

The Holy Trinity

Dr. Richard H. Bulzacchelli

CATHOLIC STUDIES
ACADEMY



The Holy Trinity

Syllabus & Objectives

This course builds on material presented in our earlier courses in the Fundamental Theology sequence and Christology, by delving more deeply into the mystery of the God of the Bible, who reveals himself as relational. Our concern here, as it was in Christology, is not merely to arrive at an abstract intellectual formulation concerning the nature of God but to find a way to speak about God, according to his own self-revelation, in such a way as to affirm the connection between who God is and what he intends for his creation. For this reason, this course treats not only the Triune God, but also the mystery of salvation, covenant, and Church, laying the groundwork for further studies related to those questions.

Note on Suggested Readings: Students should remember that suggested readings for this course are just that: suggestions. Our lectures cover numerous thinkers and historical periods, so the suggested reading list can be extensive, particularly for certain lessons. In some cases, for the convenience of the student, a recommended reading is given with a hyperlink to an available online source, which can be accessed free of charge.

In any event, students need not consider this reading a “requirement,” and they should remember that lessons and readings can be taken at a pace that matches the student’s own schedule. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is one of the most difficult areas of theological study, but our intention here is only to provide a survey of the development of Catholic theology on this topic, from the time of the primitive Church to the present day, familiarizing the student with the most important figures, concepts, controversies, and definitions pertaining to this broad question.

Students who complete this course will be equipped to:

- Articulate the objective content of the dogma of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit,
- Identify several of the major heresies concerning the Trinity denounced in the patristic period and explain why they are offensive to the Faith,
- Explain what is at issue in variants of later theories of Trinitarian procession—for example, in the filioque controversy, or in the different theories articulated by Aquinas and Bonaventure.
- Offer a coherent and orthodox account of the unity of being and distinction of persons within the Godhead of Father, Son, and Spirit, faithful to tradition and suited to a Catechetical presentation.

The Holy Trinity

Lectures

The following lectures will be provided in this course:

1. The State of the Question about the Biblical God in the First Century, and the Nature and Limits of Trinitarian Theology
2. The Idea of Theosis: Salvation as Participation in God's Own Life
3. The "Economic" Trinitarianism of the Early Fathers: Insights and Limitations
4. From Controversies over Christ to Theories of Trinitarian Relations
5. The Paradox and Problem of Trinitarian Theology According to St. Augustine
6. A Summary of Augustine's Context and Contribution to Trinitarian Theology
7. Augustine's Approach to the Trinity
8. Person, Relation, and the "Image of God" in Humanity
9. The Filioque Controversy
10. St. Thomas Aquinas on the Trinity
11. St. Bonaventure on the Trinity
12. Returning to the Central Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Face of Contemporary Controversies

The State of the Question about the Biblical God in the First Century, and the Nature and Limits of Trinitarian Theology

Suggested readings: Genesis 1–2; Psalm 51; Isaiah 63; Wisdom 7–9, 18; Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 1:1–3:22; John 1:1–34; 1 Corinthians 1; 2 Corinthians 4; Colossians 1; Hebrews 1; 1 John 1; Revelation 19; Letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Magnesians 8–9.

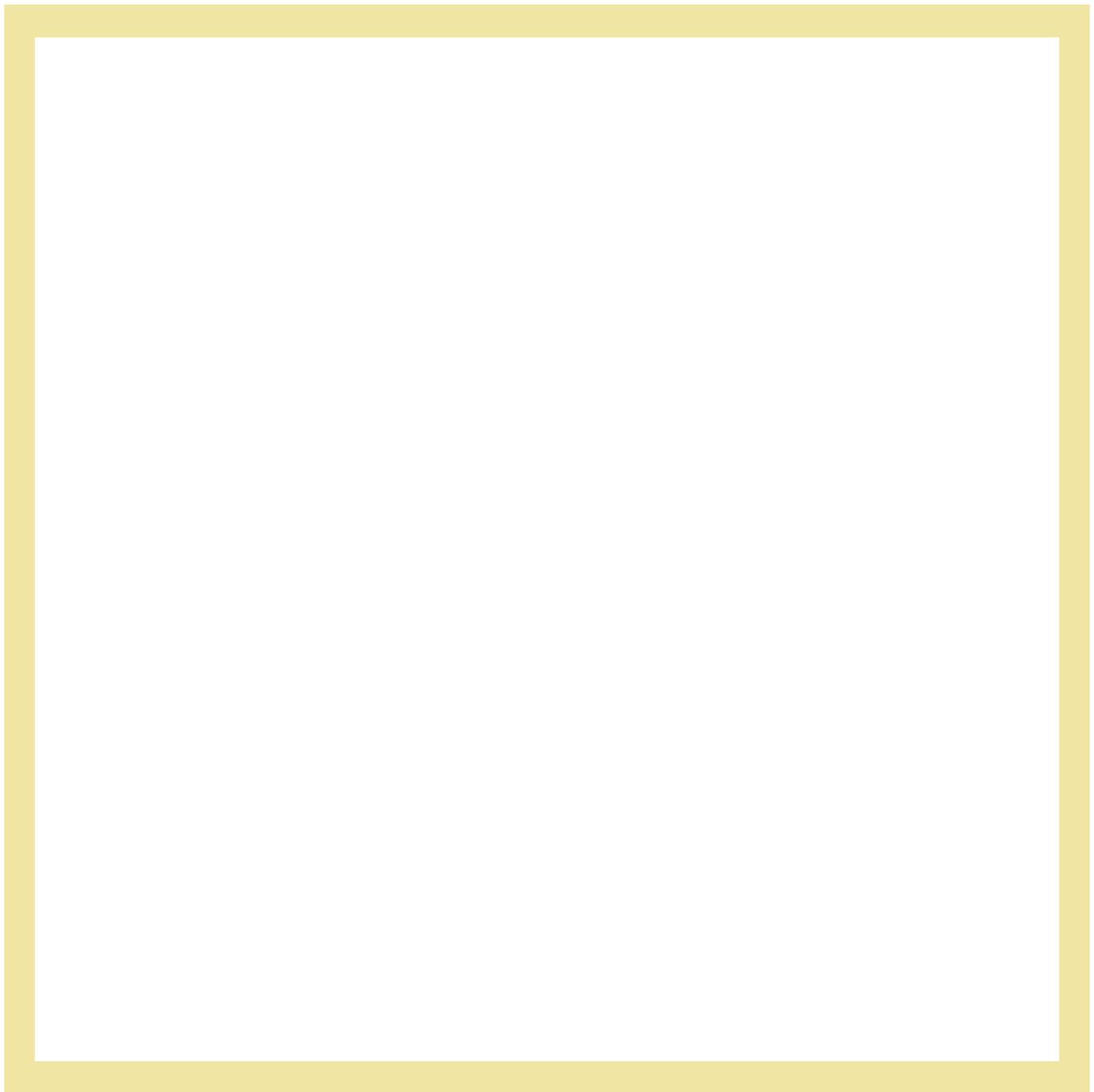
The figure of the Holy Spirit (Hebrew: ruach qadesh) or the Spirit of God (Hebrew: ruach elohim) features prominently in the Old Testament, but scholars tend to agree that the figure is not understood the same way in each case. What are some of the various meanings these phrases can have in the Old Testament? Do any of these meanings approach the explicit association between the Holy Spirit and God according to the Faith of the Church?

Old Testament writers were primarily concerned with God’s activity in the world and in their lives through covenant, providence, prophesy, inspiration, and empowerment (a word I generally dislike, but which is appropriate in this case). How do these concerns carry over into the New Testament image of the Holy Spirit, and into the trinitarian thought of the primitive Church?

