

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 05, 2006

Attributes of God (I): Simplicity

I'm going to start a **series of indefinite length on various attributes of God**. This series is inspired by a seminar I am taking on Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of God. However, I will avoid any technical discussion of Thomas, and simply explain the attributes as classically formulated and raise a few questions about how they may be developed, reformulated, and in some cases rejected. So here goes...

When speaking of God, we must organize our thoughts into distinct attributes regarding his nature. But once we begin to distinguish these attributes, we run the risk of introducing a division within our talk of God that does not correspond to God's singular unity. Nevertheless, we must speak discursively -- prodding along from point to point. In order to ensure that our discursive God-talk does not degenerate into a mere montage of irreconcilable attributes, we **must choose our starting point wisely**. Aquinas believes that **divine simplicity** is the best place to start, as it determines our understanding of all the attributes of God.

To see why simplicity is a good place to start, we must understand **the meaning of divine simplicity**. This attribute does not mean that God is simplistic in contrast to complex. God is certainly complex in the current sense of the word! Rather, simplicity classically conceived is set **in contrast to composite**. To be composite is to be an assembly of different parts; to be simple is to be wholly and completely what one is. God is simple (aka non-composite) because God is wholly and completely what he is, not admitting of parts or degrees.

The **implications of divine simplicity** for God's nature are far-reaching. Simplicity implies that the rest of God's attributes do not describe parts of God, but rather indicate God's whole character. So God's love does not describe part of God and his justice another part, nor does God move successively from love to justice, but God is his own love and is his own justice. Love and justice characterize

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his being. More precisely, one might say that God characterizes his own being in terms of his love and his justice. The same can be said of another other divine attribute.

The question for us today is **whether simplicity is a good idea**. Is it a genuine attribute of the God revealed in Scripture? Is it a useful conceptual tool for describing the God we worship? These normative questions immediately raise the question of method: How do we determine its appropriateness? Does it need to be explicitly stated in Scripture? Or may it be implied by other Biblical affirmations (monotheism for instance)? Is it simply sufficient that it does not contradict Scripture? Because of its significance in the Christian tradition, the burden of proof lies on the one who wishes to reject divine simplicity. Yet, like any human affirmation about God, it is open to criticism -- at least in principle.

Any thoughts?

Is my definition of simplicity sufficiently clear?

What is your initial reaction to the notion of divine simplicity?

On what basis might we evaluate the claim that God is simple?

If one were to reject divine simplicity, what would the ramifications for the rest of theology be?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 7:03 PM

[12 comments](#)

12 Comments:

At [10:27 PM, October 06, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

to be wholly and completely what one is...

I think this is simple enough. :) Well, since I don't consider myself educated enough to be able to give an authoritative should, I'll go a different direction. At least, it seems the shema points this way by inference as you mentioned--the Lord our God is one. But if my memory serves me well James, especially early on, seems to highlight unity, wholeness, this idea of simplicity that you mention.

Would anything but divine simplicity cause significant problems for trinitarian monotheism?

Thanks for another good post, John. I really DO love reading them.

At [6:22 PM, October 07, 2006](#), [Ben Robinson](#) said...

Perhaps simplicity, as a term, can be confusing semantically; especially considering your notation of the evolution of the word. Simplicity does tend to *mean* something different in current terminology. In this sense, perhaps (and I really do mean *perhaps*,

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for I'm not sure how useful it would be) we could reformulate the word itself and use a word that more purely implies the lack of being a composite.

But the concept of simplicity, classically defined, I believe is foundational. As Dave mentioned, the unity of God is predicated throughout scripture. It is essential. So divine simplicity is essential in that the rejection of it allows for the possibility of division within the Godhead (which becomes a conspicuous temptation regarding the unity of the three-persons).

At [8:40 PM, October 08, 2006](#), [coach d](#) said...

Thanks for this series...it gets me thinking about God, and that should be the result of a theologian's work. ;-)

At [1:50 PM, October 09, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

John - I'm elated that you've started this series. It will be a benefit to my soul and mind.

I'm in agreement with Ben that the term might be something to touch up... even if the doctrine remains intact.

