

The Attributes of God's Omni

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Abstract:

There are many conceptions of God's qualities. This is because there are various facets of God. Hence, terms like omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence become important in understanding the concept of God. The focus of the article is attributed to the emergence of theism and the difficulties which are posed by virtue of the ascription of particular attributes to God. However, examining the different kinds of properties that are often ascribed to God, it is necessary to turn our mind towards different kind of problems that might arise. By establishing different modalities it will be proper to reassess these terms in a meaningful manner so that proper assessment of the God's attributes can be examined.

Key words: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipotence, Roman Christianity, spatial dimensions, Son of Man, Trinity, holy will, free creature, dilemma of a stone, Thomas Aquinas, universal agent

INTRODUCTION

Generally science works with a set of concepts and terms. This also applies to social sciences. One such branch is religion. It is concerned with the study of religion or rather religions. The pertinent question is what 'religion' is. Concepts have their own

history and their first use is related to a specific culture. The concept is derived from the Latin word *religio*. Religion is mainly expressed in a meaningful and meticulous manner which prescribed rituals. Cicero defined 'religion' as 'worship of the gods'. The idea of religion was taken over by Roman Christianity and transformed into a new concept with more or less the same meaning the word 'religion' is understood by western world. It was in the 17th and 18th centuries that efforts were made to apply the use of the concept outside Christianity. In the 19th century, the concept became more widely used to denote religious belief and practices of non-European traditions. The concept 'religion' is something one can think of abstraction, and consequently the object of our study is not religion in itself but the concrete cultural manifestation that we call 'religions'.

In religion, the major thrust is on god and its attributes. The most important God "omni" attributes are omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Though, these words are not actually mentioned in the scriptures, but are, in fact used to share the theological construct pertaining to God's power knowledge and presence. These attributes of God have been misunderstood by many people-both Christians and non-Christian. People's knowledge of God's power, and presence seems to limit one of their understanding of the words "omnipotence", "omniscience" and "omnipresence" respectively. A careful analysis of these attributes will be necessary to understand religion as such.

OMNIPRESENCE

The term "omnipresence" is derived from Latin word. *Omni*, meaning "all" and *praesens*, meaning "here". Thus, God is always here, close to everything, next to everyone.¹ This means that God has unlimited space. Wayne Grudem points "God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every

point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.²

A.W.Tozer argues that lesser truths are so clearly taught in scripture.³ The scriptures teach us that even the highest heavens cannot contain God. He is still near us when we pray but unlike other Gods, it does not even exist. Yet, God is not just nearby and everywhere. There are no secret places where he is excluded. This truth has been well spelt by The Psalmist :129:7-10

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

The doctrine of omnipresence is extremely comforting and subduing to the believer since God is always available to help. He is near to all those who call on him (Psalm 145:18), and always will be to the very end of the age. On the other hand, the doctrine also has a strong warning and a deterrent effect because no-one can escape the presence of God.

CRITICISM:

It appears that a real problem of Colossians 2-9 doctrine is “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Yet Christ is apparently not omnipresent. On the other hand, John 3:13 contains a variant reading “who is in heaven”. The majority of the United Bible Societies committee rejected this variant’s authenticity. It labeled it as “an interpretive gloss, reflecting later Christological development,”⁴ but David Alan Black has pointed out that there is overwhelming evidence (both internal and external) suggesting that the variant is, in fact, original.⁵ If this view is accepted then John 3:13 teaches that the “Son of Man” was in heaven when Jesus uttered the words of that verse, but Jesus himself is regarded as the “Son of

Man". According to John 3:13, it is possible for the "Son of Man" to be in multiple places at the same time.

The question is how can a physical body in time and space be omnipresent? Henry Thiessen tries to answer by stating that omnipresence is not a necessary part of God's being, but rather, is a free act of His will: "If God decided to destroy the universes, his omnipresence would cease, but he himself would not cease to be."⁶ John Walvoord make its clear by adding:

To explain a body as omnipresent, however, ends in a concept of a body which has lost all of its distinguishing qualities.....For this reason, it is preferable to regard the qualities of the human nature of Christ as finite. The body, soul, and spirit have locality, but do not have the infinite qualities that belong to the divine nature.⁷

OMNISCIENCE

The word "omniscience" is also taken from Latin word. It is also a compound of omni, meaning "all," and scientia, meaning "knowledge". Grudem argues that: "God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and external act."⁸ Tozer believes that, God knows "every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the countries or ages yet unborn."⁹ In other words, God is infinite in regard to knowledge. He knows things immediately, simultaneously, exhaustively and truly.¹⁰ Tozer adds that God knows instantly and effectively all matter, mind, spirits, being, creaturehood plurality all law, and relations, causes, thoughts, mysteries, enigmas, feeling, desire, every unuttered secret, throne and dominions, personalities, things, visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven and hell.¹¹

In addition, if God has perfect knowledge, He has no need to learn. Moreover, such perfect knowledge implies God

has never learned and, in fact, cannot learn.¹² Thus, God does not need to reason toward his conclusions or ponder carefully over his answer.¹³ Isaiah (40 : 13-14 NIV) make it clear by stating:

Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding.