By the first century B.C., Judaism had developed a logos theology that built on the idea of the Wisdom of God, through which he creates and governs all things. Philo of Alexandria, a First-century Jewish scholar, develops such a view, and identifies the number 3 as the number of the divine life and power. How do these kinds of ideas, already present in Judaism at the time that Christ appears, prepare the early Christians to receive God’s self-revelation as the Triune God? Where do we see this kind of thought most explicitly taken up in the New Testament, and how does it go beyond what had been perceived already?

The State of the Question about the Biblical God in the First Century, and the Nature and Limits of Trinitarian Theology

Notes:



The Idea of Theosis: Salvation as Participation in God's Own Life

Suggested readings: The Gospel of John 1:1–28, 3:1–36, 6:22–71, 11:1–44, 12:20–36, 14:1–17:26; Romans 5:1–8:39; 1 Corinthians 11:23–15:58; 2 Corinthians 5:11–7:1; Ephesians 1:1–2:22; Colossians 1:15–3:17; Revelation 21:1–22:17.

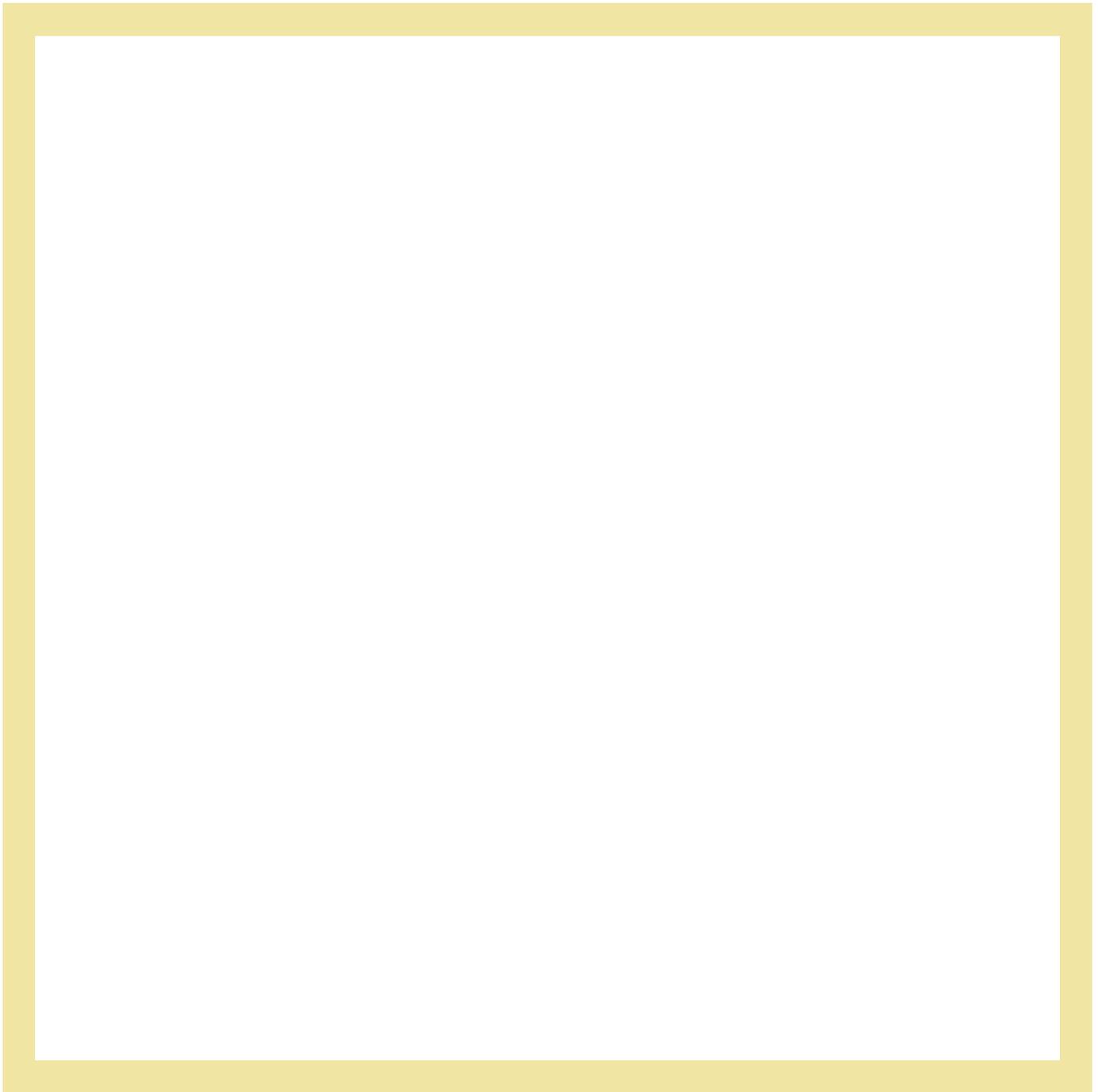
What does the word theosis mean? Can you name some New Testament passages that speak about this idea?

How does Christian Baptism relate to theosis?

How does the Eucharist relate to theosis?

The Idea of Theosis: Salvation as Participation in God's Own Life

Notes:



The “Economic” Trinitarianism of the Early Fathers: Insights and Limitations

Suggested readings: Tertullian, Against Praxeas; Novatian, On the Trinity.

What does the term *oikonomia* mean? What, then, does it mean to approach the mystery of the Trinity by way of an “economic” account?

What is meant by the phrase, “immanent Trinity”? How does this relate to but also differ from the “economic Trinity”?

Tertullian defends the profession of the Holy Trinity against a series of heresies. In Marcionism, he finds the introduction of a second God, because the first God (of the Old Testament) is supplanted by a new God. In Praxeas, however, who defended the thesis of patripassionism, and against whom he writes directly, Tertullian finds a form of modalism essentially identical to what Sebellius would affirm. Tertullian’s explanation, though, is subordinationist, and appears to suppose a “Semi-Arian” view that there was some point, metaphysically prior to God’s determination to create, that he was in no sense “Father,” and that the Son and the Spirit were not. Explain.

