalcedonian Dyophysitism: The Quest for the Phronema Patrum* (PDF), 38. Retrieved August 16, 2024.

Others interpret the miaphysite term *physis* in line with its use by the Council of Chalcedon and speak of “miaphysitism” as “monophysitism”, a word used of all forms of denial of the Chalcedonian doctrine. However, they add that “miaphysitism” is “the more accurate term for the position held by the Syriac, Coptic and Armenian churches.”²²⁶

The Second Council of Constantinople (553), the ecumenical council that followed that of Chalcedon, accepted Cyril’s phrase, but warned against misinterpreting it.

THOUGHTS ABOUT HERESY IN THE EARLY CHURCH



History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun
is truly new.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 NLT



“There is nothing new under the sun,” the Preacher wrote. According to Professor Klaus Haacker of Wuppertal, Germany, one of the primary sources of error in theology is the desire to say something new.

Harold Brown describes his own theological journey: “As a teacher of theology for a score of years, I have noticed this: It is extremely hard for a theologian today to say something that is not either borrowed from an earlier, orthodox writer or heretical. Indeed, even the newest heresies, sometimes presented as the latest discoveries in biblical scholarship, usually turn out to be plagiarized from earlier heretics.

“As a young student of theology, I determined to delve into church history and find the time when the Christian faith was pure and undistorted, the ‘faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3). The difficulty soon became apparent. Even in the New Testament itself, we find evidence that there were disputes about doctrine among believers. Was there never a time when all Christians knew right Christian doctrine? Was there never actually a faith “once for all delivered to the saints”? How could a third-, sixth-, 16th-, or 20th-century Christian know what to believe when even in the New Testament we see evidence that heresy was present alongside of solid doctrine, almost

²²⁶ Parry, Ken (2009). *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 88.

from the very birth of the church? There is indeed a faith once delivered to the saints.

“It is a curious fact about Christianity that it is the only major religion many of whose paid, full-time priests, prelates, and professors spend much time and energy trying to show that it is false and should be totally changed or perhaps even abandoned. Buddhists do not do this; neither do Hindus. Muslims certainly do not, or if they do they do not live long. This shows, I believe, that the religion of Scripture, historic, biblical Christianity, is obnoxious to the Prince of Darkness, so that he makes a point of tempting the professors and priests of Christianity to undermine their own doctrines.

Brown continues, “In my book *Heresies*, I follow the practice of the early Christians in defining as heresies only those doctrines or teachings that change the nature of the faith so fundamentally that it no longer can be trusted to be saving faith. There are three principal concepts dealt with in the New Testament that can be defined as heretical in this sense. Curiously enough—or perhaps not so curiously, if we recall the Preacher’s words above—these three New Testament problems persist.

“They are (1) legalism (often called Judaizing in the days of the early church), which can also be called salvation by works or works righteousness; (2) the opposite concept of antinomianism; and perhaps most significant for our own day (3) the curious complex of fantastic ideas and doctrines that goes by the name of Gnosticism.

“Paul confronted each of these in several epistles, notably Romans, Galatians, and Colossians. John also deals with Gnosticism in his first two letters. In Galatians 1, Paul warns against deserting the One who called us for “a different Gospel, which is really no Gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6–7 NIV). In the context of the epistle, it becomes evident that he is speaking of the tendency to add works to the Gospel of justification by faith in the finished, once-for-all work of Christ. In our own day, in which there is licentiousness on all sides, some Christians drift toward legalism, though Paul warns explicitly against it in his parody, ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle’ (Colossians 2:21). Roman Catholicism is particularly prone to this error, although it certainly is not limited to Catholics.

“Others, however, fall into the concept of antinomianism, probably a greater danger for Christians today. We can express it thus: ‘Once saved, anything goes.’ Paul asks ironically, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1). And of course he counters this in a number of places, including ‘faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6), and ‘neither circumcision [keeping the Law] nor uncircumcision [ignoring the Law] avails anything; but [what counts is] a new creation’ (Galatians 6:15).

