A THOMISTIC CONSIDERATION OF DIVINE "BODY, PARTS, AND PASSIONS" WILL THE POPULAR REJECTION OF DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY REACH ITS LOGICAL CONCLUSION?

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Introduction

The Westminister Confession of Faith begins its assertions concerning the nature of God by stating that "there is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions. . . ."[1] The phrase "without body, parts, or passions" has been a standard inclusion in creeds for some time,[2] but was generally only questioned by groups outside of orthodox Christianity (such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).[3]

Recently, however, the phrase as a whole has come upon hard times, particularly among popular evangelical writings.[4] The idea that God is "without parts or passions" is seriously

[1]Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007 Reprint of 1931 Harper and Row edition), 606.

[2]This phrase can be found nearly 100 years earlier in the opening lines of the *Anglican Articles* (both 1553 and 1562 versions) and remains in the current versions today.

[3]Typical LDS sentiment is reflected in this passage from Parley P. Pratt: ". . . that there is one only true God, consisting of three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but without body, parts, or passions. Here is the exact image and likeness of an idol established through the principal creeds of Christendom, that is, if it is an image at all, or if it makes a shadow at all, it is that of an idol: it is a being that never existed in heaven, earth, or hell; it will not make even a shadow. Indeed, it is a thing literally motionless and powerless, as much so as any term that can be used to mean nonentity." *Journal of Discourses,* 3:38.

[4]I am using "evangelical" loosely here, referring primarily to popular Protestant writers. For example, although Open Theists disagree with many tenets of traditional theism, they remain members in good standing at the Evangelical Theological Society (despite protests from many members). When I wish to differentiate between traditional theism /theists and "evangelical" theism/theists in general, I will refer to them as "traditional" or "classical." Roman Catholic and Eastern orthodox traditions are not being considered here, as they are not generally in disagreement with traditional orthodoxy in this area (at least in popular print).

contested (when it is not simply ignored) by most evangelical thinkers today. Could the trend to deny divine simplicity ("without parts"), as well as impassibility ("without passions"), result in rejection of divine incorporeality ("without body") as well?

This paper will demonstrate that this potential result is no mere slippery slope. On the contrary, it is already making progress in contemporary theology. Although the issue of God's simplicity is generally relegated to the high towers of academic theology, divine impassibility (whether known by that title or not) is a very much discussed topic even among the laity. It is to the latter that focus will be directed in this paper. Divine impassibility enjoyed the majority opinion for centuries and found its an ardent supporter in Thomas Aquinas, at what some consider the peak of Christian theology. Thus, after a brief historical review, Aquinas's arguments (and one curious adoption / adaptation of them) will be given center stage. It will also include an evaluation of one modern evangelical writer's claims concerning the thomistic viewpoint, and if it can hold back the divine corporeality tide.

Without Parts?

The notion of God's simplicity (i.e., "without parts") has been out of favor for some time. As far back as 1985, Stump and Kretzmann could already note that "despite its metaphysical credentials . . . [and] . . . long-established position at the center of orthodox Christianity's doctrine of God, and its advantages for rational theology, the doctrine of simplicity is not used much in contemporary philosophy of religion, primarily because it seems outrageously counter-intuitive, or even incoherent."[5] Among those who deny divine simplicity are many evangelicals.

[5]Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (October 1985), 354.

For example, William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland believe that "we have no good reason to adopt and many reasons to reject a full-blown doctrine of divine simplicity."[6] A more detailed account is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that the growing list of modern evangelical theologians who ignore or reject divine simplicity makes a compelling case for the conclusion that the doctrine is no longer considered a necessary condition for orthodoxy.[7]

Without Passions?

If divine simplicity has struggled to retain its former standing in the hierarchy of classical theology, then divine impassibility has utterly failed.[8] Marcel Sarot notes that today "most of the theologians who explicitly state their views on divine impassibility hold that this doctrine is to a greater or lesser degree false." He agrees that "the rejection of the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has become a theological commonplace."[9] This recent development in Christian theology seems to have begun with Jurgen Moltmann, Karl Barth, John Macquarrie, and others who equate impassibility to impassivity and immobility.[10] Process theologians such as Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne denied divine impassibility along with most of the

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[6]J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 525. Craig, in agreement with Plantinga, also denies divine impassibility. See William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 109.