The “Economic” Trinitarianism of the Early Fathers: Insights and Limitations

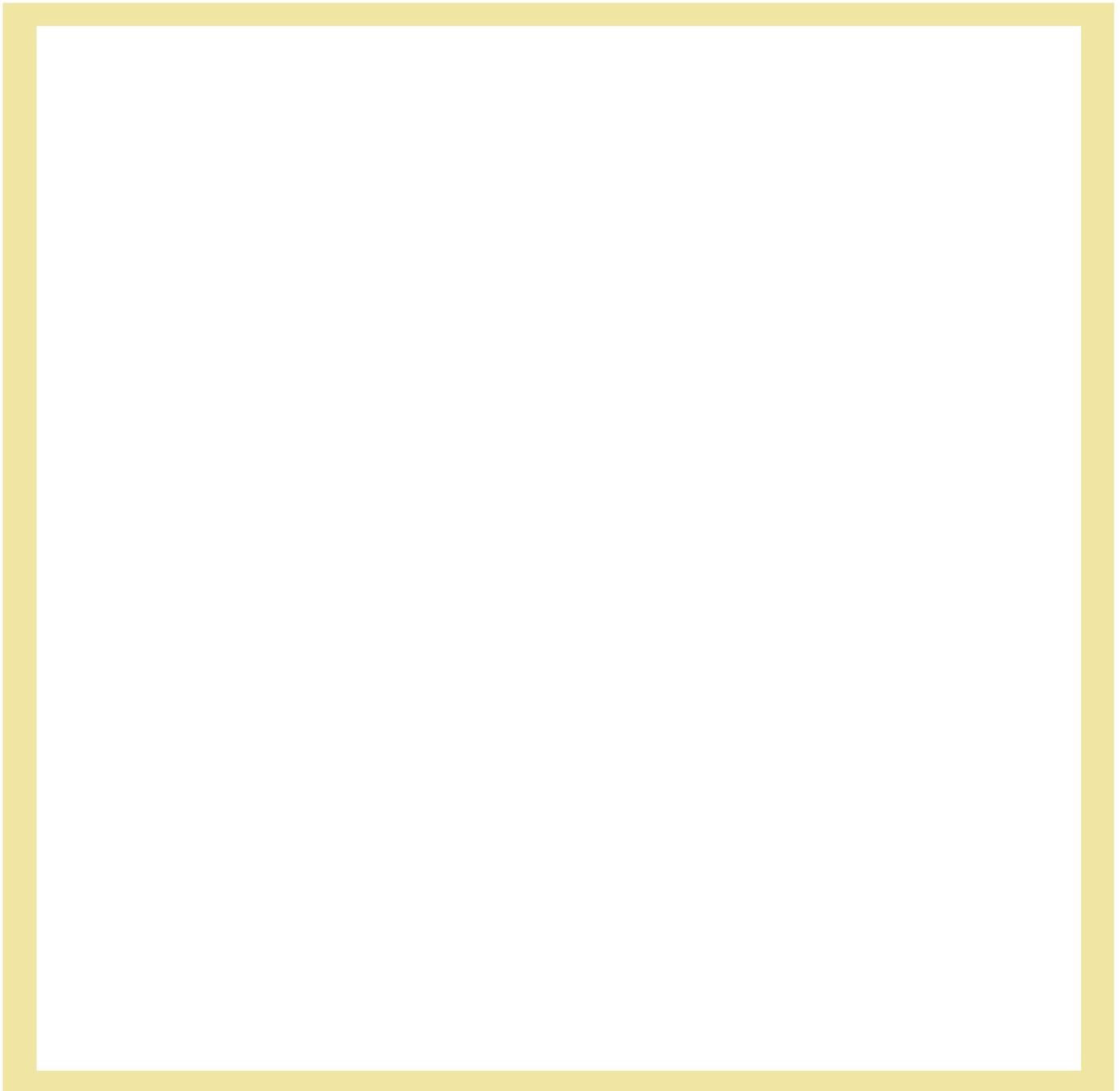
Novatian’s treatment of the mystery of the Trinity is remarkably careful for its time, but in the last chapter of his work, he introduces a serious difficulty. While attempting to defend the oneness of God, eternity of God, the begottenness of the Son, and the divinity of the Son, he nonetheless asserts something about the manner in which the Son is generated from the Father that one could characterize as “Semi-Arian.” Explain.

Apart from the specifically Christological question of the seeming incompatibility of matter and spirit in Arius’ dualistic thought, what fundamentally correct insight do the Arians bring to their criticism of the idea of a Trinitarian God?

How is Sabellianism able to present itself as an “economic” trinitarianism? Is this enough? Can it deal with what we said in Lesson 2 concerning Baptism and the Eucharist in relation to the idea of theosis?

The “Economic” Trinitarianism of the Early Fathers: Insights and Limitations

Notes:



From Controversies over Christ to Theories of Trinitarian Relations

Suggested readings: St. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion. Also of interest is Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, Book II.

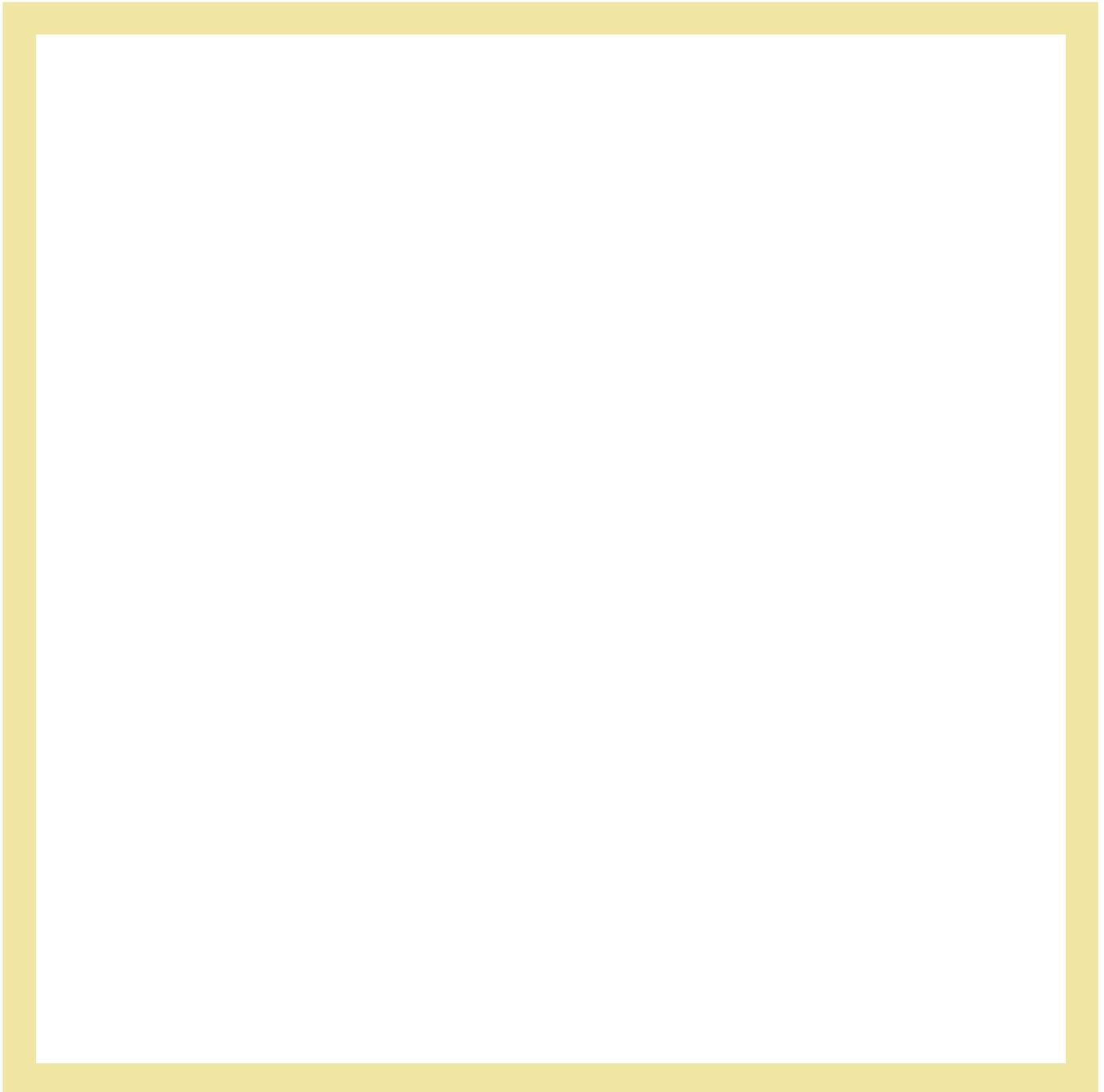
In Sabellianism, the equality, co-eternality, and essential unity of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are affirmed, but not the real distinction between them. In Arianism, the real distinction between them is affirmed, but not the equality, co-eternality, and essential unity. How do St. Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea attempt to grasp both horns of this dilemma? How do they resolve distinction and unity?

Are there any difficulties that remain in the wording of the Council of Nicaea? What do the Fathers say that will require a future linguistic development? What do they leave unsaid that gives rise to a new heresy concerning the Holy Spirit?

