

Subordinationism

Subordinationism is a heresy in Christian theology which holds that the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to God the Father in nature and being. Subordinationism, in its various forms, was believed by some in the Early Christian period until the mid 4th century, when the Arian controversy was finally settled, after many decades of debates, with the formulation of the doctrine of Trinity.

Subordinationism has some commonalities with Arianism, but has some differences. While many Christian leaders in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Centuries acknowledged a “relational subordination” of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father, as to an authority, not as an inferior being to a superior one, the Arians went even further to assert that the Son was a created being, and was therefore not eternal, and therefore he is inferior in nature to the Father, whom they believed to be the One and Only God. Subordinationism in its various forms thrived at the same time as Arianism (fourth century AD), but long survived it. Its chief proponents in the fourth century were Arius of Alexandria, after whom the view is most commonly named, and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Athanasius of Alexandria and his mentor and predecessor, Alexander of Alexandria, battled Arian Subordinationism throughout his career as bishop of Alexandria.

In most orthodox Christian theological circles, Arian subordinationism is treated as heresy, while “relational subordination” is not. In other circles, subordinationism is seen as biblical middle ground between extremes of Modalism and Unitarianism. (Christology has been the source of many (but not all) hot disputes and subsequent divisions of Christianity since the 1st century AD)

1 History

1.1 New Testament Era

Some of the Bible verses used to arrive at this position are:

- John 3:35, 5:26,27, 10:29, 13:16, 14:28
- 1 Cor 8:4-6, 15:28
- Heb 10:7,9

1.2 Pre-Nicean

Perhaps the most elaborate of advocates in favor of Subordinationism was Origen of Alexandria. Origen taught that Jesus was a “DEUTEROS THEOS” (*second God*)^[1] He also said the Son was “distinct” from the Father.^[2] Finally Origen insisted that the Son is other in substance than the Father.^[3] It should be noticed that some of these same references are used to defend the concept of the Trinity. However, Subordinationism is not a differentiation or distinction between persons in the Trinity. In this regard they agree. Subordinationism rather suggests that the Son (and Spirit) are other in substance than the Father.^[3]

Other pre-Nicean references which are often interpreted as Subordinationist views include (but are not limited to):

- Clement of Rome (AD 45-101) : “The apostles received the gospel for us from Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was sent from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ: thus both came in proper order by the will of God.”^[4] Also, “Let all the heathen know that thou [the Father] art God alone, and that Jesus Christ is thy Servant...”^[5]
- Ignatius of Antioch (AD 50-115) : “Jesus Christ . . . is the expressed purpose of the Father, just as the bishops who have been appointed throughout the world exist by the purpose of Jesus Christ.”^[6] “Be subject to the bishop and to one another, as Jesus Christ in the flesh was subject to the Father and the apostles were subject to Christ and the Father, so that there may be unity both fleshly and spiritual.”^[7] “All of you are to follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery [the elders] as the apostles.”^[8]
- Epistle of Barnabas (c. AD 100) : “And furthermore, my brethren, consider this: . . . the Lord submitted to suffer for our souls--he who is Lord of the whole world, to whom God said at the foundation of the world: Let us make man in accord with our image and likeness.”^[9] “The Scripture is speaking about us when he [God] says to the Son: Let us make man in accord with our image and likeness, and let them rule over the beasts of the earth and the birds of heaven and the fish of the sea. . . . These things he said to the Son.”^[10]
- Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) : “I shall attempt to persuade you, since you have understood the Scrip-

tures, of the truth of what I say, that there is, and that there is said to be, another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things”^[11] “But to the Father of all, who is unbegotten, there is no name given. For by whatever name he be called, he has as his elder the person who gives him the name.”^[12]

- **Didache** (AD 90-200) : “We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you have made known unto us through Jesus your Servant.”^[13] “We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge, which you have made known to us through Jesus your Servant. Glory to you forever!”^[14]
- **Tertullian** (AD 165-225) : “Thus the Father is distinct from the Son, being greater than the Son, in as much as he who begets is one, and he who is begotten is another; he, too, who sends is one, and he who is sent is another; and he, again, who makes is one, and he through whom the thing is made is another.”^[15]
- **Pope Dionysius** (AD 265) : “Neither, then, may we divide into three godheads the wonderful and divine unity.... Rather, we must believe in God, the Father Almighty; and in Christ Jesus, his Son; and in the Holy Spirit; and that the Word is united to the God of the universe. 'For,' he says, 'The Father and I are one,' and 'I am in the Father, and the Father in me'.”^[16] Yet, Jesus is not treated as synonymous with God.

