

THE OMNIPRESENCE AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD: A RESPONSE TO THE PANTHEISTIC VIEW OF GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE UNIVERSE

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This article seeks to give a satisfactory, though not necessarily final answer to the question, "What is the difference between the biblical understanding and the pantheistic concept with regard to the omnipresence of God?" This article explores the biblical perspective about God's presence in His created world and His distinctiveness from His creation. The concept of pantheism, on the other hand, holds that God is not only present in the universe, but God is everything that exists. The pantheistic view of God's presence is limited to the universe.

Key Words: omnipresence, transcendence, pantheism, nature, universe.

1. Introduction

The Bible shows that God has basic attributes that make Him different from angels, human beings, and all other created beings. These attributes are: omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, self-existence, and eternal.¹ Pantheism "regards God as one with the natural universe,"² and denies "the transcendence of God."³

This article will focus on the biblical perspective of the omnipresence and transcendence of God in response to the pantheistic view of God's presence in the universe. "Pantheism is the idea that everything in the whole universe is God, or is part of God."⁴ In other words, for pantheism, God is not only present in the whole universe but God is one with the

¹ Aecio Cairus, *Class Handouts for THST 612 Doctrine of God*, Adventist International Institute of Advance Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2002, 26.

² Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 34.

³ Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 61.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 208.

material world or "God is everything that exists."⁵ This study focuses on the question: "What is the difference between the biblical understanding and the pantheistic view about the omnipresence of God?"

2. The Omnipresence Of God

God's omnipresence may be defined as follows, "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."⁶ The concept that God is Lord of space and cannot be limited by space is evident from the fact that He created it. The creation of the material world (Gen 1:1) implies the creation of space as well. Matter and space are two things that cannot be separated. Moses reminded the Israelites with regard to the lordship of God over the universe, "Indeed, heaven and the highest heaven belong to the Lord your God, also the earth with all that is in it" (Deut 10:14, NKJV).

2.1 God is Present Everywhere

God possesses the ability to be present in every place at the same time. Several biblical passages speak of God's presence in every part of the universe. Jeremiah quotes God Himself, "Am I God at hand, says the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see Him? Says the Lord. Do I not fill in heaven and earth? Says the Lord" (Jer. 23:23, 24).

David expresses his conviction with regard to God's omnipresence. He states, "Whither shall I go from your Spirit? Or wither shall I flee from your presence? If I ascended to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me" (Ps 137:7-10). The biblical account does not provide any indication that a part of God might be in one place and another part in another place. God is present with His whole being in every part of space, because God is one, "undivided and indivisible."⁷ Paul affirms: "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), and, "In Him all things hold together" (Col 1:17).

⁵ Grudem, 208.

⁶ Ibid., 173

⁷ Thiessen, 89.

2.2 God is not Limited by Space

Pantheism "regards God as one with the natural universe,"⁸ and denies "the transcendence of God."⁹ In other words, the presence of God, for pantheism, is limited to the universe. The biblical account shows that God is not limited by space and can not be contained by any space, but He "transcends all spatial limitation,"¹⁰ no matter how large.

When King Solomon dedicated the temple that he had built to be the dwelling place of God, he expressed his belief about the limitless presence of God in his dedicatory prayer, "And now I pray, O God of Israel, let Your word come true, which You have spoken to Your servant David my father. But will God indeed dwell on earth and the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You; How much less this temple which I have built" (1 Kgs 8:26, 27). The presence of God is too vast to be contained in a building, for God is beyond all boundaries of the universe and fills everything, a concept, which is beyond human thinking and knowledge.¹¹

The thought that God is present everywhere and with His whole being greatly encourages believers to worship Him and pray to Him, no matter in which place they are. Also, the fact that no place can be found that is capable to contain God should discourage one from thinking that there exists a place of worship such as a temple that holds the presence of God and, as Grudem argues, provides special access to God.¹²

In addition, the biblical account does not allow for the thought that God is in need of or exists in a spatial area even if it is larger than the universe. Such a thought would encourage the idea of God's being in spatial terms, as if He is a large being. Rather, the creation account seems to imply that before God created the universe there was no matter, thus there was no space either. Yet, God existed; He existed as a being different and far greater than one can envisage.

⁸ Thiessen, 34. Erickson stated, "In Pantheism, the nature minus God equals nothing, but God minus nature also equals nothing. He has no independent status. Creation in the traditional sense has no place in the pantheistic scheme, since, according to Pantheism, God could not have existed before the creation of natural order." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 303.

⁹ Berkof, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ Tony Evans, *Teologi Allah* (Malang: Gandum Mas, 1994), 171

¹² Grudem, 174

3. God is Distinct from His Creation

Pantheism holds that everything is God or that God is everything that exists: The "being of God is really the substance of all things."¹³ On the other hand, the biblical text shows that God is present everywhere in his creation, but that He is distinct from His creation. God's distinctiveness needs to be understood in the sense that He is not to be identified with His creation. The analogy of a sponge filled with water might be helpful to illustrate the biblical concept about God's distinctiveness from His creation: Water is present everywhere in the sponge, but the water is completely distinct from the sponge. The water exists separately from the sponge and vice versa.