[7]Others include Gordon Lewis, Millard Erickson, J. O. Buswell, and Wayne Grudem..

[8]A universally agreed-upon definition of impassibility does not exist (Creel lists no less than eight candidates. See Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock: 2005), 9). However, when one looks at the passions that are considered in actual debate, the list usually includes what the average person would consider "emotions" or "feelings" (love, anger, fear, hope, joy, hate, etc.). Unless qualified in some manner, impassibility will simply be considered here as being without these sorts of emotions.

[9]Marcel Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality: A Thomist Perspective," *The Thomist* 58 (1994), 62.

[10]Robert Duncan Culver, "The Impassibility of God: Cyril of Alexandria to Moltmann," *The Christian Apologetics Journal* 1, no.1 (Spring 1998), 9. See also Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State Univeristy of New York Press, 1984), 27.

classical attributes of God. Open Theists such as Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, and John Sanders also deny the doctrine along with their more widely publicized attacks on classical doctrines of divine foreknowledge and immutability.[11] The doctrine of divine passibility seems to have trickled down from academia to much popular thinking, as reflected in the writings of lay authors and pastors such as Philip Yancey, John Eldredge, and Rick Warren.[12] It seems that impassibility is being added to the growing list of traditional attributes of God that can be safely ignored. As will be shown below, this rejection may have more far reaching affects than many realize. Passibility, as argued by many, seems to require corporeality as well.

Impassibility in Ancient Philosophy

Prior to the formation of the New Testament and the theologizing of the early Church, notions of divine impassibility were already being discussed by philosophers. The stoics thought of emotion as a soul-body interaction because both were seen as materially corporeal. The Stoic's simple division of emotions according to a value's (pleasure/distress) relation to time (present/future) "was very influential in ancient times, and was often used by authors who did not accept other parts of Stoic theory."[13] Plato rejected the Stoic idea of body-soul unity and linked passions to the body. He, therefore, strove for detachment from them as a means to pursue pure

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[11]See, for example, Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, et. al. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2000); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

[12]See, for example, Philip Yancey and Paul Brand, *In His Image* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1987), 278-82; John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Passionate Soul of a Man* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2001), 32-36; and Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), 68-98.

[13]Simo Knuuttila, *Emotions in Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 2006), 52.

reason.[14] Knuuttila notes that "Plato's ascetic ideal in the *Republic* and in earlier works was not very far from the ideal which the stoics later called *apatheia*."[15] Aristotle listed twelve basic emotions,[16] each with four attendant constituents: (1) an evaluation of an event as positive or negative, (2) a pleasant or unpleasant feeling,(3) an impulse toward action, and (4) bodily changes.[17] He believed that for humans, who are hylomorphically composed of body and soul, to lack proper emotion would be a deficiency. Thus, to be found without pity when pity is due would be a moral fault – a false *apatheia*.[18] The Jewish philosopher Philo continued in the line of platonic thought and is often blamed for the that influence on Christian writers.[19]

What is important to note in these and other influential ancient views is that while they disagree in many respects, all agree to some degree that feelings are somehow tied to the body.[20] That feeling is part of emotion seems also to find general agreement (what disagreement there is can usually be found with regard to location in the body, interaction with the soul, or in the order of feelings to emotions). Thus, any assertion of passibility that excludes a physical body would be at odds with the most influential ancient theorists.

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[14]Ibid., 7-8.

[15]Ibid., 24.

[16]Here there is a distinction made between feelings and emotions. Simple feelings can lack an evaluative judgment. Thus, for example, lower animals would not be said to have emotions although they could have feelings.

[17]Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book 2, Ch. 1-11.

[18]Knuuttila, 46.

[19]Thomas Weinendy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Univeristy of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 19.