How does the First Council of Constantinople further develop the teaching of the Council of Nicaea? What new distinction in language do we see in their teaching?

From Controversies over Christ to Theories of Trinitarian Relations

Notes:



The Paradox and Problem of Trinitarian Theology According to St. Augustine

Suggested readings: St. Augustine, De Trinitate, Book V and Book VIII.

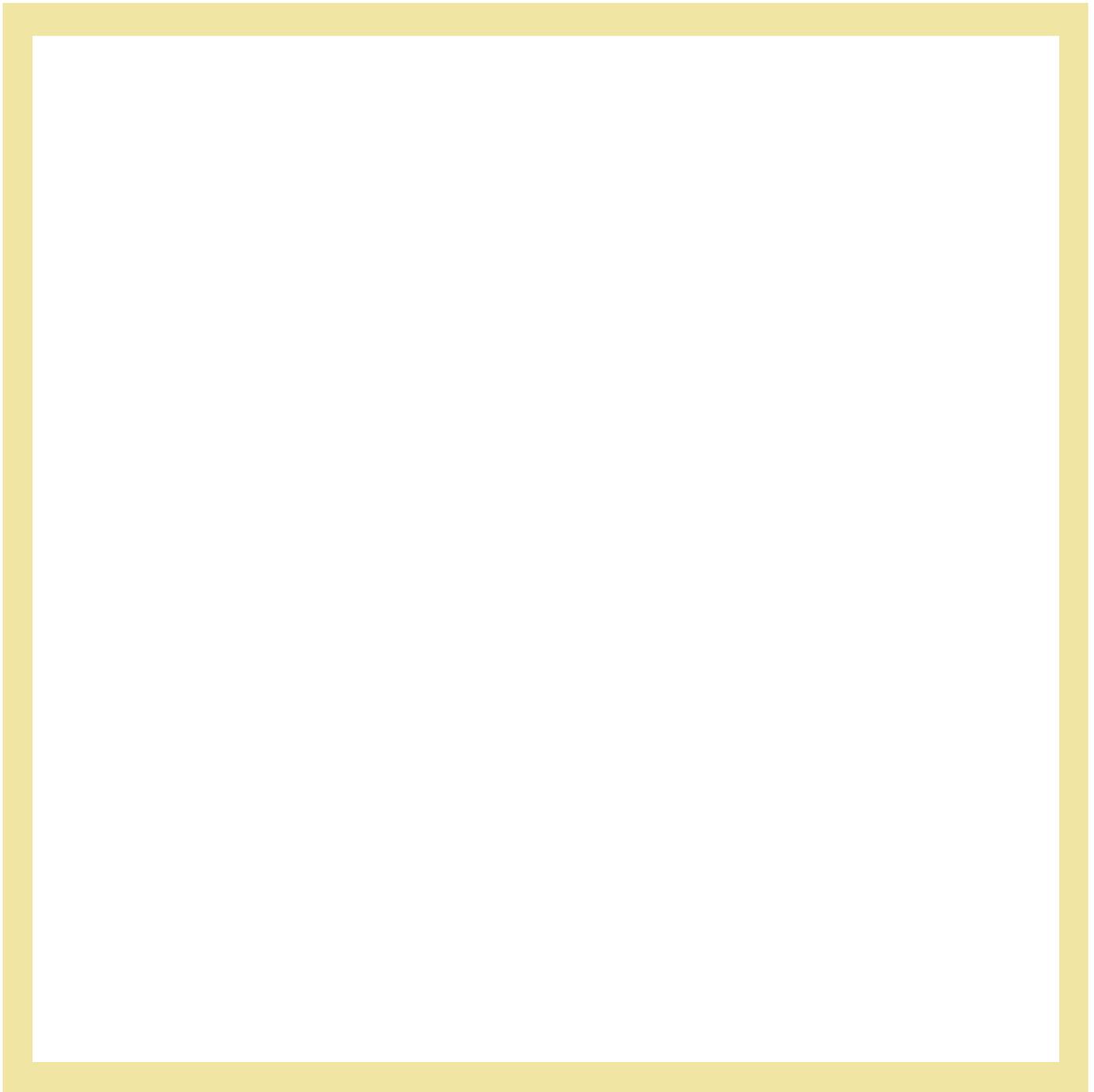
How does Augustine characterize the difficulty faced in attempts to speak about the Trinity?

What is the fundamental limitation human beings face in attempting to probe the mystery of the Trinity?

Does Augustine think there is any way forward, or are we consigned to rest in silence before the mystery, incapable either of understanding or even articulating what we say we know by faith to be true?

The Paradox and Problem of Trinitarian Theology According to St. Augustine

Notes:



A Summary of Augustine's Context and Contribution to Trinitarian Theology

Suggested readings: St. Augustine, De Trinitate, [Book I](#), [Book II](#), [Book III](#), [Book IV](#).

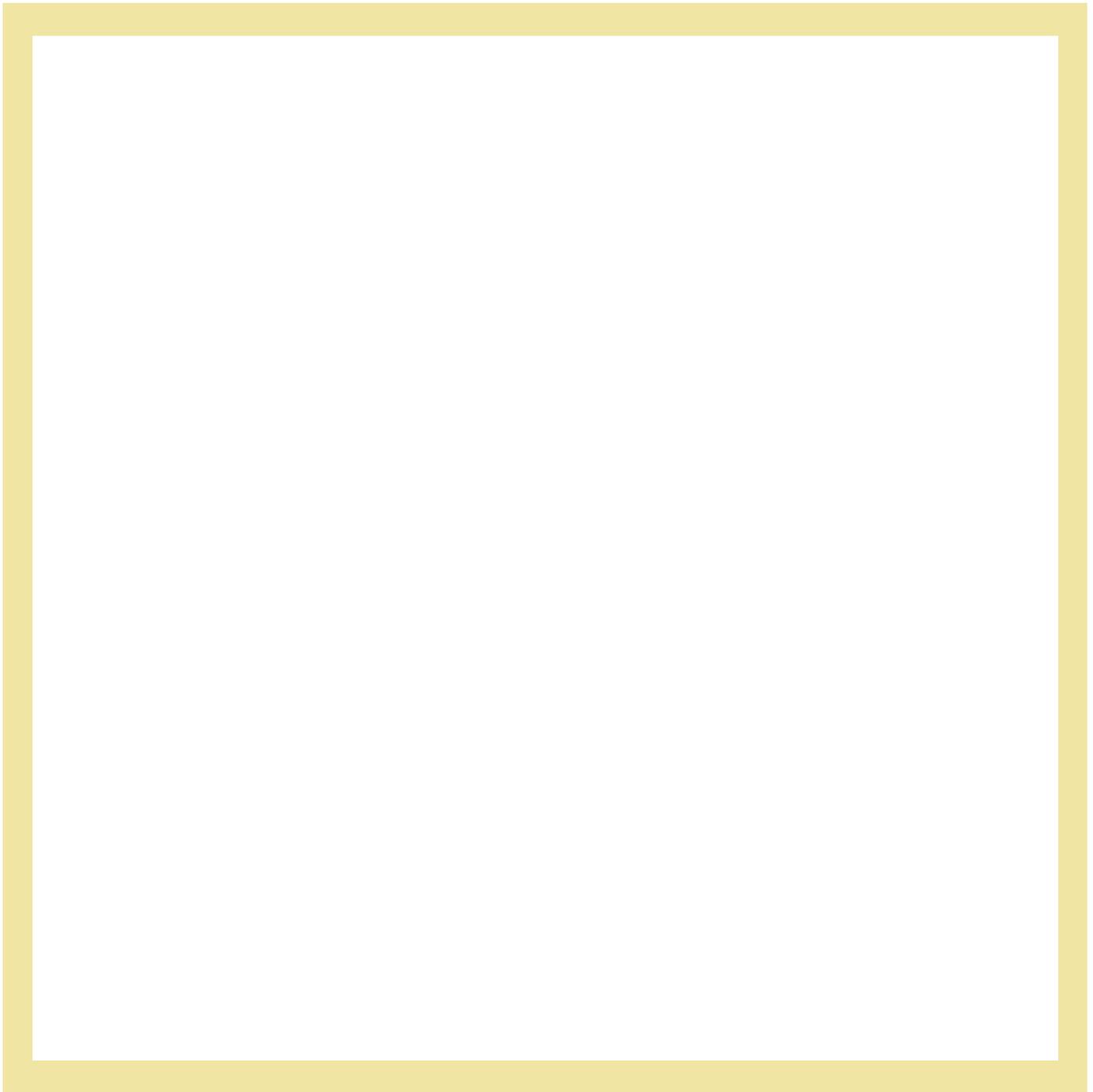
Prior to Augustine, trinitarian theology had focused principally on the economy of salvation. Most theologians understood that the economic Trinity is not really the Trinity in itself (the “immanent” Trinity), but most lacked the insight necessary to articulate the distinction between the two. As a result, articulations of trinitarian theology tended to focus on merely accidental characteristics, not the substance of God, and God does not have accidental characteristics in himself. Explain.

