What Exactly Are the Intra-Trinitarian Relations?

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Abstract: The core of a Trinitarian model is the internal layout of intra-Trinitarian relations. Depending on different metaphysical interpretations of the nature of the relations, various patristic authors have produced different and oftentimes incompatible Trinitarian models, and, consequently, conflicting expositions of the doctrine of the Trinity. To elucidate the differences in their Trinitarian theologies, I demonstrate the divergence in their understanding of the divine relations using the contemporary philosophical taxonomy of relations. I analyze the models of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Boethius, and their attempted synthesis by Thomas Aquinas. Each of the patristic Trinitarian models, despite being fully orthodox, uses completely different types of relations, which makes them incompatible. One of the results of this incompatibility is the problem of the *filioque*, which cannot be resolved without addressing the metaphysics of relations.

Keywords: Trinity, persons, relations, Church fathers, filioque.

1. What Is a Trinitarian Model?

In his *Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, Thomas McCall claims that analytic theology should be a "retrieval theology"—that it should examine and critically engage various theological proposals from the Christian tradition. McCall insists that such retrieval is especially wanted in the contemporary analytic discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity, which have been "fairly loose" in their use of the tradition.[1] Indeed, the majority of analytic debates over social vs. Latin models of the Trinity are quite independent of the theological heritage of the Early and Medieval Church. Very few contemporary philosophers have used arguments from the tradition in their reasoning about the Trinity. Even those who have incorporated some of the historical material

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[1] McCall (2015, 85–87).

into their theories usually treat the tradition uncritically, either as a convenient example of a kindred spirit in the past or as an authoritative point of reference. McCall's ideal of retrieval theology requires critical examination of the traditional Trinitarian models. Such retrieval of the historical models is a promising area of research in itself, and it would be of great value for the contemporary analytic debates about models of the Trinity.

If we are to embark on a quest to retrieve the traditional Trinitarian models, what exactly should we be looking for? What is a Trinitarian model? I take it that the minimal requirements for a conception to qualify as a Trinitarian model consist of addressing the following questions:

1. *What are "the three" in the Trinity, and what is "one" about them?* The very idea of the "*Tri*-nity" implies that there are things to count, things of the same ilk; so, the question is: what are those entities that we count ending up with the number 3? And what is this entity that we count as one in connection with those three?

2. *How is there unity in plurality, and plurality in unity?* In other words, what is responsible, or what accounts for the three being one, and what accounts for the one being three? To my knowledge, this is the question which contemporary analytic Trinitarian theology finds to be most appealing since the majority of the debates are about some proper mixture of unity and plurality.

3. *How each of the three is distinguished from the others?* Answering this question is necessary for a Trinitarian model to be exhaustive. Unfortunately, most of the contemporary analytic models of the Trinity do not even attempt addressing it. As I see it, this is a major deficiency of the contemporary models, and this is where the retrieval of the traditional models could be of great value.

I guess I should have added yet another question: *Why is the number 3 not accidental to the Trinity?* But that would be unfair. There are so few models that address this question, not only in our time but also in the tradition, that adding this requirement would be too much of a burden.

So, if we want to retrieve different Trinitarian models from the tradition, we should look there for answers to those three questions. What are those traditional answers?

1. As for the first question, there is only one orthodox answer. Initially, there was a variety of opinions, but the synod of Alexandria in 362 A.D. validated only one conventional formula: that which is one in the Godhead is *essence*, and those which are three are *hypostases* or persons.

2. There is also a remarkable unanimity among the Church fathers in their answers to the second question: the foundation of unity is the divine essence, and the foundation of the plurality is the intra-Trinitarian relations. Why relations? In the early 3rd century Christian theologians came up with the idea that the names "Father" and "Son" indicate relations and relations indicate

plurality.[2] But the real breakthrough occurred somewhere in the middle of the 4th century. In the thick of the debates with the followers of Arius, some pro-Nicene theologians happily stumbled upon a convenient philosophical idea: the Aristotelian category of relation is the only category that is not predicated of the essence. This maneuver was immediately taken up and transformed into an argument against the Arians. While the Arians argued that any plurality endangers the unity of the divine essence, the pro-Nicene theologians answered that since relation says nothing about the essence, then the relative distinctions in the Godhead do not violate the unity of the divine essence; therefore the distinctions in the Trinity must be according to the category of relation. From then onward it became the standard way of treating plurality in the Godhead in catholic theology.[3]

3. At this point, however, the patristic consensus has reached its end. There was no unanimity about a proper way of distinguishing the divine persons. While the Church fathers agreed that we should somehow apply relations to the distinctions in the Trinity, they did not have the same understanding of what exactly are the intra-Trinitarian relations. Unlike the widespread Aristotelian and Stoic lists of categories, which involved the category of relation, there was no conventional metaphysical theory of relations at the time. Different theologians came up with different ideas about the nature of relations, and that resulted in different ways of distinguishing one divine person from another. The only patristic consensus here was about the general rule that the distinction between the persons must be described according to their relations, but how one should interpret that rule was a matter of individual metaphysical preferences.