3.1 God's Presence to Bless

When the Bible speaks of God's presence among human beings, His presence implies blessing in every way. God's request to build a sanctuary so that He would dwell among the Israelites (Exod 25:8-9) is a reference to the blessedness of His presence for the sake of His people. God had designated the specific location of His presence, above the ark of the covenant and between the cherubim (Exod 25:22; 1 Sam 4:4). This specific reference to the location of God's presence does not imply that God was not present elsewhere in the Israelite camp (see Num 2:2; 23:21), but that He manifested His character in a unique way in the location specified above the ark of the covenant in order to bring blessing to His people.

Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman communicate the blessing of worshipping God independent of the temple in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim, the mountain regarded as holy by the Samaritans. He explained that there would be a time when the believer will not come to a specific holy place to worship. Rather, the believer will approach God in different dimensions of reality, dimensions that Jesus identified as "spirit and truth" (John 4:20-24).

The book of Revelation has much to say about heaven as the dwelling place of God. As the focus of His manifestation of character and glory his presence in heaven holds divine blessings for the believer, now and for all eternity. When the city of the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, John the Revelator hears a loud voice coming from God's throne, "Behold, the dwelling of God with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev 21:13). It might seem misleading to say that God is "more present" in heaven than anywhere else, but it would not be misleading to say that God is present in

¹³ Berkof, 61

heaven in a unique way, present to provide His blessings and show forth His glory.

The presence of God in Christ certainly can be understood as a blessing in favor of the human being. Paul writes, "In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). Christ as the source of divine blessing imparts the blessing of His presence by dwelling within the believer (Rev 3:20). However, the Bible never speaks in a direct way about God's presence within unbelievers. While God "causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45), His presence with the unrighteous seems to be for their life's sustenance¹⁴ and salvation.

The assurance of God's presence through the Holy Spirit is a major theme of the gospel of John: Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He promised that He will ask the Father to send a helper who will accompany the disciples (John 14:16). By His presence in the world and within the believer, the Holy Spirit will encourage and provide comfort to the followers of Christ until the end of age, "I am with you always even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

Other texts express the blessing of God's presence within the believer as follows: "If Christ is in you, . . . the spirit is alive" (Rom 8:10); "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17); "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

On the other hand, when the Bible speaks of God, as being "far away," it seems to imply that He is "not present to bless."¹⁵ Isaiah 59:2 states, "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God." Proverbs 15:29 declares, "The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer from the righteous."

Herman Bavinck, in *The Doctrine of God*, aptly illustrates the practical application of the concept of God's omnipresence:

When you wish to do something evil, you retire from the public into your house where no enemy may see you; from those places of your house which are open and visible to the eyes of men you remove yourself into your room; even in your room you fear some witness from another quarter; you retire into your heart, there you meditate: he is more inward than your heart. Wherever, therefore, you shall have fled, there he is. From yourself, whither will you flee? Will you not follow yourself wherever you shall flee? But since there is one more inward even than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from God's

¹⁴ Grudem, 177.

¹⁵ Ibid.

anger but to be reconciled to God. There is no place at all whither you may flee. Will you flee from Him? Flee unto Him.¹⁶

Scripture also speaks of the blessing of God's presence in Christ who sustains and keeps the entire universe to exist and function for the sake of His creation: "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). In other words, Jesus, God the Son, is continually "upholding the universe by His word of power" (Heb 1:3).¹⁷

In summary, God is present in every part of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places. Furthermore, Scripture confirms that the blessing of God's presence within the believer powerfully conveys the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the reality of life.

3.2 God's Presence to Judge

The idea of God's presence in hell has something troublesome. The question seems valid, "Isn't hell supposed to be the opposite of God's presence or the absence of God?" And yet, it seems that even this question might be answered by the principle that God is present in different ways in different places in His creation. Scripture tells that God is present even in Sheol, and that His presence there is for the purpose of judgment, one could even say, for punishment:

Not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape. Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent and it shall bite them. And though they go into captivity before their enemies, there will I command the sword, and it shall slay them; and I will set my eyes upon them for evil not for good (Amos 9:1-4; cf. Ps 137:7-10).

4. Summary

Pantheism believes that everything is God, or that God is everything that exists. The biblical perspective, however, is that God is present everywhere in His creation but distinct from His creation. The pantheistic view of God's presence is limited to the universe; the biblical concept of God's

¹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. By William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 164.

¹⁷ The present participle *pherein*, "carrying along," in Hebrew 1:3 implies that Christ's activity of "carrying along all things" is a continual activity, one that never ceases.

presence is not limited by the universe but goes beyond the material space. God is present with His whole being in every part of space because God is one, undivided, and indivisible. God is present in different ways in different places in His creation.