What insight did Augustine find in the thought of Gregory Nazianzen and Didymus the Blind that he was able to develop in his own work, De Trinitate, into a contribution that has shaped trinitarian theology ever since?

This new conceptual category of thought transcended the limitations of the substance/accident divide. Explain.

A Summary of Augustine's Context and Contribution to Trinitarian Theology

Notes:



Augustine's Approach to the Trinity

Suggested readings: St. Augustine, De Trinitate, Book IX, Book X, Book XI, Book XV.

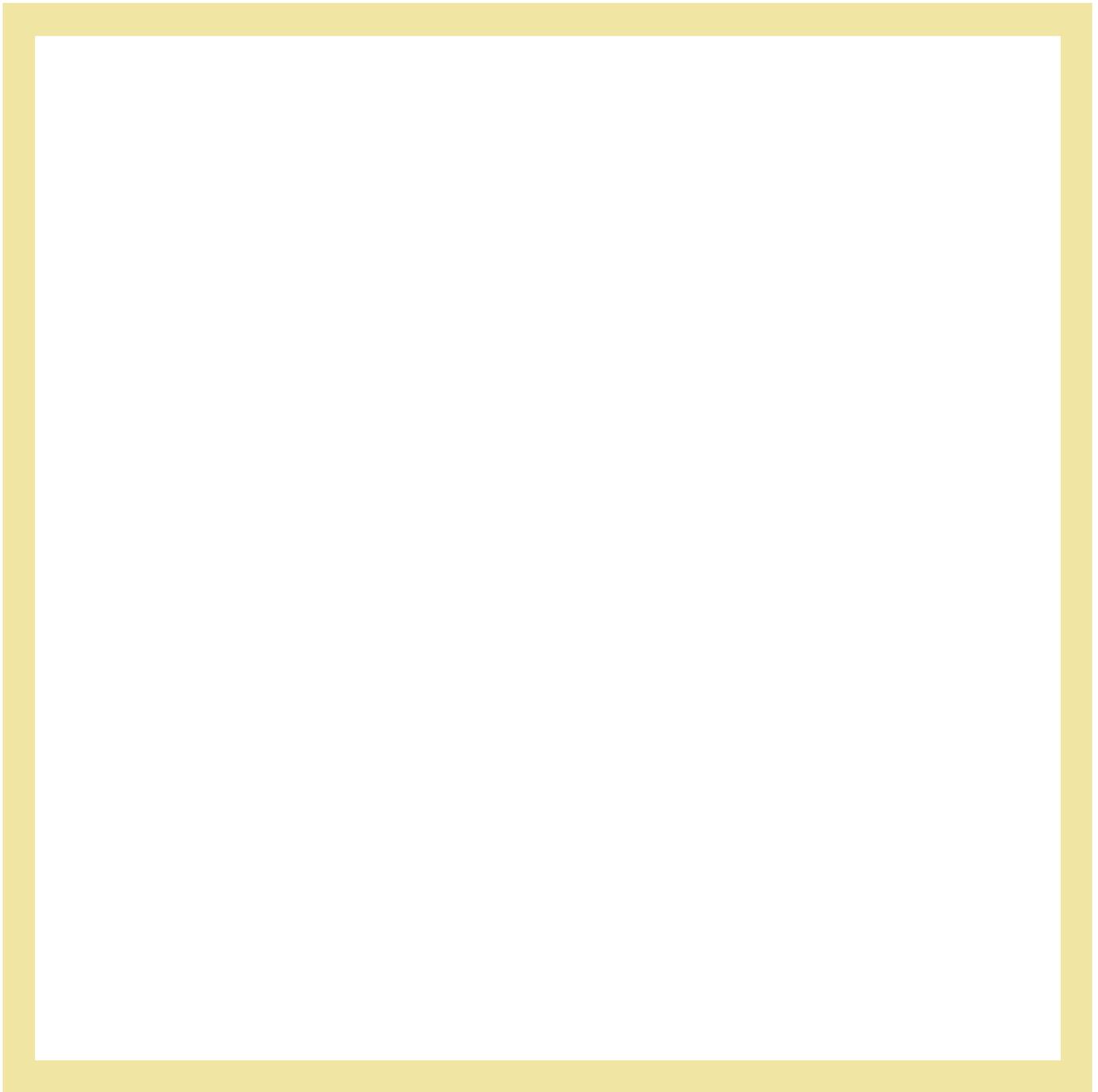
What model of does Augustine employ in his attempt to describe the Trinity as it is in itself, and not merely to us?

What is the obvious limit to this model in terms of its starting point?

Augustine has a difficult time accounting for why we speak of the Son's procession as "generation" but we do not speak of the Spirit's generation in the same terms. Explain.

Augustine's Approach to the Trinity

Notes:



Person, Relation, and the “Image of God” in Humanity

Suggested readings: Boethius, [Against Eutyches and Nestorius](#).

