

Theo 101, Session #06:

Major Heresies of the Early Church

The University of St. Francis

Adoptionism	A 2 nd -3 rd century heresy that affirmed that Jesus' divine identity began with his baptism (God adopted the man Jesus to be his Son, making him divine through the gift of the Holy Spirit). It was advocated by Elipandus of Toledo and Felix of Urgel, but condemned by Pope Adrian I in 785 and again in 794. When Peter Abelard (1079-1142) renewed a modified form of this teaching in the twelfth century, it was condemned by Pope Alexander III in 1177 as a theory proposed by Peter Lombard.
Apollinarianism	Heretical doctrine of Appolinaris the younger (310-90), Bishop of Laodicea, that Christ had a human body and only a sensitive soul, but had not rational mind or a free human will (i.e., Jesus was not fully human). His rational soul was replaced by the Divine Logos, or Word of God. The theory was condemned by Roman councils in 377 and 381, and also by the 1 st Council of Constantinople in 381.
Arianism	A fourth century heresy that denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. Its author was Arius (256-336), a priest of Alexandria who in 318 began to teach the doctrine that now bears his name. According to Arius, there are not three distinct persons in God, co-eternal and equal in all things, but only one person, the Father. The Son is only a creature, made out of nothing, like all other created beings. He may be called God by only by an extension of language, as the first and greatest person chosen to be divine intermediary in the creation and redemption of the world. Opposed by St. Athanasius and condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325.
Docetism	A 1 st century heresy that stated that Christ only appeared to have a human body ("clothed in the likeness of our flesh"), but was not truly born of a human mother, nor did he himself die on the cross. Jesus' body was reduced to the level of an apparition. Opposed by St. Ignatius of Antioch.

Ebionism	A second century Jewish-Christian heresy that rejected the divinity of Christ on the grounds that it conflicted with Old Testament monotheism. Jesus was the natural son of Mary & Joseph who was filled with the Holy Spirit at Baptism.
Gnosticism	An early Church heresy, related to Docetism, that claimed that “the Christ” was a pre-existent spiritual being (“one eon among others”) who descended on Jesus of Nazareth. The opponent of this heresy was Irenaeus.
Modalism	A Christian heresy introduced by Sabellius (a priest excommunicated by Pope Callistus I in 220) which taught that Jesus Christ and God the Father were not distinct persons, but two aspects or offices of one person. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely three aspects or manifestations (masks) of God. Condemned by the Synod of Rome in 262.
Monophysitism	A historical system that arose in the fifth century, claiming that in Christ there was only one nature (divine). It came as a reaction to Nestorianism, which postulated two persons in Christ. Here, the two natures existed before the union, and one divine nature after the union of both. Among the early Monophysites was Eutyches (378-454), head of a monastery near Constantinople. In his effort to save the unity of the Word Incarnate, he suppressed Christ’s human nature. Other Monophysites spoke of a single combined nature that was both human and divine. Condemned by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Monophysitism still prevails in the East among the Copts and the Syrian Jacobites.
Monothelitism	A heresy that began in the seventh century out of an attempt to conciliate the Monophysites. The latter confused the idea of personality with the undivided activity of a single will, claiming that there was a kind of divine-human operation in Christ. The Monothelites recognized the orthodox doctrine of Christ’s two natures but taught that these two natures had a common will and a common activity. This view was urged by Sergius (d. 638), Patriarch of Constantinople. Opposed by Maximus the Confessor and rejected in 681 at the 3 rd Council of Constantinople.

Montanism	During the late 2 nd century, Montanus began his career innocently enough through preaching a return to penance and fervor. His movement also emphasized the continuance of miraculous gifts, such as speaking in tongues and prophecy. However, he also claimed that his teachings were above those of the Church, and soon he began to teach Christ's imminent return in his home town in Phrygia. There were also statements that Montanus himself either was, or at least specially spoke for, the Paraclete that Jesus had promised would come (in reality, the Holy Spirit). Opposed by St. Irenaeus of Lyons.
Nestorianism	A 2 nd -4 th century heresy that claimed that Mary was <u>not</u> the mother of God (i.e., Mary gave birth to the humanity of Christ but not to his divinity since the Divine Word is immutable and impassable). Nestorianism was condemned by Cyril of Alexandria and the Council of Ephesus in 431, which stated that Mary was the <i>Theotokos</i> , the true mother of God.
Patipassianism	A Christian heresy introduced by Sabellius which claimed that the Father (the First Person of the Trinity) suffered on the cross. Condemned by the Synod of Rome in 262.
Sebellianism	See Modalism
Subordinationism	Related to Arianism, this heresy denied the divinity of the Eternal Word (not the Incarnate Word as adoptionism did).
Tritheism	Tritheism teaches that the Trinity consists of three equal, independent, and autonomous beings, each of whom is divine. Tritheism stresses the plurality of the Godhead. Many human analogies for the Trinity actually convey tritheism instead. Examples include the erroneous analogy that the Trinity is like an egg with the three parts of yolk, white, and shell. Condemned at the Third Council of Constantinople in 680-81.