1.3 Nicea

Alexander of Alexandria, bishop of Alexandria, taught that Christ was the Divine Son of God, who was equal to the Father by nature, and in no way inferior to him, sharing the Father’s divine nature. However to the Presbyter Arius, believed this was inconsistent with the recent decisions against Sabellius at the Synod of Rome. Arius opposed Alexander and called him a heretic. At subsequent local Church Councils, Alexander’s view was upheld, and Arius was condemned and excommunicated as a heretic.

Arius’ friendship with powerful allies, especially Eusebius of Nicomedia, who was influential in Constantine’s Imperial Court, led to the whole controversy being brought before Constantine. Constantine at first viewed the controversy as trivial and insisted that they settle their dispute quietly and peacefully. When it became clear that a peaceful solution was not forthcoming, Constantine summoned all Christian bishops to convene a worldwide, or ecumenical Church Council in Nicea. From the beginning of the Arian controversy, due to the influence of Arian bishops like Eusebius of Nicomedia, Constantine initially favored the Arian position. He saw their views as being easier for the common Roman to understand, and easier for Roman pagans to accept and convert to.

Probably the most vocal subordinationists were Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Of the two Eusebiuses, Eusebius of Caesarea was more moderate in his subordinationist views. Although not as extreme as the Arians in his definition of who Jesus is, neither did he agree with the Modalists in equating Jesus with his Father in authority or person but he was flexible concerning *ousia* (substance). The Trinitarians also opposed Modalism, but insisted on the equality of the Son and the Father by nature (though they generally allowed that the Son was relationally subordinate to the Father as to his authority). For the reasons of him being moderate in the religious and political spectrum of beliefs, Constantine I turned to Eusebius of Caesarea to try to make peace between the Arians and the Trinitarians at Nicea.

In his book, *On the Theology of the Church*, Eusebius of Caesarea explains how the Nicene Creed is a full expression of Christian theology, starting with an emphasis in the Creed of saying, “We believe in One God...” Eusebius goes on to explain how initially the goal was not to expel Arius and his supporters, but to find a Creed on which all of them could agree and unite. The Arians, led by Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia, insisted that the Son was “heteroousios” or “of a different substance/nature” from the Father. The Trinitarians, led by Alexander of Alexandria, his protege Athanasius, and Hosius of Cordoba insisted that the Arian view was heretical and unacceptable. Eusebius of Caesarea suggested a compromise wording of a creed, in which the Son would be affirmed as “homoiousios”, or “of *similar* substance/nature” with the Father. But Alexander and Athanasius saw that this compromise would allow the Arians to continue to teach their heresy, but stay technically within orthodoxy, and therefore rejected that wording. It was Hosius of Cordova who suggested the term “*homoousios*” or “of the same substance/nature” with the Father. This term was found to be acceptable, though it meant the exclusion of the Arians. But it united most of those in attendance at Nicea. Even the “semi-Arians” such as Eusebius of Caesarea accepted the term and signed the Nicene Creed.

Constantine, though he initially backed the Arians, supported the decision of the Council in order to unify the Church and his Empire. He ordered that any bishop, including his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia, who refused to sign the Creed should be removed from their positions in the Church and exiled from the Empire.

1.4 Post-Nicean

Athanasius, in particular, categorically rejected subordinationism in all its forms, possibly as a reaction against Arianism. In the pseudonymous Athanasian Creed, all three divine persons are *almighty* and *Lord*; no divine person is *before* or *after* another, *none is greater or less than another* ... all three are *co-equal*. Constantine, who had been sympathetic to the Arian view from the beginning of the controversy, ends up rescinding the exiles of Ar-

ius and his supporters only a few short years after Nicea. He also brings Eusebius of Nicomedia in as his personal spiritual advisor, and then turned on Athanasius, who is not only deposed from his seat as bishop of Alexandria, but also banished from the Roman Empire a total of five different times.