However, many of the other options (such as "unified, singular, etc") come with their own issues. So perhaps simplicity is the word. I wonder if "simplicity" is a good word in reality for the seeker of God. When they expect to find a complex God pieced together like some religious Frankenstein's monster--they instead are assured that God may indeed be profound... but not compound.

But on the second issue (whether the doctrine remains intact) I have some questions in return for you, O PomoAquinas that you are becoming:

1) Does scripture ascribe attributes to each person of the Trinity that are not ascribed to the other persons? You've corrected my theology in the past when I've erred in this direction--yet I still feel in my bones that while "every thing you can say about one person of the Trinity COULD be said about the others" I'm not sure if I WOULD say them... or SHOULD. Is the Trinity really that SIMPLE? Or is there indeed a composite God represented by Scripture in these three relationships? (There's your slow-pitch, now swing your PTS bat at this minor-leaguer).

2) If we reject the doctrine of simplicity there may be consequences of over-emphasis on one or another person of the Trinity... but there may also be benefits in association and connection to that person of the Trinity. Here I have in mind in particular the charismatic movements "tune in" to the Holy Spirit. Are there not

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theological benefits to celebrating a composite God in that movement--or are there only pitfalls?

3) How does Aquinas, the father of so much Catholic Theology, support the notion of a simple God when Catholicism has one of the most vast and complex understandings of the Godhead (and indeed, the Motherhead, if you'll permit me) of any Christian tradition? I have to smile a bit when I hear that "Aquinas started with simplicity." HA! If he started there I'm not so sure that he ended there.

Of course, my above objections would make Aquinas uncomfortable, for he taught that since forgers were put to death in his day, and heretics were far more dangerous, that all heretics should then be put to death immediately.

-David

At [3:52 PM, October 09, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

Hey Dave--quit picking on your little brother!

Hey John--hit him back if he gets on your side of the carseat!
--Dad ;-)

At [7:06 PM, October 10, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Dave,

Here's some separately posted thoughts on each of your three questions.

1) Does scripture ascribe attributes to each person of the Trinity that are not ascribed to the other persons?

There's a classical distinction between the axiom "opera trinitatis ad extra indivisia sunt" [=the works of the trinity outside itself are indivisible] which protects the unity of the three persons as they work together in all divine actions (otherwise they would not all be fully God!), and the hermeneutical practice of "appropriations," whereby certain divine activities, on the basis of scriptural warrant, are "appropriated" to one or another person of the Godhead, acknowledging of course that all the persons are present in the work (though often in a hidden way). So, for instance, we say that the Father creates (we "appropriate" the work of creation to the first person of the trinity). In principle we affirm that the trinity is active in each activity, and we can even sometimes identify their role (the Father creates through the Son and Spirit, for instance). But as long as the axiom is acknowledged and shapes our language at critical points, we are free to appropriate certain actions to certain persons

provided this corresponds to scriptural modes of speech.

At [1:00 PM, October 11, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

DED:

2) If we reject the doctrine of simplicity there may be consequences of over-emphasis on one or another person of the Trinity...

JLD:

This is precisely the kind of danger I am trying to block by invoking simplicity. Much contemporary theology risks tritheism in my estimation.

DED:

but there may also be benefits in association and connection to that person of the Trinity. Here I have in mind in particular the charismatic movements "tune in" to the Holy Spirit.

JLD:

It is not exactly fair to think of charismatics as more in tune to the Spirit than other traditions. Non-charismatics could take issue with this way of putting it. Why? Because the charismatic movement differs from other Christian communities not in its contact with the Spirit but in its understanding of the Spirit. Charismatics link the Spirit to (specific) signs & wonders, whereas other traditions link the Spirit to liturgy (Eastern Orthodoxy), the church's mediation (Roman Catholics), the word (magisterial Reformation), discipleship (Radical Reformation), or interior experience (Pietism). To say Charismatics are more in tune with the Spirit is to accept their pneumatology as a given by which the presence of the Spirit in other communities must be judged.