2. How to Retrieve a Trinitarian Model?

Since the answers to the first two questions from our list are standard and well-known, our quest for patristic Trinitarian models should be focused only on the third one. We should also keep in mind that the only distinction between the persons that was approved by the Church Fathers is the difference in their mutual relations. Therefore, we have to narrow down our question for the patristic writers. Formulated more technically, our main question (henceforth: "our main question") should look like this: "*What is the relational internal structure of the Godhead, and how does it allow identifying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*?"[4]

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[2] See Ayres (2006, 43, 201–202); Turcescu (2005, 81).

[3] See Ayres (2006, 201); Beeley (2008, 161, 208, 312).

[4] I borrow the phrase "internal structure of the Godhead" from Tertullian's concept of *dispensatio,* or οἰκονομία in the One God (*Adv. Prax*. 2.1).

Looking for answers to our main question in the patristic writings would be more efficient if we could equip ourselves with up-to-date tools of analytic metaphysics. Unfortunately, as in the patristic era, the contemporary metaphysics of relations is "still in its infancy."[5] Nevertheless, despite its infancy, it is already capable of providing some apparatus for the analysis of patristic relational models. I suggest using the taxonomy of relations that is widely applied in mathematics and analytic philosophy. We will need such categories as the degree of relations, the symmetry, and the externality.

The degree of relation (also known as *adicity* or *arity*) is the number of things that are involved in the relation. Thus, a "two-place" relation (a.k.a. dyadic or binary) has the degree of 2, a "three-place" relation (triadic or ternary) has the degree of 3, and so on. If the relation has a definite degree (for example, it is always binary, or always ternary), then it is a *unigrade* relation. If it does not have a definite degree, i.e., it can be either binary, or ternary, or something else, it is called a *multigrade* relation.

We will also use a distinction between *symmetric* and *asymmetric* relations. By definition, if x has a symmetric relation to y, then y has the same relation to x. And, by definition, if x has an asymmetric relation to y, then y does not have that same relation to x.

Finally, we will need the distinction between *external* and *internal* relations. This distinction is not entirely clear and there are ongoing debates about its proper criteria.[6] Nevertheless, the basic idea is that a relation is internal if it is necessitated by the intrinsic properties of the related objects, otherwise, it is external.

Having equipped ourselves with this taxonomy of relations, we are ready to proceed with our quest for retrieval of traditional Trinitarian models. Due to the limits of this paper, I will mention only a few models—those of Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and Boethius. In addition, I will examine a medieval attempt to combine the patristic ideas—the Trinitarian model of Aquinas.

3. Patristic Trinitarian Models

3.1. Pre-Cappadocian Trinitarian relations

The earliest complete answers to our main question in the history of Christian theology are given by the Great Cappadocians, namely, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. But before we proceed to their relational Trinitarian models, we should take a quick look at the earlier

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[5] Simons (2010, 199).
[6] See Simons (2010, 203–206).

tradition. From the time of Tertullian and Origen,[7] there was a persistent theological line of reasoning that the name "Father" indicates that there is an eternal relation of fatherhood in God, and that, in turn, implies that there must be an eternal relation of sonship in God, which does not belong to the Father. This was not, however, a complete Trinitarian model, because the pre-Cappadocian theology did not address relations with the Holy Spirit. Since it fails to identify the third person of the Trinity, it does not provide a satisfactory answer to our main question. The incomplete model includes only two relations – fatherhood and sonship, which are binary, asymmetric, and internal (Figure 1).
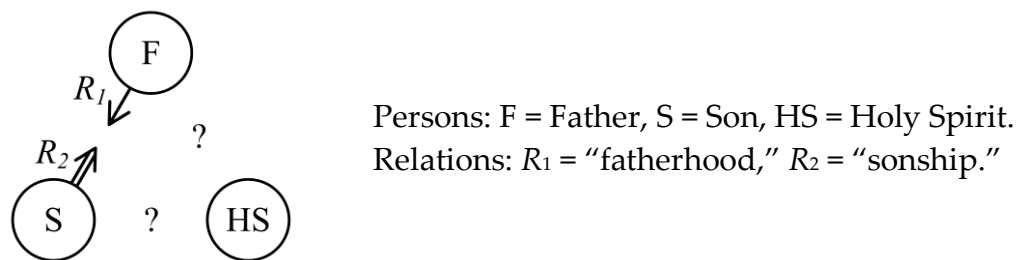

