

# A Glossary of Theological Terms

What follows is a brief discussion of a series of technical terms that the reader is likely to encounter in the course of reading texts which relate to Christian theology, some of which are used in the present collection.

**adoptionism** The heretical view that Jesus was “adopted” as the Son of God at some point during his ministry (usually his baptism), as opposed to the orthodox teaching that Jesus was Son of God by nature from the moment of his conception.

**aggiornamento** The process of renewing the church, which was particularly associated with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962–5). The Italian word can be translated as “a bringing up to date” or “renewal,” and refers to the process of theological, spiritual, and institutional renewal and updating which resulted from the work of this Council.

**Alexandrian school** A patristic school of thought, especially associated with the city of Alexandria in Egypt, noted for its Christology (which placed

emphasis upon the divinity of Christ) and its method of biblical interpretation (which employed allegorical methods of exegesis). A rival approach in both areas was associated with Antioch.

**Anabaptism** A term derived from the Greek word for “re-baptizer” and used to refer to the radical wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation, based on thinkers such as Menno Simons or Balthasar Hubmaier.

**analogy of being (*analogia entis*)** The theory, especially associated with Thomas Aquinas, that there exists a correspondence or analogy between the created order and God, as a result of the divine creatorship. The idea gives theological justification to the practice of drawing conclusions from the known objects and relationships of the natural order concerning God.

**analogy of faith** (*analogia fidei*)

The theory, especially associated with Karl Barth, which holds that any correspondence between the created order and God is only established on the basis of the self-revelation of God.

**anthropomorphism** The tendency to ascribe human features (such as hands or arms) or other human characteristics to God.

**Antiochene school** A patristic school of thought, especially associated with the city of Antioch in modern-day Turkey, noted for its Christology (which placed emphasis upon the humanity of Christ) and its method of biblical interpretation (which employed literal methods of exegesis). A rival approach in both areas was associated with Alexandria.

**anti-Pelagian writings** The writings of Augustine relating to the Pelagian controversy, in which he defended his views on grace and justification. See “Pelagianism.”

**Apocalyptic** A type of writing or religious outlook in general which focuses on the last things and the end of the world, often taking the form of visions with complex symbolism. The Book of Daniel (Old Testament) and Revelation (New Testament) are examples of this type of writing.

**apologetics** The area of Christian theology which focuses on the defense of the Christian faith, particularly through the rational justification of Christian belief and doctrines.

**apophatic** A term used to refer to a particular style of theology, which stressed that God cannot be known in

terms of human categories. “Apophatic” (which derives from the Greek *apophasis*, “negation” or “denial”) approaches to theology are especially associated with the monastic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox church.

***Apophthegmata*** The term used to refer to the collections of monastic writings often known as the “Sayings of the Desert Fathers.” The writings often take the form of brief and pointed sayings, reflecting the concise and practical guidance typical of these writers.

**apostolic era** The period of the Christian church, regarded as definitive by many, bounded by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (c. AD 35) and the death of the last apostle (c. AD 90?). The ideas and practices of this period were widely regarded as normative, at least in some sense or to some degree, in many church circles.

**appropriation** A term relating to the doctrine of the Trinity, which affirms that while all three persons of the Trinity are active in all the outward actions of the Trinity, it is appropriate to think of those actions as being the particular work of one of the persons. Thus it is appropriate to think of creation as the work of the Father, or redemption as the work of the Son, despite the fact that all three persons are present and active in both these works.

**Arianism** A major early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus Christ as the supreme of God’s creatures, and denied his divine status. The Arian controversy was of major importance in the development of Christology during the fourth century.

**asceticism** A term used to refer to the wide variety of forms of self-discipline used by Christians to deepen their knowledge of and commitment to God. The term derives from the Greek term *askesis* (“discipline”).

**atonement** An English term originally coined in 1526 by William Tyndale to translate the Latin term *reconciliatio*, which has since come to have the developed meaning of “the work of Christ” or “the benefits of Christ gained for believers by his death and resurrection.”