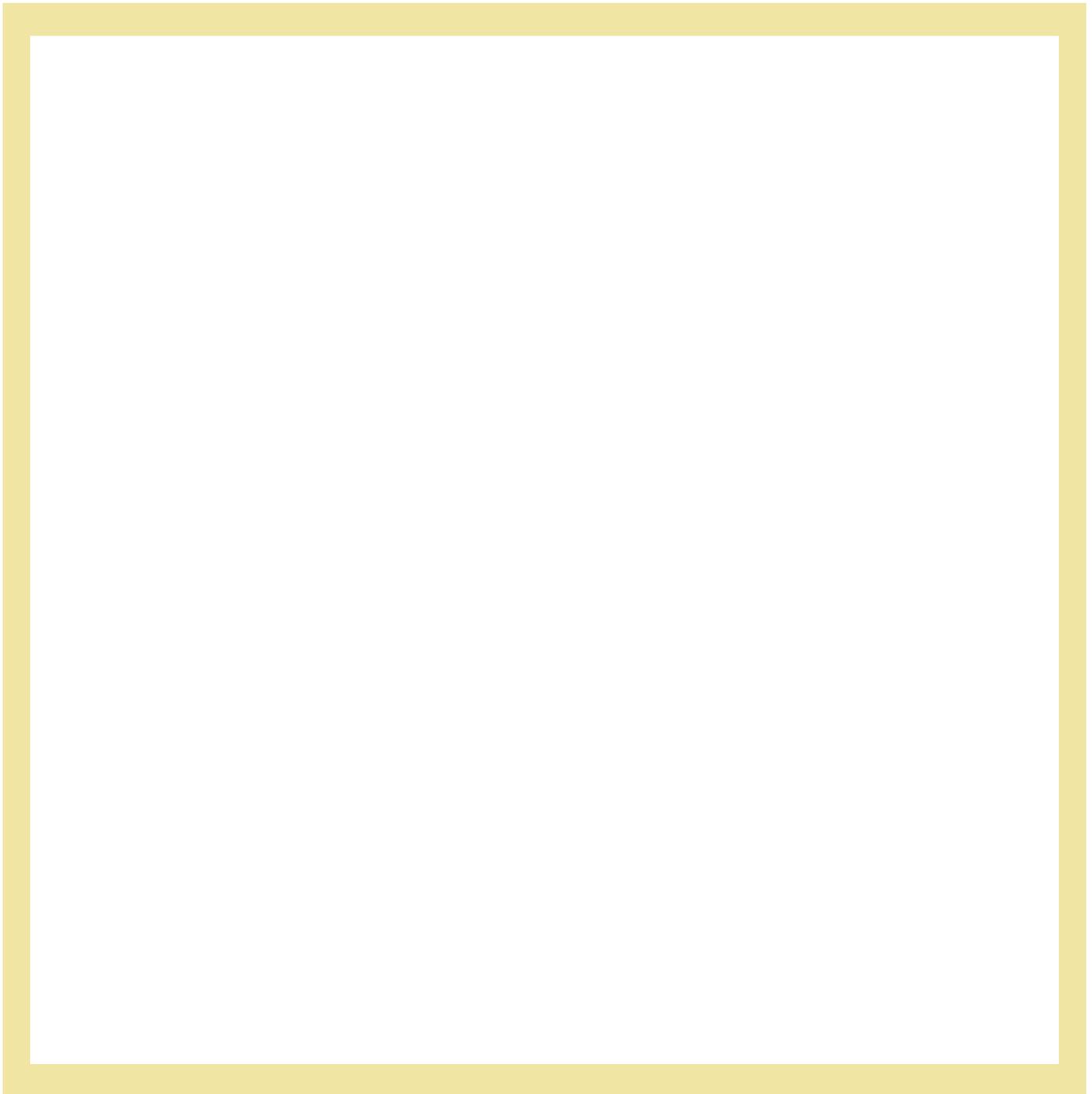
Augustine helps to establish the logical category of what might be described as “relational substantiality,” beyond either being a substance, simply, or else an accident or attribute of a substance. In the trinitarian and declarations of the early Councils, the term hypostasis or substantia (substance in Greek and Latin, respectively) came to be associated with the idea of prosopon or persona (person in Greek and Latin, respectively). But here, the terms hypostasis and substantia are used according to Augustine’s conceptual distinction. How does Augustine’s distinction and the terminology of the trinitarian councils inform Boethius in his famous definition of the term “person” in his work, *Against Eutyches and Nestorius*?

When Boethius uses the term person, he is actually concerned, mainly, with the distinctions between the various hypostases of the Trinity. How do we get from that use of the word person to the application of that term to human beings?

What does this tell us about the basic mode of human existence according to the Bible? Does this help you to see more fully how one man’s sin can bring about the fall of the whole world, or how one man’s righteousness can become the righteousness of the whole—in short, how there is really no such thing as a purely private human act, whether it is an act of sin or of righteousness?

Person, Relation, and the “Image of God” in Humanity

Notes:



The Filioque Controversy

Suggested readings: USCCB, [A Statement of The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue?: An Agreed Statement \(25 October 2003\)](#).

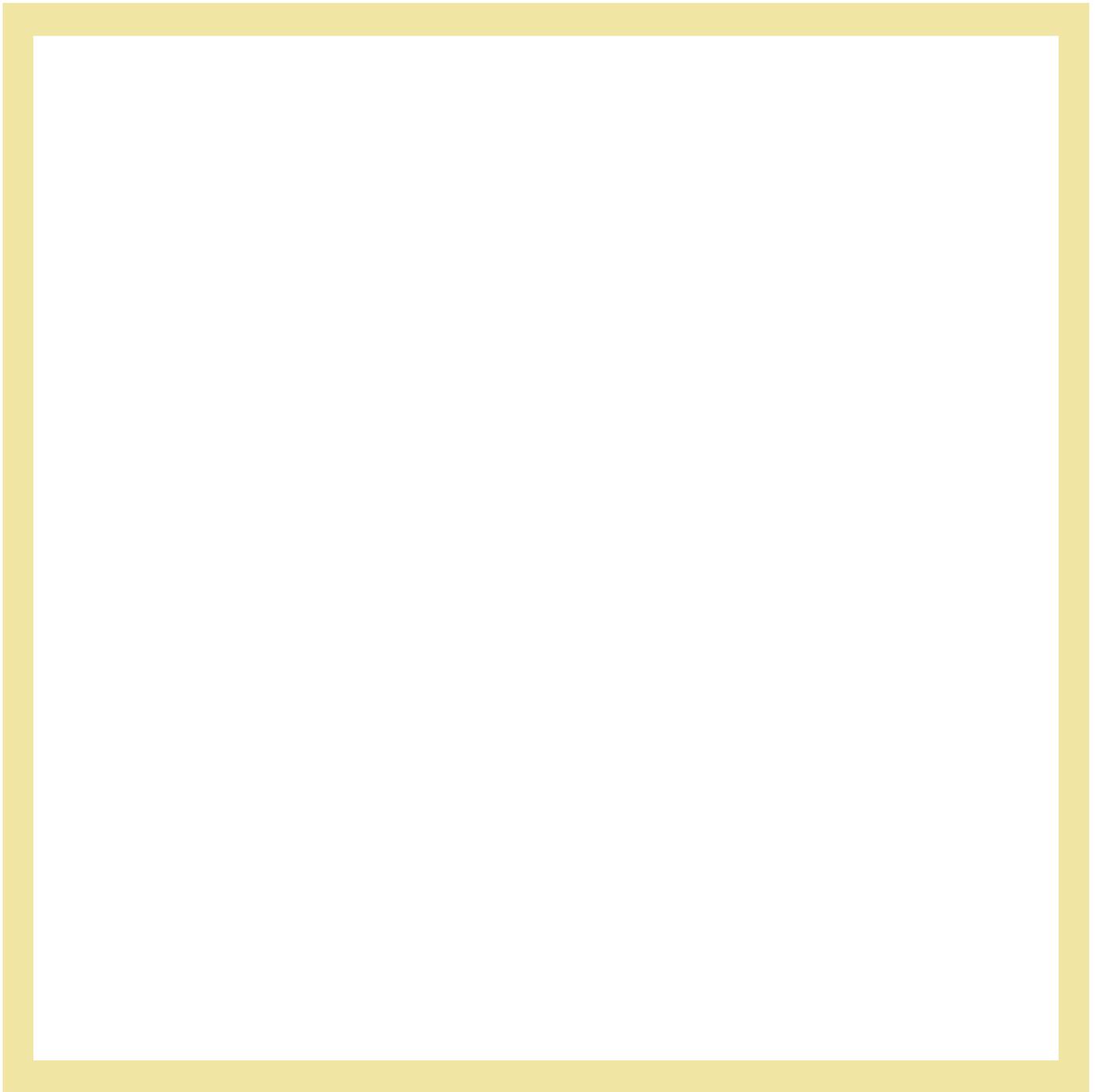
What does the term filioque mean? Why was this phraseology chosen to describe the procession of the Holy Spirit according to the dominant Western model rather than some other phraseology?