Persons: F = Father, S = Son, HS = Holy Spirit.
Relations: R_1 = "fatherhood," R_2 = "sonship."

Figure 1. Pre-Cappadocian relational model

Why bring it up if this was not yet an exhaustive model? There are two reasons for that. First, it was a meaningful step towards later fully developed relational models, and it would be worthwhile to compare this early idea with its future developments. The second reason has to do with the fact that the later Church fathers considered this reasoning to be a part of their authoritative tradition. They would often reproduce this discourse even if their understanding of Trinitarian relations was quite different. In other words, not every statement which comes from the mouth of a Church father is an integral part of his distinctive doctrine. And we have to be aware of those extraneous elements while retrieving original Trinitarian models.

3.2. Basil of Caesarea

The first complete Trinitarian model comes from Basil of Caesarea. His writings on the Trinity are not entirely consistent, and his ideas are vulnerable to many criticisms; nevertheless, Basil provides the necessary elements of an exhaustive Trinitarian model. Before introducing his distinctive ideas, Basil repeats the traditional discourse about the names "Father" and "Son" that indicate mutual relations.[8] Afterward, he claims that divine persons can be distinguished by

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[7] Tertullian, *Adv. Prax*. 4.4; Origen, *De Princ*. I.2.2–3. See also Ayres (2006, 22); Beeley (2008, 312, n. 245).

[8] Basil, *Adv. Eun. II*, 22.

their peculiar properties (ἰδιώματα)—"fatherhood," "sonship," and "sanctifying power."[9] Since those properties are distinctive for the persons, they must be relations (Figure 2).

Relations: R_1 = "fatherhood," R_2 = "sonship," R_3 = "sanctifying power."
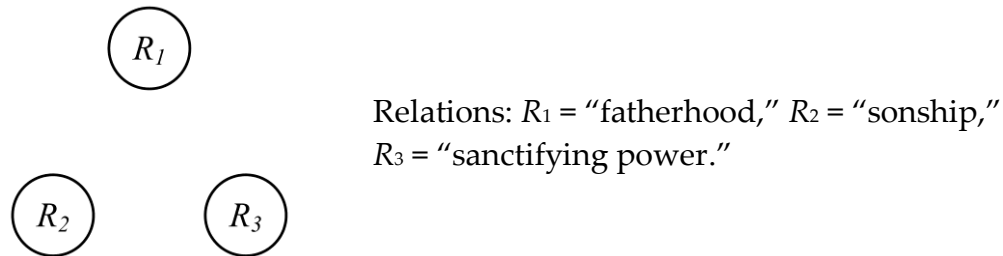
Figure 2. Trinitarian model of Basil of Caesarea

Basil's Trinitarian relations differ from the traditional ones. While his predecessors taught that "fatherhood" is that which distinguishes the Father from the Son, Basil's idea implies that "fatherhood" is not a mutual relation, but it is simply a property that defines the Father. In other words, for the predecessors, "fatherhood" was a binary relation, but in Basil's model, it becomes unary. Thus, Basil's model can be described as containing three different unary relations, and each of the three relations pertains to only one of the divine persons. As for their symmetry and externality, unary relations are, obviously, internal, and symmetry does not apply to them.

3.3. Gregory Nazianzen

The next model we will address belongs to Basil's younger friend, Gregory Nazianzen. It would be misleading to assume that the Cappadocians must have a common Trinitarian theology.[10] Gregory's model and his relational terminology are unique.[11] It is not easy, however, to extract his original model from his writings. While talking about the Father and the Son, he does not hesitate to repeat and even build upon the traditional binary fatherhood/sonship approach. Moreover, he also pays his respects to his senior

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[9] Basil, *Ep.* 214.4.