It would also be unfair to say that Charismatics are more in tune with the Spirit over against the other triune persons. Charismatics could take issue with this way of putting the matter. For instance, Oneness Pentecostals are Christocentric modalists, a.k.a. Jesus is the one God. Even if other Charismatics consider this group an anomaly (which is hard to prove sociologically, and the theological affinities are there despite rejection by the "mainline" pentecostals), the Jesus-centered language of the Charismatic tradition cannot be denied. Further, the language of "promise" and "blessing" which permeates their theology is both explicitly and implicitly related to the Father. So, Charismatic theology is a unique form of Trinitarism, not a unique Spirit-group.

DED:

Are there not theological benefits to celebrating a composite God in that movement--or are there only pitfalls?

JLD:

Yes, we should listen to Charismatics. I do. But we should listen to them not as contributing a part to our understanding of a composite God, but rather as alternative perspective on the one simple triune God.

At [3:05 PM, October 11, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

DED:

3) How does Aquinas, the father of so much Catholic Theology, support the notion of a simple God when Catholicism has one of the most vast and complex understandings of the Godhead (and indeed, the Motherhead, if you'll permit me) of any Christian tradition? I have to smile a bit when I hear that "Aquinas started with simplicity." HA! If he started there I'm not so sure that he ended there.

JLD:

I take it that, given your Motherhead line, your objection here focuses on Mariology. I too would object to Catholic Mariology, but not on the grounds that she has been elevated to divine status (no Catholic theology would claim that), but rather that she has been elevated to the status of co-redemptrix along with Christ. For Roman Catholics, Mary does not compete with the Triune God, but she does come dangerously close to competing with the Incarnate Son. She does this as the Queen of Saints, building on a Hagiology developed by Aquinas. To this entire development I say: there is one mediator between God and Man: the God-Man Jesus Christ!

If your objection concerns something else about the Trinity, I can't go there with you, since the Reformation claims to have no quarrel with Rome over the basic doctrines of the Trinity and Christology.

You might also be aiming at the Catholic tendency to produce long lists of metaphysical attributes. I believe that the Scriptural principle of the Reformation leads us to reformulate such metaphysical attributes on the basis of Scripture (understood as a witness to Christ, the definitive revelation of God's character). This is the very task I hope to pursue in this new series on the Attributes of God.

If your objection is aimed at Catholic theology being complex (in the sense of complicated and difficult, not composite), this would be an apt description, although I am inclined to regard it as a strength, not a weakness. Of course, I have a "scholastic" streak that puts me in company with Catholics. Furthermore, I would contend that the Reformation's beef with Catholic complexity is not against rigorous theology on principle, but rather the clericalism that keeps this theological rigor from the people. The Reformation is not about

dumbing down the faith to the level of the laity, but rather the lifting up of the laity from ignorance into a true knowledge of their faith. Once again, I hope that drulogion can contribute to this ongoing project - a project which can be pursued all the more rigorously in conversation with intelligent objections like yours! Keep 'em coming!

- John

At [5:51 PM, October 12, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

John said>>> "The Reformation is not about dumbing down the faith to the level of the laity, but rather the lifting up of the laity from ignorance into a true knowledge of their faith."

Keith says>>> sure isn't working out that way is it?

At [12:25 PM, October 13, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

ohKeith says>>> sure isn't working out that way is it?

John says>>> I know. Isn't it tragic?

At [10:53 AM, October 21, 2006](#), [Scott David Hendricks](#) said...

The first time I picked up Thomas Oden's "The Living God" and read about the attribute of divine simplicity, it was transformational for me. Of course, I don't necessarily mean that it changed my life, but perhaps in a hyperbolic way; and I sure began to fall in love with theology after that.

Divine simplicity made 'the attributes of God' make sense. If God the Father is a person, and the Holy Trinity is three persons, then to describe them as perfect persons without flaw, who always act rightly is reasonable and Scriptural. To then also say that when you describe your mother as being loving, you do not exclude her wisdom; and that when she disciplines us we ought not to think of her as "acting out of her discipline," this also makes sense as a way to understand how God acts as a unified being. I also feel that calling and believing God as the Father, Almighty, is for myself one of the most effective ways of conceiving divine simplicity.

At [9:01 PM, November 28, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

And John wrote... "God is love." Does it get any simpler than that? Does it get any more magnificent? I think not.

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