**Barthian** An adjective used to describe the theological outlook of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), noted chiefly for its emphasis upon the priority of revelation and its focus upon Jesus Christ. The terms “neo-Orthodoxy” and “dialectical theology” are also used in this connection.

**beatific vision** A term used, especially in Roman Catholic theology, to refer to the full vision of God, which is allowed only to the elect after death. However, some writers, including Thomas Aquinas, taught that certain favored individuals – such as Moses and Paul – were allowed this vision in the present life.

**Beatitudes, the** A term used to describe the eight promises of blessing found in the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 3–11). Examples include “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” and “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

**Calvinism** An ambiguous term, used with two quite distinct meanings. First, it refers to the religious ideas of

religious bodies (such as the Reformed church) and individuals (such as Theodore Beza) who were profoundly influenced by John Calvin, or by documents written by him. Second, it refers to the religious ideas of John Calvin himself. Although the first sense is by far the more common, there is a growing recognition that the term is misleading.

**Cappadocian fathers** A term used to refer collectively to three major Greek-speaking writers of the patristic period: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, all of whom date from the late fourth century. “Cappadocia” designates an area in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), in which these writers were based.

**Cartesianism** The philosophical outlook especially associated with René Descartes (1596–1650), particularly in relation to its emphasis on the separation of the knower from the known, and its insistence that the existence of the individual thinking self is the proper starting point for philosophical reflection.

**catechism** A popular manual of Christian doctrine, usually in the form of question and answer, intended for religious instruction.

**catharsis** The process of cleansing or purification by which the individual is freed from obstacles to spiritual growth and development.

**catholic** An adjective which is used both to refer to the universality of the church in space and time, and also to a particular church body (sometimes also known as the Roman Catholic church) which lays emphasis upon this point.

**Chalcedonian definition** The formal declaration at the Council of Chalcedon that Jesus Christ was to be regarded as having two natures, one human and one divine.

**charisma, charismatic** A set of terms especially associated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In medieval theology, the term “charisma” is used to designate a spiritual gift, conferred upon individuals by the grace of God. Since the early twentieth century the term “charismatic” has come to refer to styles of theology and worship which place particular emphasis upon the immediate presence and experience of the Holy Spirit.

**charismatic movement** A form of Christianity which places particular emphasis upon the personal experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual and community, often associated with various “charismatic” phenomena, such as speaking in tongues.

**Christology** The section of Christian theology dealing with the identity of Jesus Christ, particularly the question of the relation of his human and divine natures.

**circumincision** See “perichoresis.”

**conciliarism** An understanding of ecclesiastical or theological authority which places an emphasis on the role of ecumenical councils.

**confession** Although the term refers primarily to the admission of sin, it acquired a rather different technical sense in the sixteenth century – that of a document which embodies the principles of faith of a Protestant church, such as the Lutheran Augsburg Con-

fession (1530), which embodies the ideas of early Lutheranism, and the Reformed First Helvetic Confession (1536).

**consubstantial** A Latin term, deriving from the Greek term *homoousios*, literally meaning “of the same substance.” The term is used to affirm the full divinity of Jesus Christ, particularly in opposition to Arianism.

**consubstantiation** A term used to refer to the theory of the real presence, especially associated with Martin Luther, which holds that the substance of the eucharistic bread and wine are given together with the substance of the body and blood of Christ.

**contemplation** A form of prayer, distinguished from meditation, in which the individual avoids or minimizes the use of words or images in order to experience the presence of God directly.

**creed** A formal definition or summary of the Christian faith, held in common by all Christians. The most important are those generally known as the Apostles’ creed and the Nicene creed.

**Dark Night of the Soul** A phrase especially associated with John of the Cross, referring to the manner in which the soul is drawn closer to God. John distinguishes an “active” night (in which the believer actively works to draw nearer to God) and a “passive” night, in which God is active and the believer passive.