After the death of Constantine, his sons, Constans and Constantius II, share joint rule in the Empire. Both sons begin to actively support the subordinationist views of Arianism, and begin to depose Trinitarian bishops in key sees throughout the empire and replace them with Arian bishops. This policy begins to change the balance of power in the Christian Church, as many of the most influential churches in the empire became Arian by the intervention of Emperors Constans and Constantius II.^[17] To this, Saint Jerome famously lamented, "*The whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian.*"^[18] Ironically, therefore, after the Council of Nicea, Arianism actually grew in power in the Church.

The deaths of Constans and Constantius II ended this policy, however the increased power of Arianism in the Church remained unchanged until the ascension of an Emperor friendly to the Trinitarian view. Theodosius I called the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, 56 years after Nicea, to once again confront the Arian controversy.^[19] The Council of Constantinople once again rejected the subordinationism of Arianism, and affirmed Trinitarianism. In addition, the Nicene Creed of 325 AD was amended and expanded to include a more detailed statement about the Holy Spirit, rejecting an idea which had been advanced by the Arians during the intervening years since Nicea, termed "Macedonianism", which denied the full deity of the Holy Spirit. The Creed of 381 AD^[20] included an affirmation of the full deity of the Holy Spirit, calling him "the Lord, the giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father."^[21]

Among the Cappadocian Fathers, they yet consistently asserted the supremacy and authority of the Father in all things. When the Cappadocians began releasing their beliefs in writing, it helped unify the semi-Arians with the Trinitarians. (The Greek Fathers and the whole Christian Orient speak, in this regard, of the "Father's Monarchy," and the Western tradition, following St. Augustine, also confesses that the Holy Spirit takes his origin from the Father principaliter, that is, as principle.^[22] In this sense, therefore, the two traditions recognize that the "monarchy of the Father" implies that the Father is the sole Trinitarian Cause (Aitia) or Principle (Principium) of the Son and the Holy Spirit.)

The origin of the Holy Spirit from the Father alone as Principle of the whole Trinity is called ekporeusis by Greek tradition, following the Cappadocian Fathers. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the Theologian, in fact, characterizes the Spirit's relationship of origin from the Father by the proper term ekporeusis, distinguishing it from that of procession (to proienai) which the Spirit has in com-

mon with the Son. "The Spirit is truly the Spirit proceeding (proion) from the Father, not by filiation, for it is not by generation, but by ekporeusis."^[23] Even if St. Cyril of Alexandria happens at times to apply the verb ekporeusthai to the Son's relationship of origin from the Father, he never uses it for the relationship of the Spirit to the Son.^[24] Even for St. Cyril, the term ekporeusis as distinct from the term "proceed" (proienai), can only characterize a relationship of origin to the principle without principle of the Trinity: the Father.

In the 6th Century, the Western Churches, battling a resurgence of Arianism in Spain, held a local Council in Toledo, Spain in which the Spanish bishops added a phrase to the Nicene Creed, "and the Son" (in Latin, *filioque*).^[25] This was ostensibly to counter the Arian argument that the Son was inferior to the Father because he did not share in the Father's role as the Source of the Holy Spirit's Godhead, and so they affirmed that the Holy Spirit proceeded "from the Father and the Son". This phrase, however, was not intended originally to change the Nicene Creed, but only used as a local creed in defense against the Arians. But its use began to spread throughout the Western Church. To many in the Eastern Church, the filioque clause implied that there were two sources of the Godhead, the Father and the Son, which to them meant that there were now two Gods, and the Holy Spirit was relegated to an inferior status, as the only member of the Godhead who was not the source of any other. The Western Churches, however, did not necessarily understand this clause to imply this, but understood it to mean the Holy Spirit proceeded "from the Father through the Son" or "From the Father and the Son as from one principle our source".^[26] But to the Eastern Church, it appeared to be a denial of the Monarchy of the Father and an heretical and unauthorized change of the Nicene Faith.

In the Eastern Church, the debate surrounding subordinationism came to be submerged into the later conflict over the monarche, or single-source of divinity. This idea was that the Father was the source of divinity, from whom the Son is eternally begotten and the Spirit proceeds. As the Western church seemed to implicitly deny the monarchy of the Father and explicitly assert the papacy. It is disagreements on these two primary issues, the filioque and papal claims, which eventually helped fuel the Great Schism of 1054.

2 Current Views

2.1 Orthodox (Eastern)

The Orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity holds to the position known as "the monarchy of the Father," which Orthodox Christians contend is that of Scripture, Pre-Nicene writers and also that of the Cappadocian Fathers and Second Ecumenical Council. The teaching on

the “monarchy of the Father” was especially stressed by St Photios who is considered a Pillar of Orthodoxy, against the Latin *filioque*. According to the Orthodox view, the Son or Word is derived from the Father who alone is without cause or origin. This is not a subordination in time, since the Son is co-eternal with the Father or even in terms of the co-equal uncreated nature shared by the Father and Son. However, this view is sometimes considered a form of “subordinationism” by Western Christians, and the Western view is often viewed by the Eastern Church as being close to *Modalism*.^{[27][28]} Regarding this point, the Revised Catechism of the Orthodox Faith notes that “This (the Orthodox view) is sometimes misunderstood (by Christians influenced by Western teachings on the Trinity) as “subordinationism,” but this term cannot rightly be applied to the Orthodox teaching because it can be said that God the Father depends on the Son to be called “Father...”^[29]

Moreover, since the term “Subordinationism” is often associated with Arianism, it is always rejected by Orthodox commentators as pejorative and inadequate.

2.2 Roman Catholics

Roman Catholicism is firmly non-Subordinationist, in the Arian or Semi-Arian sense, but does accept a relational subordinationism of Son to the Father.^[30]

2.3 Lutherans

Dr John Kleinig (Dean of worship and Head of biblical studies at Australian Lutheran College) promotes a form of subordinationism in his paper,^[31] “The subordination of the exalted Son to the Father”. He concludes:

“Well then, is the exalted Christ in any way subordinate to the Father right now? The answer is both “yes” and “no”. It all depends on whether we are speaking about Him in His nature as God, or about Him in his office as the exalted Son of God. On the one hand, He is not subordinate to the Father in His divine essence, status, and majesty. On the other hand, He is, I hold, subordinate to the Father in His vice-regal office and His work as prophet, priest, and king. He is operationally subordinate to the Father. In the present operation of the triune God in the church and the world, He is the mediator between God the Father and humankind. The exalted Christ receives everything from His Father to deliver to us, so that in turn, He can bring us back to the Father. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.”

Others within Lutheran circles are critical of Dr Kleinig’s position including Dr Mark Worthing who presented the problems with Dr Kleinig’s position in a paper presented to pastors in Queensland.

2.4 Evangelicals

Contemporary Evangelicals believe the historically agreed fundamentals of the Christian faith, including the Trinity. In the typical Evangelical formula, the Trinity is one God in three equal persons, among whom there is economic subordination (as, for example, when the Son obeys the Father). As recently as 1977, economic subordinationism has been advanced in *evangelical* circles at the suggestion of many, not least *George W. Knight III* in his 1977 book, “The New Testament Teaching on Role Relationship with Men and Women”. In this book, Knight suggests that the Son is functionally - but not ontologically - subordinate to the Father, thus positing that eternal subordination does not necessarily imply *ontological* subordination.

2.5 Bible versions

Two noteworthy changes from the KJV are found in many other translations (including the NIV) where two scripture references are omitted (on the basis of ancient manuscripts discovered since the KJV’s original printing). These references have often used by traditional trinitarians and modalists to justify their Christology. Sir Isaac Newton while studying the *Patristics* identified these as spurious.

One is the word “God” from 1 Tim 3:16 and the second is the entire verse of 1 John 5:7; both of which do not exist in any of the 500+ Greek manuscripts (only in the *Latin Vulgate* much later). 1 John 5:7 is commonly referred to as the *Comma Johanneum*. Besides the NIV, these two passages are also corrected to reflect the Greek majority in the following versions: ASV (1901), RSV, NRSV, NASB, ESV, NWT, etc.