[20]Epicurus, Hippocrates, Galen, Plotinus, and Nemesius also located emotions in the body – some even within specific organs. See Knuuttila, 87-107.

Impassibility in the Early Church

The argument that an impassible God is the product of an attempted synthesis between pagan philosophy and biblical revelation is ubiquitous among impassibilist detractors. Weinandy opens his discussion of this notion by stating that "*all* theologians, who advance the idea that God is passible, agree on this judgment. The static, self-sufficient, immutable, and impassible God of Platonic thought hijacked, via Philo and the early church Fathers, the living, personal, active, and passible God of the Bible. . . . This cancer was transmitted to the Scholastics and thus deformed the whole body of Christian theology."[21]

While this sentiment seems to find much popular appeal, it is anything but sure. Gavrilyuk argues in a recent book that the sharp distinction between the apathetic God of the pagans and the emotional God of the Bible actually misrepresents both.[22] First, as mentioned briefly above, there is no single, unified concept of impassibility (much less the nature of God) in Greek thought.[23] Second, the mythology surrounding the pantheon of Greek gods certainly did not exclude emotional outbursts, passions, and suffering. Indeed, it was against these very myths that the early church fathers had to fight. Thus, divine impassibility became just one of the many apophatic qualifiers of descriptions of the true God's nature.[24] This is to say that the creator God transcends human descriptions which all, necessarily, rely on our experiences of the finite. Thus

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[21]Weinandy, 19-20 [emphasis in original].

[22]Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[23]For another interesting comparision of Greek thought to the New Testament writers, see Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003).

[24]See Gavrilyuk, ch. 2; as well as Weinandy, ch. 3.

it is the case that in patristic theology "impassibility consistently appears among other negative characteristics that express God's distinction from all creation."[25]

The difficulty with negative theology is in discovering what exactly is being denied of God in what might at first seem a positive predication. To say God is impassible is to deny of God whatever one means by "passible." If passible refers to bodily passions then divine impassibility may be simply be an appendage to the affirmation of divine incorporeality. If, however, passible refers to God's being changed by a changing creation, or suffering with the suffering of creation, or loving his creation, then impassibility might seem to contradict clear statements of Scritpure.[26] Gavrilyuk states that the settlement of the major theological disputes concerning Docetism, Arianism, and Nestorianism, found its final form in Cyril. Impassibility was then regarded by orthodox theologians as allowing for certain "God-befitting emotions" and functioned as a protector for the paradoxical view that during the incarnation the impassible God suffered *through* the flesh.[27] Once again, corporeality was seen as a requirement for passibility.

Impassibility and Incorporeality in Thomas Aquinas

The trend to affirm impassibility among Christian theologians continued for centuries with little resistance, and found its strongest philosophical defense in Thomas Aquinas. Thomas argued forcefully that an emotional God would require a body. Oddly, it is a passibilist / corporealist theologian who has argued that Thomas's arguments should be given more serious

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[25]Gavrilyuk, 60.

[26]Thomas lists several (Gen. 6:7; Dt. 33:3; Ps. 102:8; Isa. 59:15-16; Jer. 31:3; Jn. 16:27; etc.) in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Tr. Anton Pegis (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I, 91.

[27]Gavrilyuk, 171-75.

consideration in today's theology.[28] Thomas considered passions according to three senses: (1) when something passes from potentiality to act, (2) when something gains one quality by losing another, and (3) suffering. It is only by the soul's union with a body that it can undergo passions: "A passion of the body is therefore attributed to the soul indirectly in two ways: (1) . . . the passion begins with the body and ends in the soul . . . (2) . . . the passion begins with the soul . . . and ends in the body. . . . passions of this kind are aroused by the apprehension and appetite of the soul, and a bodily transformation follows upon them."[29] Sarot says that a passion of the first type corresponds to what we call feelings, while the second might be more properly referred to as an emotion. In either case, for Thomas, both require a body.