[10] I agree with Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (2009, 87, n.1) that Gregory Nazianzen has significantly different Trinitarian views from the two brothers—Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. I disagree with him, however, that the two brothers are "sufficiently like-minded" since their Trinitarian models have nothing in common. While Basil builds his Trinity upon three different unary relations, Gregory of Nyssa suffices with only one multigrade symmetric external relation of "communion" (See Turcescu 2005, 58, 59, 117).

[11] For Nazianzen, the technical term σχέσις, which generally denoted "relation" in Stoic and later Aristotelian philosophy, pre-Cappadocian theologians, and the other two Cappadocians, surprisingly has a different meaning of mutual disposition or position in a relational scheme (see Butakov 2015, 363–372).

friend's idea of personal distinctive properties, simply changing Basil's terminology of unary "fatherhood, sonship, sanctifying power" into "ungenerated, generated, proceeding." It is only when he addresses our main question, i.e. attempts to identify each of the three persons (especially the Holy Spirit), we can see his original ideas. Gregory introduces two Trinitarian relations—"generation" for the Father and the Son, and "procession" for the Father and the Spirit (Figure 3).
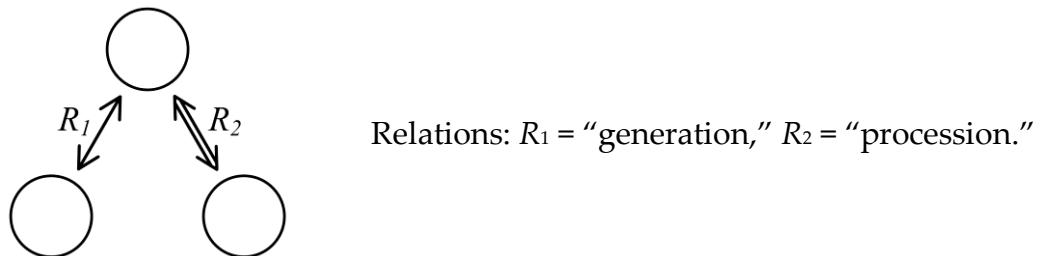
Relations: R_1 = "generation," R_2 = "procession."

Figure 3. Trinitarian model of Gregory Nazianzen

For his predecessors, a relation pertains to only one of the persons; but for Gregory, relations pertain to pairs of persons.[12] Thus, the Spirit is identified as the one who does not participate in "generation," and the Son is the one who is not in "procession." This relational model is complete and fully functional, and it successfully answers our main question. It consists of two different binary relations, which are symmetric and external.
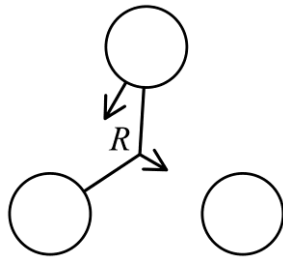
3.4. Boethius

Our next model is of Western origin. It has its roots in Augustine,[13] and it was brought to completion by Boethius. Boethius claims that there is only one relation that obtains in the simple divine essence, and that is the relation of identity or sameness. But, strangely enough, this relation of identity is not symmetric—it is directed from the Father to the Son, and from both of them to the Holy Spirit (see Figure 4).[14]

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[12] Gregory's peculiar approach to relations as referring to pairs of persons becomes obvious when he says that "Father" is the name according to the "mutual disposition and relation of the Father to the Son or of the Son to the Father" (*Or*. 29.16). I provide a more substantiated account of Gregory's Trinitarian model in: Butakov (2014, 507–509).

[13] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, books V, VII (e.g., V.5.6, VII.1.2). While being considered as typically Western, Augustine can also be seen as a successor of the Trinitarian ideas of Gregory of Nyssa (see Ayres 2006, 366).

[14] Boethius, *De Trinitate*, 6.20–22.

Relation R = "identity" (or "procession").

Figure 4. Trinitarian model of Boethius

Boethius allows likening this relation of identity to the creedal term "procession." The Son proceeds from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.[15] This elegant solution allows answering our main question: he, who the relation is from, is the Father; he, who the relation is to and from, is the Son; he, who the relation is to, is the Holy Spirit. Thus, Boethius manages to produce an exhaustive Trinitarian model by utilizing only one relation, which is multigrade, asymmetric, and internal.

Let us stop here for a moment and compare the three Trinitarian models (Figure 5). They are significantly different and thus incompatible. Each one of them has its own set of relations, uses different types of relations, and identifies the divine persons in its unique way. Each one of them, however, is an exhaustive and viable model, and each one conforms to the catholic doctrine of the Trinity.