How, historically, did the term become an occasion of such heated controversy in the Church?

What does each side see to be at stake in this controversy? Do you see any way beyond the controversy?

The Filioque Controversy

Notes:



St. Thomas Aquinas on the Trinity

Suggested readings: Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars, QQ 27–43 ([Available here](#))

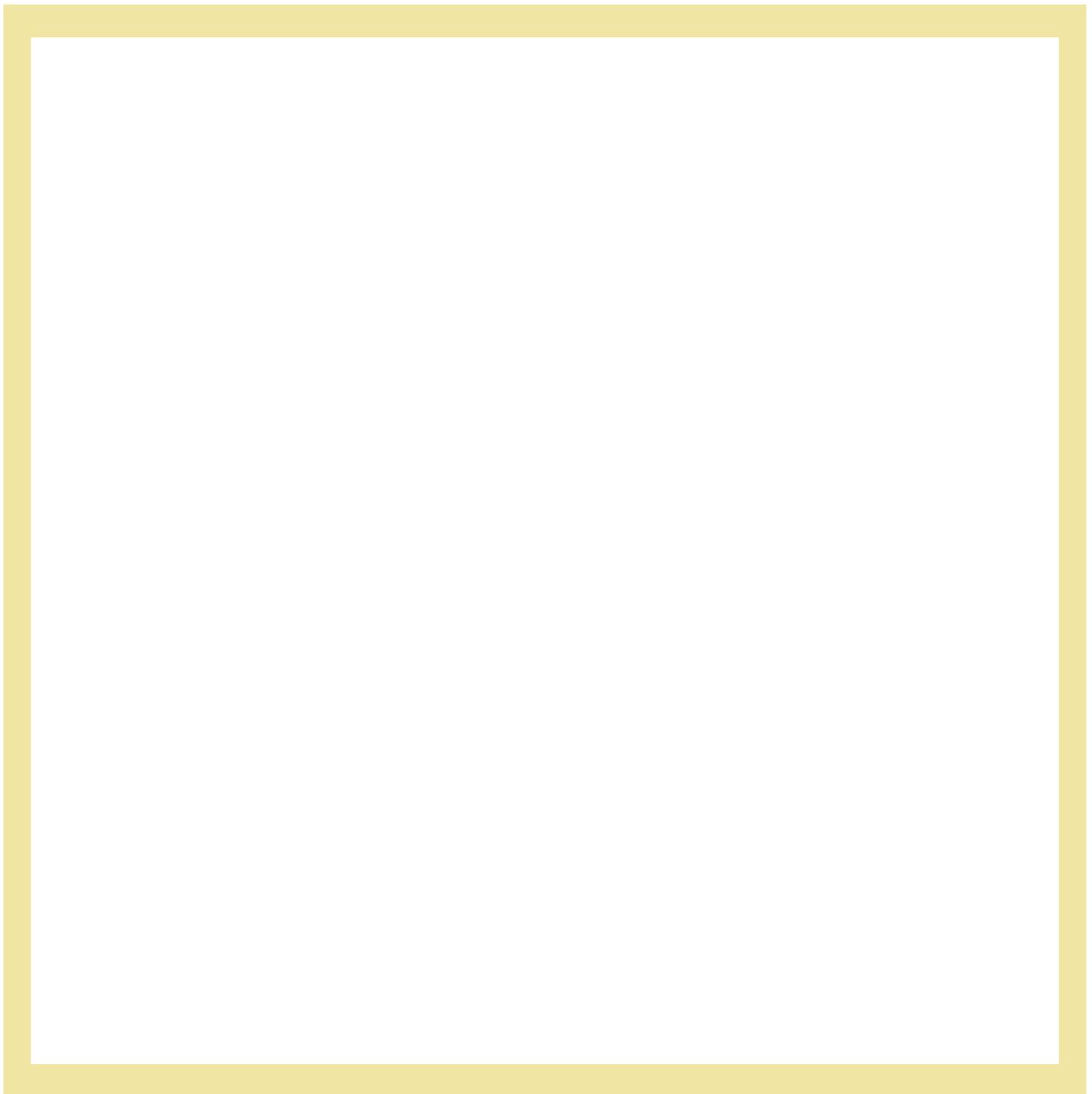
In the High Middle Ages, an enthusiasm for the reconciliation between faith and reason led some to argue that even the trinitarian nature of God could be demonstrated by reason unaided by faith. St. Thomas rejects this thesis. Why?

Even though Thomas rejects in the harshest terms the thesis that the trinitarian nature of God is demonstrable by reason alone, he nonetheless spends a great deal of time attempting to demonstrate that belief in the trinitarian nature of God is belief in something logically possible. To show this, he employs numerous distinctions and logical categories. Can you name some of them and define what they mean?

several such distinctions and logical categories in his careful attempt to present a trinitarian theology that held together as a logically possible thing to affirm.

St. Thomas Aquinas on the Trinity

Notes:



St. Bonaventure on the Trinity

Suggested readings: St. Bonaventure, Breviloquium, Part I, Chapters 1–6; Ilia Delio, O.S.F., “Bonaventure’s Metaphysics of the Good,” *Theological Studies*, 60 (1999): 228–246.

St. Bonaventure, perhaps more than most theologians, sees the Trinity all over the created world. How does this conviction inform his theology?

St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas agree that the divine persons subsist as relations within the divine essence. They don’t agree, however about how those relations should be understood. What does Bonaventure say about that question and what does Thomas say?

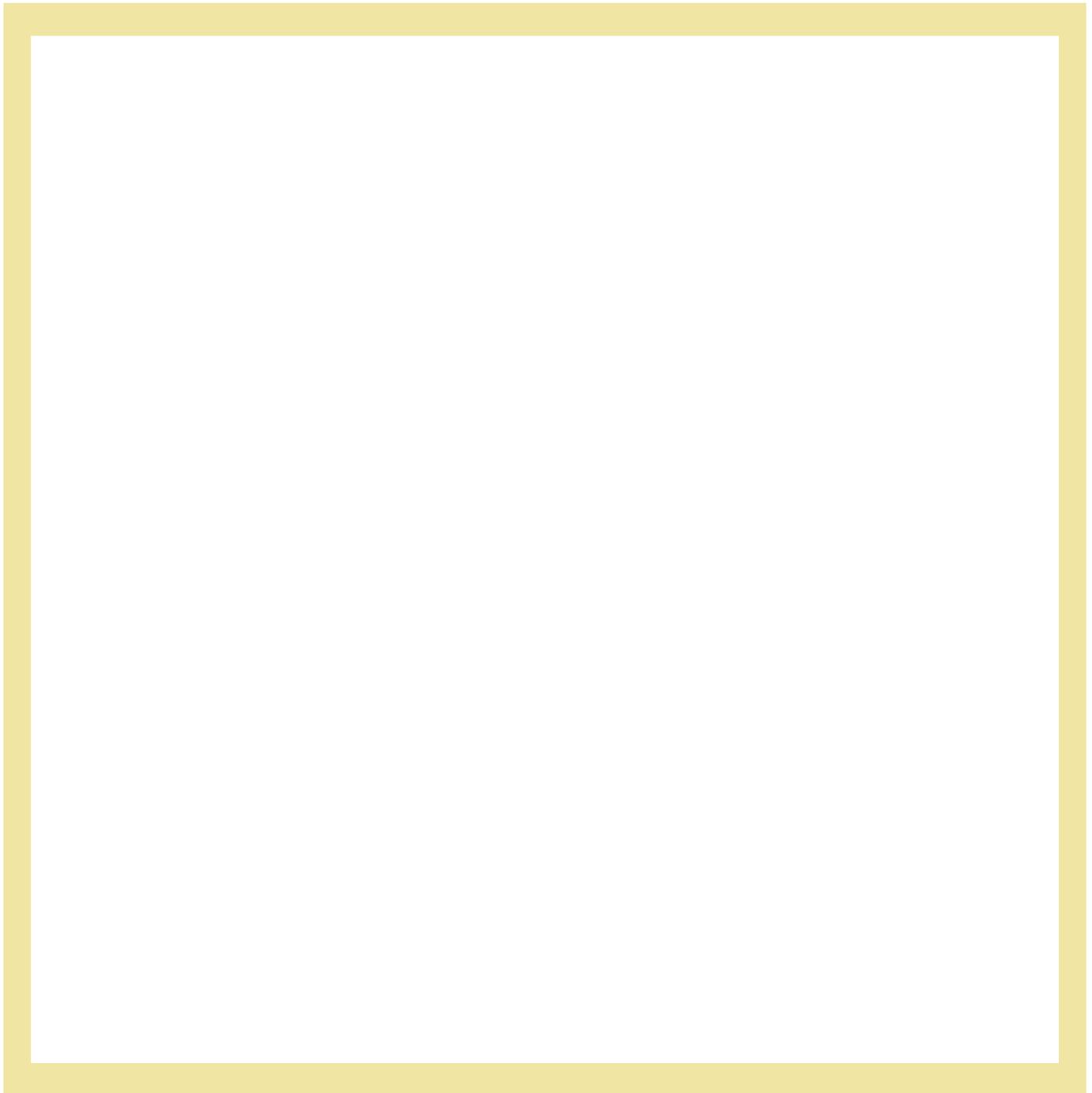
What reason does Thomas give for his disagreement with Bonaventure’s thesis?