Thomas gives several arguments for God's incorporeality, namely that because God is pure actuality he cannot have a body, for bodies are composed of actuality and potentiality. Similarly, since God is simple, and a body requires composition, God cannot have a body. Or again, since God is by nature infinite, he cannot have a body for a body can be divided while an infinite cannot. It is not difficult to guess Thomas's conclusions regarding impassibility given his view of the necessity of corporeality for emotions: ". . . every passion of the appetite takes place through some bodily change . . . none of this can take place in God, since He is not a body."[30]

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[28]Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality," 61-92.

[29]*De Veritate* 26, 2 c. in Ibid., 68.

[30]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 89, 3. This is not the only line of enquiry that Thomas considers. There are certain emotions which, body or not, would be improper for God to have. Any emotion that has evil as its object could not be found in God because of his perfection, and any emotions which have non-possessed goods as their object would not be fitting for God for the same reason. This eliminates hate, aversion, sadness, fear, anger, despair, hope, etc. The difficulty that arises from this list is that the Bible itself ascribes these very things to God in various places. In these cases, answers Thomas, the biblical writers are using metaphor to communicate God's actions. Other emotions, such as love and joy, that are said to be in God are literally true, however, for they are not found *as emotions* in God. Rather, they are found as dispositions of his will: Love being the willing of good to another, and joy being a resting of the will in its object (which for God is himself). See also I, 90, 4 and I, 91, 2.

Thomas concludes that "the occasion of all these errors [arguments for corporeality] was that, in thinking of divine things, men were made the victims of their imagination, through which it is not possible to receive anything except the likeness of a body."[31] In other words, men must not think of God as being like them. As even detractors of classical theism acknowledge, God is in some sense unlike his creatures and thus anything said of God using language derived from creaturely experience will always mean something different when used of God.[32] Accurate God talk is possible, though, because the relation between what is said of a creature can be in an analogous proportion to the relation in God.[33] How one arrives at just what that proportion is, however, will often depend upon one's prior metaphysical commitments concerning God's nature. So if God does not have a body, and emotion requires a body, then emotional language used of God is analogical and the similarity of relation must exist in some way other than they would in an embodied creature (e.g., feelings vs. 'disposition toward', 'action concerning', etc.).[34] This important distinction is often missing in arguments concerning divinity which rely on intuitions regarding what is proper for humans.[35]

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[31]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 20.

[32]E.g. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 170.

[33]A helpful discussion of analogous God talk can be found in Armand Mauer, "St. Thomas and the Analogy of Genus," *The New Scholasticism* 29, no. 2 (April 1955): 127-44. A rebuttal is given in Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 27-32.

[34]This is how Thomas explains the emotional language used of God in Scripture. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 90, 4 and I, 91, 2.

[35]Wolterstorff provides several good examples of this tactic. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love" in Thomas V. Morris, ed. *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1990), 224-25 and 229.

While Aquinas may provide a more thorough philosophical explanation and defense of divine impassibility, his view as to whether or not passibility is tied to corporeality was, as has been shown above, neither innovative nor unusual. The doctrine was not threatened by the Reformation fathers either. Calvin wrote that God "is described to us humanly. . . . therefore, as when we hear that God is angry, we ought not to imagine that there is any emotion in him, but ought rather to consider the mode of speech accommodated to our sense."[36] Sarot notes that "Aquinas's position points to a weakness in those contemporary theological positions in which divine impassibility is asserted without any attention to the question of whether divine corporeality is a necessary concomitant of it."[37] After consideration of some leading theories of emotion, Sarot concludes that "passibilist theologians cannot without argument take it for granted that incorporeal passibility is possible."[38]

Impassibility in Modern Theology

A move toward divine passibility began to grow in the 1860s, but it was not until the late nineteenth century that divine impassibility was seriously questioned and even later before it became a noticeable issue.[39] Jurgen Moltmann's modern account of a God who suffers along with humankind found a compelling illustration in Elie Wiesel's story of a young child hanged at

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[36]John Calvin, *The Institutes*, Book I, Ch.17, sec.13.