Author	Number of relations	Degree of relations	Symmetry	Externality
Basil of Caesarea	3	1	n/a	internal
Gregory Nazianzen	2	2	symmetric	external
Boethius	1	multigrade	asymmetric	internal

Figure 5. Patristic Trinitarian relations

Will it be worthwhile to bring them all together, as if they were just fragments of a greater picture? Should we consolidate them into one extensive Trinitarian model? I am certain that we ought not to do that. Each of them already is a complete picture and does not require any enhancement. There was, however, a theologian who attempted to produce an all-embracing Trinitarian model—St. Thomas Aquinas.

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[15] Boethius, *De Trinitate*, 5.46–48.

5. Thomas Aquinas

The model of Aquinas is a complex arrangement of several types of Trinitarian relations (see Figure 6).
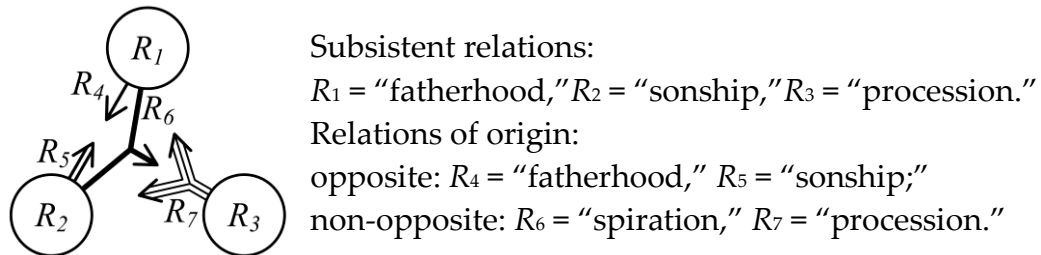

Subsistent relations:
R_1 = "fatherhood," R_2 = "sonship," R_3 = "procession."
Relations of origin:
opposite: R_4 = "fatherhood," R_5 = "sonship;"
non-opposite: R_6 = "spiration," R_7 = "procession."

Figure 6. Trinitarian model of Thomas Aquinas

The first type is the subsistent relations[16]: fatherhood, sonship, and procession.[17] The three subsistent relations are the personal properties, which constitute the divine persons. These three relations are unary, and they function in the same way as Basil's relations: each divine person is identified with a certain relation. In addition to the subsistent relations, Aquinas introduces another type – relations of origin.[18] There are four of them: fatherhood, sonship, spiration, and procession. Moreover, there is a further subdivision: two of the four relations of origin—fatherhood and sonship—are opposite relations, and two—spiration and procession—are not, because spiration belongs not to one, but two persons—the Father and the Son.[19] Fatherhood and sonship are similar to the pre-Cappadocian relations, spiration resembles the procession of the Spirit in the model of Boethius, and the division of the relations of origin into two types—towards the Son, and towards the Spirit—follows the idea of Gregory. Aquinas claims that the persons can be distinguished only through opposite relations of origin.[20] Thus, the Father and the Son are distinguished through the opposite relations of fatherhood and sonship. It is not entirely clear, however, how Aquinas's model identifies the person of the Holy Spirit since there is no opposite relation of origin for the Spirit's procession. All of the relations of origin are asymmetric and internal, while the opposite ones are binary, and the non-opposite are ternary.

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[16] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 4.

[17] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 30, 2, ad 1.

[18] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 28, 4.

[19] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 30, 2.

[20] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 30, 2.

Type of relations	Number of relations	Degree of relations	Symmetry	Externality
Subsistent relations	3	1	n/a	internal
Opposite relations of origin	2	2	asymmetric	internal
Non-opposite relations of origin	2	3	asymmetric	internal

Figure 7. Trinitarian relations in the model of Aquinas

The combined model of Aquinas was hardly a success. Apparently, it has no advantage over the models of his predecessors and does not allow achieving more than they already did. It is cumbersome, excessively complex, and it still fails to properly distinguish the person of the Holy Spirit. It utilizes seven different relations of three different types (see Figure 7), which does not sit well with Aquinas's ideal of divine simplicity. I do not imply that one could do a better job of combining the traditional models—I believe that they are mutually exclusive, and the very project of their unification is doomed to failure.