Furthermore, from the scripture it is clear that God's understanding is infinite and that all persons of the Trinity know each other perfectly. Nothing is hidden from God sight. His eyes are everywhere, he knows of the wickedness and the goodness. He knows even the most minute details about everything indeed, all knowledge is ever-present in His consciousness.¹⁴ He is never surprised or amazed. God does not only know actual events throughout time, but he apparently also knows all possible and hypothetical events.

In other words, Isaiah 48:18 demonstrates that God known the potential and universal result of our actions and choices. The doctrine of omniscience has become a cause of more worry to those who have something to hide, since nothing can be hidden from God's sight – God knows it all! On the other hand, God's omniscience is comforting to those who are open to God's conviction. Hebrews 4:15 states that God knows what it is like to live as a human being, what it is like to have needs and wants, what it is like to be tempted, and what is like to suffer. Furthermore, Mathew 6.8 believes that it is comforting to know that God knows our needs before we even ask for his assistance.

CRITICISM:

If God is perfect in knowledge and knows everything that then he must be acquaintance with evil things. The question is now how righteous God know evil? Even before Thomas Aquinas, this objection was raised: Further, what is known through

another and not through itself, is imperfectly known. But evil is not known by God; for the thing known must be in the knower. Therefore if evil is known through another name, through good, it would be known by him imperfectly; which cannot be, for the knowledge of God is not imperfect. Therefore God does not know evil things.

But answers to such criticisms were also provided by Thomas Aquinas. He Aquinas argued: To know a thing by something else only, belongs to imperfect knowledge, if that thing is of itself knowable; but evil is not of itself knowable, for as much as the very nature of evil means the privation of good; therefore evil can neither be defined nor known except by good.

In Isaiah 43:25 it appears that there is a problem for omniscience: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." How can an omniscient God erase something from his memory, and yet still be regarded as being perfect in knowledge. Therefore, in Isaiah 43:25, God declare that he will not let past events effect his present thought and actions.

Grudem's criticism is based on Jeremiah 7:31 : "They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. This verse acknowledges that God has been surprised by these actions and caught unprepared. However, looking back over history reveals that burning children had occurred centuries before and God Himself forbid the practice 800 years earlier in Leviticus 18:21. Grudem further suggested that some theologians have arrived at conclusion that God does not know the future – at least with any certainty – because, according to them, such knowledge would take away our freedom to act.¹⁵ Francis Beckwith agrees with Grudem. Backwith then points out some theologians and philosophers, have tried to resolve the supposed conflict by denying that God knows the future, although they believe that he is nevertheless omniscient. What they mean by this is that God knows everything that can be

known, but since the future is not actual and hence not a thing his not knowing it does not count against his omniscience.¹⁶

Following Gruden's lines: Brain Leftow objects by arguing that a propositionally omniscient being is impossible and therefore, God is not propositionally omniscient. He reasons that for each person there is a truth that person alone knows. An example of such a truth statement is a man named, Herman saying "I am Herman." While others may know that Herman is indeed Herman, only Herman knows what is to be Herman. Therefore, there are some things which God does not know which makes Him less than omniscient.¹⁷

OMNIPOTENCE:

Like either other omni terms, "omnipotence" is a Latin word. Omni, meaning "all" and potens, meaning "power." Grudem defines it in this way: "God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will."¹⁸

Omnipotence implies unlimited power. Job 42:2 states that an omniscient God can do anything he pleases and is never exhausted. His power is unlimited in regard to both its extent and its magnitude. Matthew 19:26 mentions what is impossible for man is possible for God. And Jeremiah 32:17 believes that nothing is too hard for him furthermore, anything can be done as easily as anything else, and all acts are done effortlessly.¹⁹ In other words, "God can do what he wills to do, but he does not necessarily will to do anything." In other words, God has power over His power.²⁰

DILEMMA OF OMNIPOTENCE:

The attribute of omnipotence gives rise to some interesting puzzles. The first paradox is proposed by Antony Flew and J.L.Mackie. They argue that if God is omnipotent, he cannot create anything that he does not control absolutely; as a result,

it is impossible for God to create a genuinely free creature. Antony Flew's writes in "God and Philosophy" (1996):

"As Creator he could not decide simply to leave to their own devices creatures already autonomously existing. He both designs and makes them in full knowledge and determination of all that they will ever do or fail to do. As Creator he must be first cause, prime mover, supporter, and controller of every thought and action throughout his utterly dependent universe. In short : if creation is in, autonomy is out."