Is Thomas’ approach devoid of its own difficulties? Remembering the inherent limitations of any trinitarian theology, how well do you think each of these thinkers does in attempting to show that the affirmation of a trinitarian God is a rational affirmation to make.

It is sometimes said that between Thomas and Bonaventure, Bonaventure has the more “Eastern” mind. In light of what he learned in Lesson 9, do you think Bonaventure has anything to offer in terms of overcoming retrenchment and polemics on both sides of the Filioque controversy?

St. Bonaventure on the Trinity

Notes:



Returning to the Central Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Face of Contemporary Controversies

Suggested readings: Here, I recommend this excellent example of a responsible treatment of Patristic theology on the part of an Evangelical Christian who retains many of his Evangelical presuppositions and commitments while recovering many of the features of early Christian thought largely forgotten within much of Protestant tradition and de-emphasized within later Roman Catholic thought. I am enthusiastic about the contribution this book makes to ecumenical dialogue.

Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2009).

How does the thought of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel appear to borrow from trinitarian theology while, at the same time, completely deconstructing it and replacing it with something wholly incompatible with Christianity?

In the centuries following the Protestant Reformation, some self-described “Christians” have gone on to rehabilitate ancient trinitarian heresies, mostly in the form of Sabellianism and Arianism. Can you name some denominations that have moved in these directions?

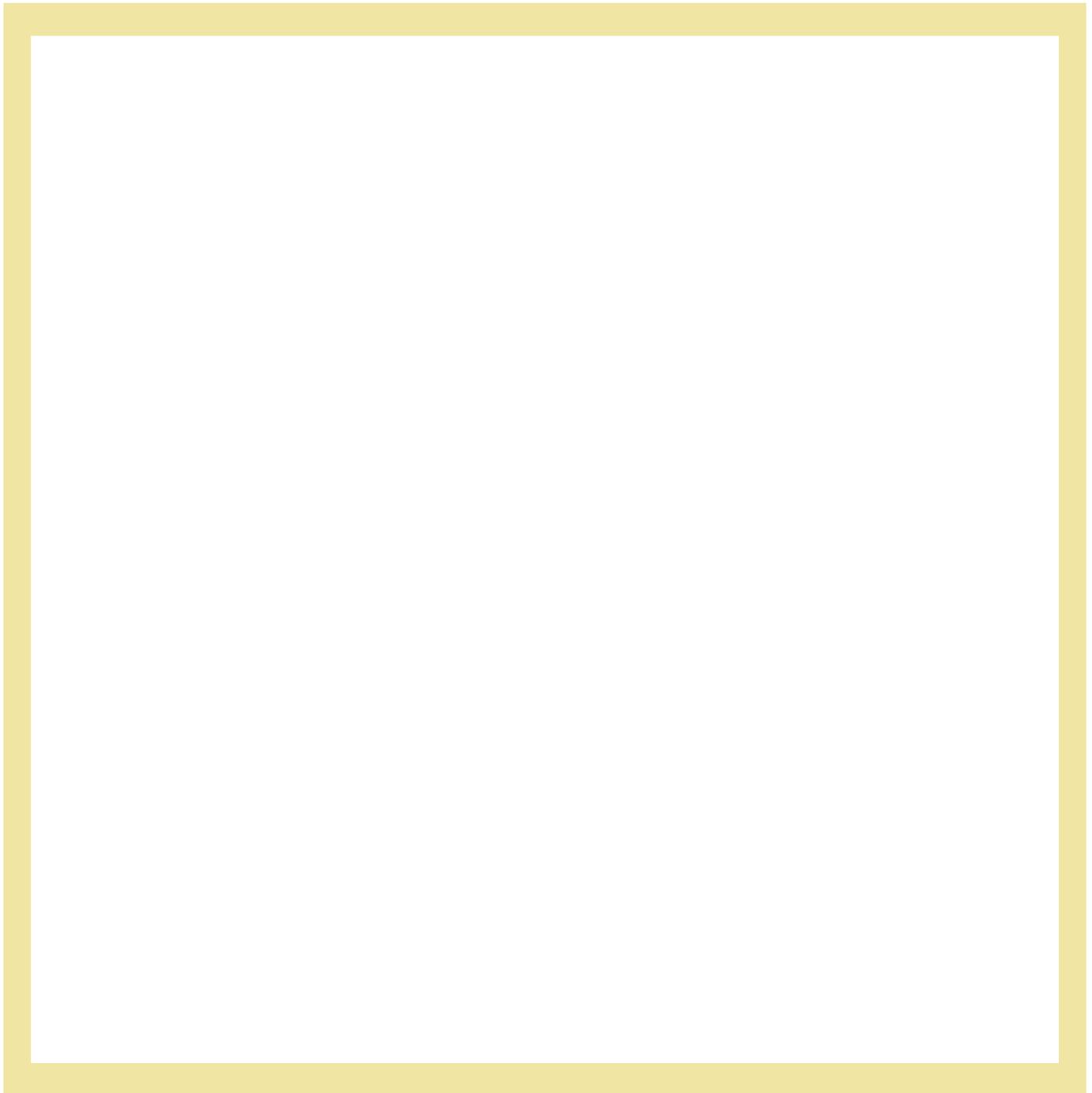
Returning to the Central Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Face of Contemporary Controversies

Why might we say that, among Evangelical Christians, a turn toward a purely economic approach to trinitarian theology, replete with its shortcomings in logical precision, has gained appeal in recent decades?

On the other side of this issue, for more intellectually careful Evangelical thinkers, how might renewed interest in the economic trinitarianism of the Fathers contribute constructively to ecumenical dialogue between Evangelicals and Catholics, perhaps opening the way to recoveries on both sides?

Returning to the Central Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Face of Contemporary Controversies

Notes:



Further Notes

Notes:

