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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 01, 2006

Attributes of God (V): Omnipresence

This week we are entering a new phase in our series on divine attributes. We will turn our attention from the NOTs to the OMNI. This shift is not only verbal (from im- to omni-), but also methodological. To discover the NOT attributes, we travel along the *via negativa* (way of negation), removing from God creaturely characteristics that do not befit him. To discover the OMNI attributes, we travel along the *via eminentia* (way of eminence), attributing to God creaturely characteristics which *do* befit him -- with the significant difference that they apply to him eminently (in the greatest possible degree). Hence the prefix omni, which means "all." So, by travelling along this path we will speak of God as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent.

We begin with **omnipresence**. To say that God is all-present is to say that God is present to all times and places. We know what it means for us to be present in one particular place at one particular time. But the creator's presence to his creation is not limited to this place at this time. God is present to this place and that place, at this time and at that time. God is all-present: present-to-all.

As the above description shows, the term "present" is conveniently ambiguous. **It refers to both time and place.** Present means here rather than there. But present also means now rather than then. This should not surprise us, considering time and space go together: we can measure one by the other, and our awareness of one carries with it an awareness of the other. When a teacher takes attendance and a student says, "Present," it refers to both their presence in the room and their presence at this time. They are here-and-now. That's what presence means. So by virtue of his omnipresence, God is here and there, now and then.

Of course, this raises an obvious **problem: What does it mean to say that God is present at a particular time and place?** Is it really so special to say that God was present with his people Israel? Is it really so special to say that God is immanuel in Jesus Christ? Is it really so

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special to say that God is present in a sacred time and space? It seems like the significance of God's particular covenant history with his people is undermined by this notion of omnipresence.

This problem is far from insolvable. The key is to think of omnipresence as **trans-presence**. God is not simply everywhere in the way that we are somewhere. God is not just a human being writ large. Rather, God transcends space and time, and so in his freedom may engage with time and place as he wills. So God may be present to his creation in a multiplicity of forms. Omnipresence doesn't set a limit on God, making it necessary that he be "everywhere" in a strict sense. Omnipresence bears witness to God's freedom from such limitation (either the limitation of being only here or the limitation of being everywhere). God is so omnipresent that he is even capable of being present to this time and place in a way that he is not present to that time and place.

This modification seems necessary for those who believe in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God. But one may rightfully ask whether such a modification of omnipresence twists the term beyond its plain sense. **Would it be better to just drop omnipresence?** I don't think so (though I'd love to hear your thoughts on the matter), because I am still affirming the point of the term: God's transcendence of time and space.

Furthermore, we can avoid an outright rejection of the term by turning the meaning of omnipresence on its head. Omnipresence focuses on God being present to all. But I am a bit more interested in saying that all are present to God. In other words, all things are laid before God. The term usually used for this God's **eternity**: God simultaneously engages all of time. Omnipresence also points to this divine reality, just from a different angle. I personally prefer the language of eternity, but see no reason to eliminate omnipresence from my vocabulary -- provided it is understood in terms of God's history with us.

Any thoughts?

Which way do you prefer: the way of negation or the way of eminence? Why?

Does my description of omnipresence make sense?

Do you think omnipresence is rightfully attributed to God?

How else might the attribute of omnipresence be reconciled with God's history?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 5:07 PM

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At [5:14 PM, November 01, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

It is worth noting that omnipresence is a nice place to start our OMNI's sub-category, for it bears a special relationship to one of the NOTs: infinity. God's engagement with space-and-time is infinite: not limited. He is not limited to certain times and palces. So, one could say that omnipresence and infinity are the positive and negative sides of the same coin.

At [8:14 PM, November 02, 2006](#), [Scott David Hendricks](#) said...

Perhaps your comment covers it, but here goes:

Tom Oden says that transcendence and immanence may be placed together within the 'category' of IMMENSITY, and that this is the way we see God described in the scriptures: the very fact that he is immeasurable and uncircumscribed is the very reason for which he is immediately present everywhere and anywhere.

At [9:31 PM, November 02, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I guess for me omnipresence blurs somewhat into omniscience. In my view God has "always" known every truth about every "place" in every "time" and had known how he would "act" in relation to it.

I'm not sure what omnipresence means beyond this to me. I'm not inclined to believe that there is some yet undiscovered energy (the ground of being :-)) that absolutely permeates the universe (and this, we call God)...

At [10:02 AM, November 03, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

To see some lesser minds wrestle with this issue check out:
<http://thejonnysmithregime.blogspot.com/2006/09/god-where-arent-you.html>

At [12:33 PM, November 03, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Okay, now you're getting into some more familiar territory (because the "Omni's" are the most common way to describe God's quality.)

I would echo what Ken says about the interrelatedness of omnipresence and omniscience... and expand to say that all three Omni's are really subcategories of some unified property of God. I wonder if we could come up with a word for that, rather than just descriptive (as your great suggested term "eminence" does) but also as a category.

I've often wondered if the Omni's, particluarly Omnipresence, are at times implied by scripture but not fully articulated, or even partially so. Of course, the Bible is a history book more than a theology book in many ways--so that doesn't hurt the argument.

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But in looking for a Hymn of the Omni's, perhaps this works:

Psalm 139:1-10

1 O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.

2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts
from afar.

3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with
all my ways.

4 Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.

5 You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the
depths, [a] you are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the
sea,

10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me
fast.

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