**Deism** A term used to refer to the views of a group of English writers, especially during the seventeenth century, the rationalism of which antici-

pated many of the ideas of the Enlightenment. The term is often used to refer to a view of God which recognizes the divine creatorship, yet which rejects the notion of a continuing divine involvement with the world.

**detachment** The cultivation of a habit of mind in which the individual aims to abandon dependence upon worldly objects, passions, or concerns. This is not intended to imply that these worldly things are evil; rather, the point being made is that they have the ability to enslave individuals if they are not approached with the right attitude. Detachment is about fostering a sense of independence from the world, so that it may be enjoyed without becoming a barrier between the individual and God.

***Devotio Moderna*** A school of thought which developed in the Netherlands in the fourteenth century, and is especially associated with Geert Groote (1340–84) and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), which placed an emphasis on the imitation of the humanity of Christ. The *Imitation of Christ* is the best-known work emanating from this school.

**dialectical theology** A term used to refer to the early views of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), which emphasized the “dialectic” between God and humanity.

**Docetism** An early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus Christ as a purely divine being who only had the “appearance” of being human.

**Donatism** A movement, centering upon Roman north Africa in the fourth century, which developed a rigorist view

of the church and sacraments.

**doxology** A form of praise, usually especially associated with formal Christian worship. A “doxological” approach to theology stresses the importance of praise and worship in theological reflection.

**Ebionitism** An early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus Christ as a purely human figure, although recognizing that he was endowed with particular charismatic gifts which distinguished him from other humans.

**ecclesiology** The section of Christian theology dealing with the theory of the church.

**Enlightenment, the** A term used since the nineteenth century to refer to the emphasis upon human reason and autonomy, characteristic of much of western European and North American thought during the eighteenth century.

**eschatology** The section of Christian theology dealing with the “end things,” especially the ideas of resurrection, hell, and eternal life.

**eucharist** The term used in the present volume to refer to the sacrament variously known as “the Mass,” “the Lord’s Supper,” and “holy communion.”

**evangelical** A term initially used to refer to reforming movements, especially in Germany and Switzerland, in the 1510s and 1520s, but now used of the movement, especially in English-language theology, which places especial emphasis upon the supreme authority of Scripture and the atoning death of Christ.

**exegesis** The science of textual interpretation, usually referring specifically to the Bible. The term “biblical exegesis” basically means “the process of interpreting the Bible.” The specific techniques employed in the exegesis of Scripture are usually referred to as “hermeneutics.”

**exemplarism** A particular approach to the atonement, which stresses the moral or religious example set to believers by Jesus Christ.

**fathers** An alternative term for “patristic writers.”

**Fideism** An understanding of Christian theology which refuses to accept the need for (or sometimes the possibility of) criticism or evaluation from sources outside the Christian faith itself.

**Five Ways, the** A standard term for the five “arguments for the existence of God” associated with Thomas Aquinas.

**fourth gospel** A term used to refer to the Gospel according to John. The term highlights the distinctive literary and theological character of this gospel, which sets it apart from the common structures of the first three gospels, usually known as the synoptic gospels.

**fundamentalism** A form of American Protestant Christianity which lays especial emphasis upon the authority of an inerrant Bible.

**hermeneutics** The principles underlying the interpretation, or exegesis, of a text, particularly of Scripture, particularly in relation to its present-day application.

**Hesychasm** A tradition, especially

associated with the eastern church, which places considerable emphasis upon the idea of “inner quietness” (Greek: *hesychia*) as a means of achieving a vision of God. It is particularly associated with writers such as Simeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas.

**historical Jesus** A term used, especially during the nineteenth century, to refer to the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, as opposed to the Christian interpretation of that person, especially as presented in the New Testament and the creeds.

**historico-critical method** An approach to historical texts, including the Bible, which argues that only proper meaning must be determined on the basis of the specific historical conditions under which it was written.