[37]Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality," 83. While some modern emotive theorists include bodily feeling as only necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for an emotion, according to William Alston,"feeling was not recognized as a distinctive category [from passions] until the eighteenth century." Emotions, however, are a "kind of temporary state of a person" and can be distinguished from "more or less long-term dispositions." See William P. Alston, "Emotion and Feeling," in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy Volumes 1 and 2* (New York: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1972 reprint), 481and 479 respectively.

[38]Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality," 89.

[39]Weinendy, 2-3.

Auschwitz.[40] Wiesel recounts his answer to a man's question regarding where God was while this poor child was dying. Moltmann records Wiesel's answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows . . ." and then states that "any other answer would be blasphemy. . . . To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon."[41]

Following this sentiment, many contemporary theologians have sought to find in God an emotional partner who can truly empathize with human suffering. As mentioned above, Process theologians, Open theists, and several popular evangelical thinkers have discarded the traditional view of God as impassible. Whatever its pedigree, passibility seems to be the new default view for evangelical theology. Further, the rejection of divine simplicity and impassibility has apparently opened the door for a new, corporeal view of God that was previously shared only with groups considered to be aberrant or even cultic.[42]

Without Body?

One theologian who has both seen and embraced the argument that passibility requires embodiment is Marcel Sarot. He notes that "the question of whether passibility implies corporeality has not attracted overmuch attention in the Christian theological tradition. As long as the adherence to the doctrine of divine impassibility was *communis opinio*, there was little

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[40]Some writers have taken exception to Moltmann's use of this story, both in its accuracy and its relevance. See Weinendy, 3-4, fn. 10.

[41]Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: Fontanna Collins, 1972), 274.

[42]Mormon writers David Paulsen and Matthew Fisher note that "Latter-day Saint readers will find especially interesting Pinnock's proposal that Openness theologians take seriously the idea that God is embodied." They further note that "many aspects of openness theology resonate with Latter-day Saint understandings of God. Indeed, Pinnock has even been criticized for endorsing Latter-day Saint points of view." David L. Paulsen and Matthew G. Fisher, "A New Evangelical Vision of God: Openness and Mormon Thought: Review of *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* by Clark H. Pinnock," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003), 415-17. http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=516 (accessed October 27, 2007).

reason to give much attention to an additional reason for a doctrine that seemed beyond dispute."[43] After considering three objections to divine passibility (arguments from God's perfection, unconditionedness, and blissfulness), Sarot responds with three qualifications to divine passibility (creation's personal but non-causal relationship to God's feelings, God's immutability with respect to moral character, and the impossibility of God becoming negatively overwhelmed) that he believes makes the notion "invulnerable to the impassibilist objections."[44] He then goes on to present five arguments for passibility, three of which he finds most compelling (due to God's consolation ability, loving nature, and Christ's incarnation).

The qualified passibility that Sarot argues for then becomes the starting point for his next big theological move toward divine corporeality. Sarot argues that there is a widely neglected problem for passibilists who wish to maintain the orthodox position that God is "without body," yet wish to affirm divine passibility.[45] He begins by giving a detailed analysis of Aquinas' argument that passibility requires embodiment. His conclusion is that "there is a very close connection between emotion and corporeality: without corporeality no emotion."[46] Sarot lists only two contemporary thinkers that have explicitly considered this connection in major works: Janine Marie Idziak and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Idziak believes that while God cannot have a bodily sensation, he can nevertheless experience an "appropriate substitute."[47] Wolterstorff holds

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[43]Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992), 104.

[44]Ibid., 67 (see also chapter 2).

[45]Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality," 90. See also *God, Passibility and Corporeality* chapter 4.

[46]Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality*, 118.

[47]Ibid., 124.

to the idea that God cannot experience emotion (which requires physiological changes), but can still suffer (which lacks said requirement).[48] Although rejecting the Thomistic argument that Sarot respects, both Idziak and Wolterstorff admit that "there is *prima facie* evidence that emotions require corporeality."[49]

Sarot's own investigation into the connection between emotions and embodiment extends to both psychological and philosophical fields. He concludes that "according to most psychological theories of emotion, emotions in fact always involve physiological changes, it is even more significant that at least some philosophical theories of emotion go so far as to assert that it is inconceivable that anyone could have an emotion without physiological changes."[50] It seems that for Sarot the burden of proof lies on the passibilist to demonstrate that bodiless emotions are possible.

