

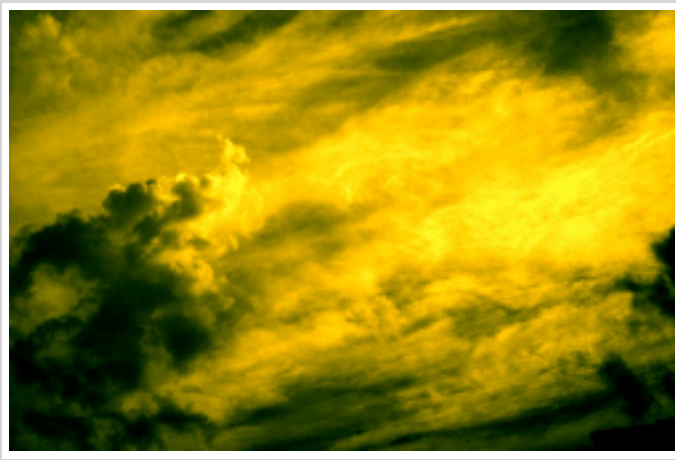
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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2006

Attributes of God (IV): Impassibility



This week we come to the conclusion of the first part of our long series on the attributes of God. In this first part we have been discussing the **NOTs**: simplicity (non-compositeness), infinity (not-finite), immutability (not-changing). These attributes of God are discovered by traveling along the *via negativa*, the way of negation: negating from God's being aspects we know about our own created being which are unbecoming of our creator. We have asked whether this is the best road to travel, and in the process offered some alternative affirmations (unity, greatness, constancy) which attempt to retain the truth of these negative attributes while (hopefully) avoiding the problems.

The last of the NOTs is **impassibility**. Technically speaking, impassibility is a secondary aspect of immutability, for passion is a sort of change. But because of its significance in the history of Christian thought and its current controversial status, impassibility deserves special attention.

What does impassibility mean? **Impassibility is the negation of passion from God**. Now this might seem a bit odd at first. Are we saying that God is dispassionate, uncaring, and boring? Although this

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may be an impression or implication of divine impassibility, it is certainly not the intended point of the attribute. A little vocab lesson will help here. *Passion* in its technical sense is to be contrasted with *action*. To be in a state of passion is to be acted upon by another. **God is impassible in the sense that he is not acted upon by another but rather is the actor, or agent, of all his experiences.**

Although this clarification of the meaning blocks a shallow dismissal of impassibility, there are still **serious problems in attributing impassibility to the Christian God**. Why? The God we worship is precisely the God of Israel who responds to the actions of his people and, in the fulfillment of their history, became human in order to suffer and die. The central place of the passion of Jesus *Christ* in any *Christian* theology worthy of the name makes impassibility a bit difficult to maintain.

The early church fathers were acutely aware of these difficulties. Their commitment to divine impassibility made them reticent about saying that God experiences death. This commitment of course made them very careful and attentive to Christological formulation, putting our sloppy and unreflective talk of divine suffering to shame. It forced them to be very precise. One could even say that the common Christian commitment to impassibility was the elephant in the room motivating the development of Christological dogma (from Irenaeus' battle with the Gnostics in the 2nd century through Nicaea and Chalcedon to the Iconoclastic controversies of the 8th century). But for all its contribution to Christian faith, this precision took to its toll: **at the crucial point (the death of Jesus), the tradition consistently put some distance between God and Christ.**

Because I believe that [Jesus is God](#) and that Jesus suffered and died, I cannot accept impassibility in the strongest sense. However, **the attribution of impassibility to God is not without its grain of truth that must be retained**. As shown above, divine impassibility bears witness to the fact that God is first and foremost the agent of his experiences. In other words, God is free. God freely engages in all his actions and passions. God initiates his history with his people. God is not drawn into relationship with creation as an outside force; rather, God creates the world in order to draw it into relationship with him. Now the history of this particular relationship includes God's passion: he undergoes suffering in the incarnation. But this passion is initiated by God's action. So we might even regard God's passion as a sort of action -- not out of an anxiety about attributing passion to the divine being, but out of a humble awe for God's free grace. God freely (without compulsion) engages in these actions and passions.