4. A Bonus: The *Filioque*

Instead of trying to mix the incompatible ingredients, I suggest dealing with the traditional models as they are. We should remember, however, that those models are not sacred doctrine. Albeit being authoritative, they are, nevertheless, negotiable metaphysical theories. If we want to retrieve those traditional models for our contemporary needs, we ought to examine and critically evaluate them, preferably by using the tools provided by analytic philosophy.[21]

I hope that this approach has the potential for going beyond the confines of armchair philosophy into the area of systematic theology. For example, it can offer a new solution to the embarrassing problem of the *filioque*.[22] A closer look at the relational language of the Eastern and Western Trinitarian theologies

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[21] Such an analysis, for example, is made by John Lamont (2004), who, using the tools of contemporary analytic metaphysics, reveals incoherence in Aquinas's concept of subsistent relations. Also, elsewhere I question the tenability of the introduction of external relations into the Godhead by Gregory Nazianzen (Butakov 2014, 509, 512).

[22] I do not suggest that to overcome the division over the *filioque* we should invent yet another relational model (Cf. Effingham 2018). We should rather sort out the mess that is already on our hands.

shows that the fight over the *filioque*, at its core, is an opposition between metaphysical models.

The Western church generally follows the model of Boethius. In that model, there is only one relation in the Trinity—the relation of procession, which is from the Father to the Son, and from both of them to the Holy Spirit. For the Western Trinitarian model to be functional, there has to be the relation of the Son to the Spirit, otherwise, the two persons would be indistinguishable (see Figure 8). Thus, within the framework of Boethius's model, the Spirit must proceed from the Father *and the Son*.
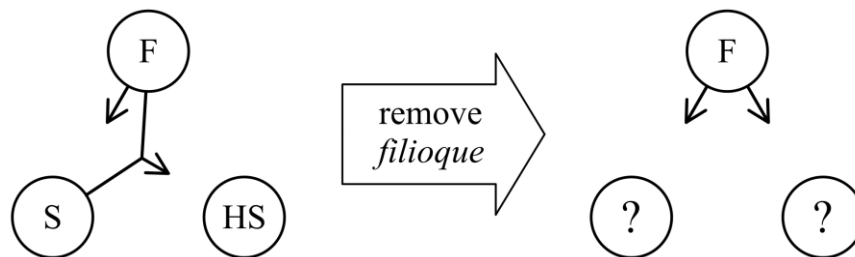
Figure 8. The *filioque* in the Western model

Eastern theology operates within the framework of Gregory Nazianzen's model.[23] This model has two different Trinitarian relations—"generation," which is between the Father and the Son, and "procession," which is between the Father and the Holy Spirit. If one would add an extra "procession" between the Son and the Spirit, then the model would fail to distinguish between the Father and the Son (see Figure 9). Therefore, within Nazianzen's relational model, the Spirit must proceed only from the Father.
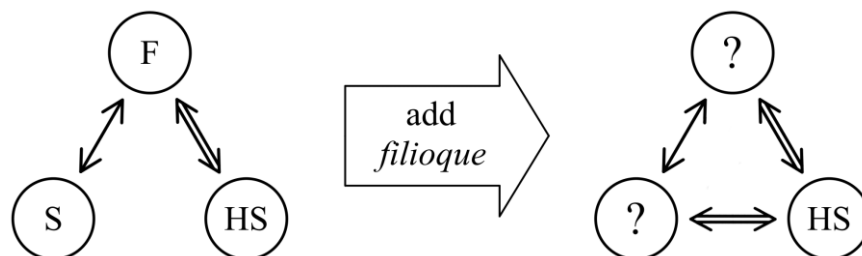
Figure 9. The *filioque* in the Eastern model

The relation of procession of the Spirit from the Son—the *filioque*—neither should be forced into the Eastern model nor should be taken away from the

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[23] It was Gregory Nazianzen, and not the other two Cappadocians, who became the definitive theologian for the Eastern Church (hence, his title: "Gregory the Theologian"). "Byzantine Christianity, in a real sense, was Gregory's mind-child and masterpiece" (McGuckin 2001, xxiv). The great systematician of Eastern theology John of Damascus in his *magnum opus* teaches about the Trinity following the model of Gregory Nazianzen (*De Fid. Orth.*, I.8).

Western model. The Western "procession" is nothing like the Eastern "procession." For the West, "procession" is the name of the only relation in the Trinity, which is multigrade, asymmetric, and internal. For the East, "procession" designates one of the two Trinitarian relations; it is binary, symmetric, and external. Arguing about the *filioque* without acknowledging the difference in the meaning of "procession" is simply talking past each other. Instead, analytic theologians of the East and the West ought to address the source of the disagreement—their metaphysical models, with unwavering open-mindedness and humility.

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