**history of religions school** The approach to religious history, and Christian origins in particular, which treats Old and New Testament developments as responses to encounters with other religions, such as Gnosticism.

**homoousion** A Greek term, literally meaning “of the same substance,” which came to be used extensively during the fourth century to designate the mainline Christological belief that Jesus Christ was “of the same substance of God.” The term was polemical, being directed against the Arian view that Christ was “of similar substance (*homoiousios*)” to God. See also “consubstantial.”

**humanism** In the strict sense of the word, an intellectual movement linked with the European Renaissance. At the heart of the movement lay, not (as the modern sense of the word might suggest) a set of secular or secularizing

ideas, but a new interest in the cultural achievements of antiquity. These were seen as a major resource for the renewal of European culture and Christianity during the period of the Renaissance.

**hypostatic union** The doctrine of the union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, without confusion of their respective substances.

**icons** Sacred pictures, particularly of Jesus, which play a significant role in Orthodox spirituality as “windows for the divine.”

**ideology** A group of beliefs and values, usually secular, which govern the actions and outlooks of a society or group of people.

**Ignatian spirituality** A loose term used to refer to the approach to spirituality associated with Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), based on his *Spiritual Exercises*.

**incarnation** A term used to refer to the assumption of human nature by God, in the person of Jesus Christ. The term “incarnationalism” is often used to refer to theological approaches which lay especial emphasis upon God becoming human.

**Jesus prayer** A prayer which has the basic form “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” This can be seen as an adaptation of the words spoken to Jesus by the blind man outside Jericho (Luke 18: 38). The prayer is widely used in Orthodox spirituality, often accompanied by certain physical postures, such as specific patterns of breathing.

**justification by faith, doctrine of** The section of Christian theology deal-

ing with how the individual sinner is able to enter into fellowship with God. The doctrine was to prove to be of major significance at the time of the Reformation.

**Kenoticism** A form of Christology which lays emphasis upon Christ’s “laying aside” of certain divine attributes in the incarnation, or his “emptying himself” of at least some divine attributes, especially omniscience or omnipotence.

**kerygma** A term used, especially by Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) and his followers, to refer to the essential message or proclamation of the New Testament concerning the significance of Jesus Christ.

**liberal Protestantism** A movement, especially associated with nineteenth-century Germany, which stressed the continuity between religion and culture, flourishing between the time of F. D. E. Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich.

**liberation theology** Although this term designates any theological movement laying emphasis upon the liberating impact of the gospel, the term has come to refer to a movement which developed in Latin America in the late 1960s, which stressed the role of political action and orientated itself towards the goal of political liberation from poverty and oppression.

**liturgy** The written text and set forms of public services, especially of the eucharist. In the Greek Orthodox church the word “liturgy” often means “the [liturgy of the] eucharist.”

**logos** A Greek term meaning “word,” which played a crucial role in

the development of patristic Christology. Jesus Christ was recognized as the “word of God”; the question concerned the implications of this recognition, and especially the way in which the divine “logos” in Jesus Christ related to his human nature.

**Lutheranism** The religious ideas associated with Martin Luther, particularly as expressed in the Lesser Catechism (1529) and the Augsburg Confession (1530).

**Manicheism** A strongly fatalist position associated with the Manichees, to which Augustine of Hippo attached himself during his early period. A distinction is drawn between two different divinities, one of which is regarded as evil, and the other good. Evil is thus seen as the direct result of the influence of the evil god.

**meditatio** A form of prayer, distinguished from contemplation, in which the mind uses images (such as those provided by Scripture) as a means for focusing on God.

**Middle English literature** Literature produced in the English language from the Norman invasion of 1066 to *c.* 1485.

**modalism** A Trinitarian heresy which treats the three persons of the Trinity as different “modes” of the Godhead. A typical modalist approach is to regard God as active as Father in creation, as Son in redemption, and as Spirit in sanctification.