"Why then is this vital conclusion so often ignored or even denied? Partly, no doubt, because the idea of creation is misunderstood; thought of perhaps as, like begetting, a matter of performing one action and then leaving nature to take its course. Mainly, surely, because theologians are no more than other men exempt from conflicts of desire....These common tendencies are reinforced by the conviction, which is for most of us for most of the time quite inescapable, that we are on occasion free agents: as indeed we are. It is, apparently, easy to mistake the implication. If in fact we ever are free agents, and if this is in a sense which is incompatible with being completely the creatures of a Creator, then what follows is : not that there may be a Creator liberally – albeit mysteriously-granting some degree of emancipation; but that there cannot be any Creator at all."

There is, however, a way to give meaning to the notion of disobedience to God's will (as much, that is, as can be given to any human notion applied in this context). But it is a maneuver for which there is a price to be paid when we come to consider the next question. In the human context we give sense to talk about what people want primarily by reference to what they do or would do in appropriate circumstances. We decided what a man-any man, including ourselves-really wants by determining what he would do if all obstacles were removed. But to creative omnipotence there are no obstacles. So what he really wants must be whatever actually comes, about; and that goes for everything that is happening, including whatever we are doing.

If, therefore, anyone wants to insist that some of these happening, in particular some actions, are against God's will; then this has, presumably, got to be done by reference to the consequences which he arranges, or would arrange, for different sorts of actions. All actions, must, in the primary sense, be according to God's will.

The second dilemma of omnipotence is the dilemma of the stone. The assessment made by C. Wade Savage is a result of the response to the suggestion that the concept of omnipotence is incoherent. In his famous work "The Paradox of Stone" (1964), Savage provides proper discussion of an argument that is intended to show that omnipotence is a paradoxical or self contradictory or necessarily empty notion. To make his view more effective he points out that can God make a stone bigger than he can lift? This could be answered in following ways. (a) Either God can create a stone that he cannot lift, or he cannot; (b) If he can, then, necessarily, there is at least one task that God cannot perform namely lifting the stone in question; and (c) If he cannot, then, necessarily, there is at least one act that God cannot perform, namely, creating the stone in question. Hence, there is at least one work or act that God cannot perform. If God is omnipotent, then he can perform any task or act. They, therefore, conclude that therefore God is not omnipotent.

Omnipotence also spells the power of self-limitation. For example, God created other beings which have free will, and His Son voluntarily took on the form of humanity (the incarnation). Because of this self-limitation, God does not keep sin out by force, or force people to repent and believe. When describing the doctrine of omnipotence, it is not entirely accurate to say that God can do "anything" for God cannot do anything that would deny His own nature/or character.²¹ Indeed, Thomas Aquinas writes:

All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists: for there

may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word 'all' when we say that God can do all things.

Marvodes has offered a solution to the familiar paradox mentioned by Savage. But it is wrong. Marvodes states that he assumes the existence of God and then articulates his view as follows: God is either omnipotent or he is not if we assume that the he is not omnipotent, the task of creating a stone which he could not lift is not self contradictory. And we can conclude that God is not omnipotent on the grounds that both His ability and His ability to perform this work imply that He is not omnipotent.

Even one accepts that God's omnipotence would enable him to create such a stone but it would not reduce His ability unless he does create such a stone. Richard Swinburne argues:

True, if an omnipotence being actually exercise (as opposed to merely possessing) his ability to bring about the existence of a stone too heavy for him subsequently to bring about its rising then it will cease o be omnipotent.....But the omnipotence of a person at a certain time includes the ability which he may remain omnipotent forever because he never exercise his power to create stone too heavy to lift, forces too strong to resist or universes too wayward to control.²²

Thiessen argues that God is able to do whatever He wills, but His will is limited by His nature. In other words, God cannot contradict His own nature.²³ Indeed, God cannot do anything that is self-contradictory For example, God cannot make a boulder so heavy that He cannot lift it, or create a square circle. In any case, these are not objects of power and so "denote no limitation of God's omnipotence."²⁴

Aquinas, again argues the power and effect of God. Power is related to its effect, otherwise, it would be ineffectual, but if the power of God is infinite then it must produce an infinite effect, which is impossible. However, Aquinas also provides a solution to this problem. The power of a univocal agent is wholly manifested in its effect, but it is clear that God

is not a univocal agent, since nothing compares with Him either in species or in genus. Therefore, it follows that His effect is always less than His power.²⁵

CONCLUSION:

The “omni” attributes of God must be assessed in a meaningful manner if one considered them as coherent doctrines. When people understand correctly, they are a source of great relief to Christians, and become a source of worship. But on the contrary, running or hiding from God, becomes source of great fear and distress.

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