All this talk of freedom suggests that an alternative affirmation that

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retains the substance of impassibility while leaving behind its drawbacks is **divine freedom**. God is free. I am still open to the possibility of attributing impassibility to God, provided it is properly defined in accordance with the history of God's passion. But I am inclined to spend more of my energy proclaiming the freedom of God.

Any Thoughts?

Is my initial explanation of divine impassibility clear?

Do you agree with the criticism as I have outlined it?

Is my reformulation of impassibility in terms of divine freedom clear? Good? True?

At what point do you just drop a term if it requires such considerable redefinition?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 7:08 PM

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3 Comments:

At [11:57 AM, October 27, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

MMMMmmmmmm.

That's me thinking. Not savoring food, by the way.

-DD

At [12:19 AM, October 29, 2006](#), [Brian B](#) said...

Am so glad you clarified exactly what impssibility means and refers to and I am glad I kept reading, since you had me initially fired up thinking God lacks passion and is boring and even dispassionate...and regarding your statement that "God is free", I began to remember Genesis 18 and how Abraham gets God to change His mind...that still befuddles me...I wonder what it would take for me to change God's mind? Anyway, great post my friend...and by the way, feel any different now that you are ordained? Way to go man! You will be a great prof one day because you also love people so much...

At [2:05 AM, October 29, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Hey John-

There's another angle for coming at passion that I was thinking about when I read your post. I'm not even sure how to relate it to your discussion directly, so I'll just throw out a couple of points and see if you think they get us anywhere and/or relate to discussions by the church in antiquity.

Your talk of passion made me think of the Stoics. I haven't read them

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particularly broadly, but Diogenes Laertius (writing 3rd century C.E., describing earlier writings) has a discussion of their teachings, including their view of the passions. His discussion deals with passion among people, not God, but I think it might give us some terms we could use to consider the question at hand.

The Stoics' primary criticism of passion (*pathos*) is that it causes people to act irrationally (*alogos*), whereas Stoic philosophy focuses on acting according to reason and nature.

The Stoic breakdown of the four primary passions (DL VII.110ff) is interesting for the theological points you've raised. The four passions, they say, are grief (*lupe*), fear (*phobos*), desire (*epithumia*), and pleasure (*hedone*). The essential flaw of these four emotions is, again, that they are irrational and lead one to act on impulse rather than reason.

Three of these passions--fear, desire, and pleasure--have acceptable counterparts that are similar inclinations but are rational (*eulogos*): caution, wishing, and joy.

The Stoics explicitly claim that God is rational (*logikos*, DL VII.147), which clearly excludes the passions from God's experience. As for the positive emotions, though I'm pretty sure the Stoics would claim they do not apply to God, they are still affirmed as positive/rational.

The implication is that Christians who wish to agree with the Stoics that the passions are irrational and bad can still attribute positive emotions to God without having to concede that God is irrational.

The problem, and what strikes me as interesting, is that the Stoics describe no counterpart for grief which can be governed by reason in a person. Therefore if we want to hold to their view of the passions as bad, we would have to say God feels no grief.

This leaves the Christian who wishes to affirm Stoic views of the passions with a contradiction:

On the one hand, if we regard Jesus as the divine word (*logos*), we commit ourselves to the idea that God acts according to reason, and that Jesus does as well. In the case of caution, wishing, and joy, this presents no problem, as they are emotions governed by reason.

But on the other hand, the cross is the ultimate expression of the passion of grief, which implies that Christ (and therefore perhaps God) indeed can be grieved.

So the Stoic evaluation of passion clearly is inadequate from a Christian perspective; grief cannot be declared irrational if we

believe the crucified Christ was also the divine *logos*.

However, we could still affirm with the Stoics that passion uncontrolled by reason is indeed to be avoided (and therefore should not be ascribed to God or Jesus). A necessary stipulation, however, is that we must disagree with the Stoics' judgment as to *which* emotional experiences in fact lack reason (and thus are "passions") and which can be governed by reason and experienced by a rational God.

Perhaps this idea that God's experience of emotion is always governed by reason (and therefore does not influence him to act irrationally or under impulse) could serve as an explanation of divine impassibility.

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