**monophysitism** The doctrine that there is only one nature in Christ, which is divine (from the Greek words *monos*, “only one,” and *physis*, “nature”). This

view differed from the orthodox view, upheld by the Council of Chalcedon (451), that Christ had two natures, one divine and one human.

**mysticism** A multifaceted term, which can bear a variety of meanings. In its most important sense, the term refers to the union with God which is seen as the ultimate goal of the Christian life. This union is not to be thought of in rational or intellectual terms, but more in terms of a direct consciousness or experience of God.

**neo-Orthodoxy** A term used to designate the general position of Karl Barth (1886–1968), especially the manner in which he drew upon the theological concerns of the period of Reformed Orthodoxy.

**Old English literature** The English literature of the period from 750 until the time of the invasion of the Normans in 1066.

**ontological argument** A term used to refer to the type of argument for the existence of God especially associated with the scholastic theologian Anselm of Canterbury.

**orthodoxy** A term used in a number of senses, of which the following are the most important: orthodoxy in the sense of “right belief,” as opposed to heresy; orthodoxy in the sense of the forms of Christianity which are dominant in Russia and Greece; orthodoxy in the sense of a movement within Protestantism, especially in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which laid emphasis upon the need for doctrinal definition.

***parousia*** A Greek term which literally means “coming” or “arrival,” used

to refer to the second coming of Christ. The notion of the *parousia* is an important aspect of Christian understandings of the “last things.”

**patripassianism** A theological heresy which arose during the third century, associated with writers such as Noetus, Praxeas, and Sabellius, focusing on the belief that the Father suffered as the Son. In other words, the suffering of Christ on the cross is to be regarded as the suffering of the Father. According to these writers, the only distinction within the Godhead was a succession of modes or operations, so that Father, Son, and Spirit were just different modes of being, or expressions, of the same basic divine entity.

**patristic** An adjective used to refer to the first centuries in the history of the church, following the writing of the New Testament (the “patristic period”), or thinkers writing during this period (the “patristic writers”). For many writers, the period thus designated seems to be *c.* 100–451 (in other words, the period between the completion of the last of the New Testament writings and the landmark Council of Chalcedon).

**Pelagianism** An understanding of how humans are able to merit their salvation which is diametrically opposed to that of Augustine of Hippo, placing considerable emphasis upon the role of human works and playing down the idea of divine grace.

**perichoresis** A term relating to the doctrine of the Trinity, often also referred to by the Latin term *circumincessio*. The basic notion is that all three persons of the Trinity mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is iso-

lated or detached from the actions of the others.

**philokalia** A Greek term (literally meaning “a love of that which is beautiful”), which is generally used to refer to two anthologies of Greek spiritual works: extracts from the works of Origen, or the collection of writings assembled by Macarius of Corinth and Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain in the eighteenth century.

**pietism** An approach to Christianity, especially associated with German writers in the seventeenth century, which places an emphasis upon the personal appropriation of faith and the need for holiness in Christian living. The movement is perhaps best known within the English-language world in the form of Methodism.

**postliberalism** A theological movement, especially associated with Duke University and Yale Divinity School in the 1980s, which criticized the liberal reliance upon human experience, and reclaimed the notion of community tradition as a controlling influence in theology.

**postmodernism** A general cultural development, especially in North America, which resulted from the general collapse in confidence of the universal rational principles of the Enlightenment.

**praxis** A Greek term, literally meaning “action,” adopted by Karl Marx to emphasize the importance of action in relation to thinking. This emphasis on “praxis” has had considerable impact within Latin American liberation theology.

**Protestantism** A term used in the aftermath of the Diet of Speyer (1529) to designate those who “protested” against the practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic church. Prior to 1529, such individuals and groups had referred to themselves as “evangelicals.”

**Quadrigena** The Latin term used to refer to the “fourfold” interpretation of Scripture according to its literal, allegorical, tropological–moral, and analogical senses.