2.6 Scholars

2.6.1 Oxford Encyclopedia

SUBORDINATIONISM. Thus we call the tendency, strong in the theology of the 2nd and 3rd cc., to consider Christ, as Son of God, inferior to the Father. Behind this tendency were gospel statements in which Christ himself stressed this inferiority (Jn 14, 28; Mk 10, 18; 13, 32, etc.) and it was developed esp. by the *Logos-christology*. This theology, partly under the influence of middle Platonism, considered Christ, logos and divine wisdom, as the means of liaison and mediation between the Father’s position to him. When the conception of the Trinity was

enlarged to include the Holy Spirit, as in Origen, this in turn was considered inferior to the Son. Subordinationist tendencies are evident esp. in theologians like Justin, Tertullian, Origen and Novatian; but even in Irenaeus, to whom trinitarian speculations are alien, commenting on Jn 14, 28, has no difficulty in considering Christ inferior to the Father.^[32]

2.6.2 Oxford Dictionary

SUBORDINATIONISM. Teaching about the Godhead which regards either the Son as subordinate to the Father or the Holy Ghost as subordinate to both. It is a characteristic tendency in much of Christian teaching of the first three centuries, and is a marked feature of such otherwise orthodox Fathers as St. Justin and Origen.^[33]

2.6.3 Westminster Handbook

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 it does not illuminate much of the theology of the pre-Nicene teachers, where a subordinationist presupposition was widely and unreflectively shared.^[34]

2.6.4 Kevin Giles

Ante-Nicene Subordinationism. It is generally conceded that the ante-Nicene Fathers were subordinationists. This is clearly evident in the writings of the second-century "Apologists."...Irenaeus follows a similar path...The theological enterprise begun by the Apologists and Irenaeus was continued in the West by Hippolytus and Tertullian...The ante-Nicene Fathers did their best to explain how the one God could be a Trinity of three persons. It was the way they approached this dilemma that caused them insoluble problems and led them into subordinationism. They began with the premise that there was one God who was the Father, and then tried to explain how the Son and the Spirit could also be God. By the fourth century it was obvious that this approach could not produce an adequate theology of the Trinity.^[35] Dr Giles' conflation of ontological and relational subordinationism and his propensity for generalisations such as 'the ante-Nicene Fathers were subordinationists' has been strongly criticised in recent years.^[36]

3 References

[1] Migne 14:108-110

[2] Prestige xxvii

[3] On Prayer 15:1; Contra Celsium 8:12.

[4] 1 Clement 42:1-2

[5] 1 Clement 59:4

[6] Ignatius to the Ephesians 3:2

[7] Ignatius to the Magnesians 13:2

[8] Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 8:1

[9] Barnabas 5:5, Sparks edit.

[10] Barnabas 6:12-13, Sparks edit.

[11] Dialogue with Trypho, 223

[12] Roberts and Donaldson 1:190

[13] Didache 9:1, Sparks edit.

[14] Didache 9:3, Sparks edit.

[15] Roberts and Donaldson 3:604

[16] [The Trinity](#)

[17] Socrates Scholasticus, Church History, book 2, chapter 37

[18] Jerome, Dialogue Against the Luciferians, 19

[19] Socrates Scholasticus, Church History, book 5, chapters 8 & 11, puts the council in the same year as the revolt of Magnus Maximus and death of Gratian

[20] <http://oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/doctrine/the-symbol-of-faith/nicene-creed>

[21] Tanner, Norman; Alberigo, Giuseppe, eds. (1990). Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. p. 84. ISBN 0-87840-490-2

[22] *De Trinitate* XV, 25, 47, P.L. 42, 1094-1095.

[23] Discourse 39. 12, Sources chretiennes 358, p. 175

[24] c.f. Commentary on St. John, X, 2, P.G. 74, 910D; Ep 55, P.G. 77, 316D, etc.

[25] "Filioque." Cross, F. L., ed. The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005

[26] Davies, Rupert Eric (1987-07-01). Making sense of the creeds. Epworth. ISBN 978-0-7162-0433-6. Retrieved 2013-03-14.

[27] The Orthodox Church: its past and its role in the world today By John Meyendorff

[28] The Orthodox Church By Kallistos (Bishop of Diokleia) pg 213

[29] Revised Catechism of the Orthodox Faith, Question 095

[30] [Catechism of the Catholic Church - SECTION TWO THE PROFESSION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH - THE CREEDS](#)

[31] Kleinig's paper can be found at

- [32] M. Simmonetti, *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, II.797.
- [33] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., p. 1319.
- [34] John Athony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, p. 321.
- [35] Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism*, pp. 60-62.
- [36] Mark Baddeley, 'The Trinity and Subordinationism', *Reformed Theological Review* 63/1 (2004), pp. 29–42.

4 See also

- Arianism
- Athanasian Creed
- Binitarianism
- Christology
- Nontrinitarianism
- Semi-Arianism
- Trinitarianism
- Unitarianism

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