“One is not saved by works, but a faith that produces nothing is no evidence that one has

become a 'new creation' in Christ. Modern varieties of this antinomian error are found in some Protestant circles that believe a simple verbal profession of faith will save one, without reference to the kind of *conversio cordis* (conversion of the heart) that produces evidence in a transformed life. Many individuals take refuge in this kind of antinomianism, which is so convenient for those who wish to go on sinning without worrying about the consequences.

"Undoubtedly the most dangerous error in our day, however, is that of Gnosticism, a worldview presenting a complex panoply of errors, afflicting non-Christians as well as Christians. It represents the temptation of the natural man to cook up speculative schemes that free him from any awareness of personal sin and guilt and offer him an inexpensive salvation. Gnosticism is hard to describe in a few words, but one can mention two common elements: secret lore and elitism. Ordinary people may make do with simple faith, but the Gnostic knows the secrets and belongs to a spiritual elite. Paul criticizes this (in Colossians 2:18, for example). It is typical of the Gnostics to honor Christ in a way, but to deny that the historic, human Jesus is the one 'name under heaven ... by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). They say Jesus was but one manifestation of "the Christ"; there were others, and there will be still more.

"Although full-blown Gnosticism was not yet in evidence at the time he wrote, John argued against this incipient tendency in the first two of his New Testament letters (for example: 1 John 1:1–2; 2:22–23; 5:1).

"The Gnostics believed in an incredible variety of spiritual beings. Most Gnostics taught that the material world is unreal and the body is unreal or evil. There is a recent parallel to Gnosticism in Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science and a very contemporary parallel in the New Age movement.

"Obviously," Brown concludes, "I could say more, and indeed have done so in *Heresies*. But the important thing about these 'heresies' is the fact that they are not just permissible variations, options, or choices, but by their very nature so undermine Christian faith that they may well render salvation unattainable for the one who makes the mistake of embracing them."²²⁷

²²⁷ © Ligonier Ministries, April 1, 1994. <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/heresy-in-the-early-church>. Retrieved January 12, 2025.



O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge.”

1 Timothy 6:20



SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While this chapter is admittedly quite detailed and academic in nature, its content is imperative for a proper understanding of how the church responded to the various heretical ideas that challenged orthodoxy in the early centuries. The modern church must also recognize heresy when it rears its ugly head—*as it always will!* And then fully comprehend how to refute it.



For my people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me— the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!

Jeremiah 2:13 NLT



SEVEN SIGNIFICANT SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. **Distinction Between Apostasy and Heresy:** Apostasy refers to a complete falling away from biblical truth and Christ, while heresy is a deviation or falsification of biblical truth. Heresy can lead to apostasy when it becomes widespread and radical.
2. **Role of Scripture in Defining Truth:** The Reformers emphasized Scripture as the sole authority for defining truth and identifying falsehood, rejecting the idea that church leaders alone could interpret biblical truth.
3. **Timeline of Early Church Heresies:** The document provides a detailed overview of heresies from the First to Fifth centuries, including Docetism, Montanism, Arianism,

Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism

Nestorianism, and Pelagianism, among others. Each heresy challenged orthodox Christian beliefs in unique ways.

4. **Recurring Themes in Heresies:** Common heretical ideas include denying Christ's divinity (e.g., Arianism), rejecting the Trinity (e.g., Modalism, Tritheism), and altering the nature of Christ (e.g., Monophysitism, Nestorianism). These heresies often stemmed from attempts to reconcile theology with human reasoning or cultural influences.
5. **Modern Equivalents of Ancient Heresies:** Some heresies, such as Arianism and Modalism, persist in modern movements like Jehovah's Witnesses, Oneness Pentecostalism, and Mormonism, highlighting the ongoing relevance of early church debates.
6. **Danger of Gnosticism:** Gnosticism, characterized by secret knowledge and elitism, remains a significant threat to Christian orthodoxy. It undermines the biblical view of salvation and the historicity of Jesus, with parallels in movements like New Age spirituality.
7. **Importance of Recognizing and Refuting Heresy:** The document emphasizes the need for the modern church to identify heresies and respond effectively, as they can fundamentally alter the nature of saving faith. Historical examples provide valuable lessons for addressing theological errors today.



NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc.*