**radical Reformation** A term used with increasing frequency to refer to the Anabaptist movement – in other words, the wing of the Reformation which went beyond what Luther and Zwingli envisaged, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the church.

**Reformed** A term used to refer to a tradition of theology which draws inspiration from the writings of John Calvin (1510–64) and his successors. The term is now generally used in preference to “Calvinist.”

**Sabellianism** An early trinitarian heresy which treated the three persons of the Trinity as different historical manifestations of the one God. It is generally regarded as a form of modalism.

**sacrament** A church service or rite which was held to have been instituted by Jesus Christ himself. Although Roman Catholic theology and church practice recognize seven such sacraments (baptism, confirmation, eucharist, marriage, ordination, penance, and unction), Protestant theologians generally argue that only two (baptism and eucharist) were to be found in the New Testament itself.

**Salesian** Relating to Francis de Sales (1567–1622) or organizations which aim to base themselves on his ideas and values. The most important Salesian group is the Society of St Francis de Sales, founded in 1859.

**schism** A deliberate break with the unity of the church, condemned vigorously by influential writers of the early church, such as Cyprian and Augustine.

**scholasticism** A particular approach to Christian theology, associated especially with the Middle Ages, which lays emphasis upon the rational justification and systematic presentation of Christian theology.

**Scripture principle** The theory, especially associated with Reformed theologians, that the practices and beliefs of the church should be grounded in Scripture. Nothing that could not be demonstrated to be grounded in Scripture could be regarded as binding upon the believer. The phrase *sola scriptura*, “by Scripture alone,” summarizes this principle.

**soteriology** The section of Christian theology dealing with the doctrine of salvation (Greek: *soteria*).

**synoptic gospels** A term used to refer to the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The term (derived from the Greek word *synopsis*, “Summary”) refers to the way in which the three gospels can be seen as providing similar “summaries” of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**synoptic problem** The scholarly question of how the three synoptic gospels relate to each other. Perhaps the most common approach to the relation

of the three synoptic gospels is the “Two Source” theory, which claims that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, while also drawing upon a second source (usually known as “Q”). Other possibilities exist: for example, the Grisebach hypothesis, which treats Matthew as having been written first, followed by Luke and then Mark.

**theodicy** A term coined by Leibniz to refer to a theoretical justification of the goodness of God in the face of the presence of evil in the world.

**theopaschitism** A disputed teaching, regarded by some as a heresy, which arose during the sixth century, associated with writers such as John Maxentius and the slogan “one of the Trinity was crucified.” The formula can be interpreted in a perfectly orthodox sense and was defended as such by Leontius of Byzantium. However, it was regarded as potentially misleading and confusing by more cautious writers, including Pope Hormisdas (died 523), and the formula gradually fell into disuse.

**theotokos** Literally, “the bearer of God.” A Greek term used to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, with the intention of reinforcing the central insight of the doctrine of the incarnation – that is, that Jesus Christ is none other than God. The term was extensively used by writers of the eastern

church, especially around the time of the Nestorian controversy, to articulate both the divinity of Christ and the reality of the incarnation.

**transubstantiation** The doctrine according to which the bread and the wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, while retaining their outward appearance.

**Trinity** The distinctively Christian doctrine of God, which reflects the complexity of the Christian experience of God. The doctrine is usually summarized in maxims such as “three persons, one God.”

**two natures, doctrine of** A term generally used to refer to the doctrine of the two natures, human and divine, of Jesus Christ. Related terms include “Chalcedonian definition” and “hypostatic union.”

**Vulgate** The Latin translation of the Bible, largely deriving from Jerome, upon which medieval theology was largely based.

**Zwinglianism** The term is used generally to refer to the thought of Huldrych Zwingli, but is often used to refer specifically to his views on the sacraments, especially on the “real presence” (which for Zwingli was more of a “real absence”).