Sarot's conclusion that passibility requires a body leads him to consider just what sort of body God might have. He considers Charles Hartshorne's Process view, Grace Jantzen's world-as-body view, and Luco van den Brom's multi-dimensional body view. Sarot settles on a slight modification of Jantzen's view – that the universe is God's body.[51] Sarot goes on to consider and answer three objections to this view (the body as an organism, the compromise to God's transcendence, and the threat to human freedom).[52]

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[48]Ibid., 126.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid., 130.

[51]God transcends the universe but is also present to it and affected by it in an analogous way to how the human soul transcends its body but is also present to it and affected by it.

[52]Sarot*, God, Passibility and Corporeality*, 234-42.

Sarot concludes his study by stating that "it is not clear without further argument that the connection between passibility and corporeality . . . requires passibilist theologians to give up their passibilism. There seems to be another road to take: developing a theory of divine corporeality."[53] Although Sarot makes it clear that he does not believe that his qualified passibility and corporeality doctrines are incommensurate with Christianity, he admits in an epilogue that "while the ascription of passibility to God is by now widely accepted, the ascription of a form of corporeality to God still smacks of heresy."[54]

Whether Sarot's view is correct, confused, or corrupt, what is interesting for this study is the fact that his method ("concentrating on the criteria of intelligibility, coherence and consistency. . . . along Anselmian lines"[55]) would seem to fall in line with many popular theologies today. If Sarot is correct, it would be instructive to discover why more theologians have not arrived at his conclusions. If it is simply out of neglect, perhaps it is only a matter of time before "without body, parts, or passions" becomes completely antiquated.

So far this has not become a major theme outside of Process Theology and some new religious movements. It has not, however, been completely absent from evangelical theology. Clark Pinnock writes in a popular text that, "if we are to take biblical metaphors seriously, is God in some way embodied? Critics will be quick to say that although there are expressions of this idea in the Bible, they are not to be taken literally. But I do not believe that the idea is as foreign

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[53]Ibid., 243

[54]Ibid., 244.

[55]Ibid. This is sometimes referred to as "perfect being theology."

to the Bible's view of God as we have assumed." Note Pinnock's conclusions based on his denial of some of the classically formulated attributes of God:

> As regards space, the Bible speaks of God having living space in the heavens: . . . Let's not tilt overly to transcendence lest we miss the truth that God is with us in space . . . . The only persons we encounter are embodied persons and, if God is not embodied, it may prove difficult to understand how God is a person. . . . Perhaps God uses the created order as a kind of body and exercises top-down causation upon it . . . . Human beings are said to be embodied creatures created in the image of God. Is there perhaps something in God that corresponds with embodiment? Having a body is certainly not a negative thing because it makes it possible for us to be agents. Perhaps God's agency would be easier to envisage if he were in some way corporeal. Add to that the fact that in the theophanies of the Old Testament God encounters humans in the form of a man.[56]

Impassibility According to a Modern Evangelical Thomist

There is one evangelical thinker worthy of note in this discussion due to his acknowledgment of being not only classical in his theology, but Thomistic in his philosophy. Among evangelical scholars, Norman Geisler stands out due to his affirmation concerning much of classical theology, especially with regard to Thomas Aquinas's views on the nature of God.[57] Geisler is also a strong opponent of those who hold to Open Theism. One of Open Theism's adherents, Clark Pinnock, admits that "practically all evangelicals who work on the doctrine of God today (except maybe Geisler) are suggesting revisions to classical theism."[58] It should be instructive, then, to note what this modern evangelical Thomist has had to say regarding the

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[56]Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 32-35.

[57]See Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 103-117.

[58]Clark H. Pinnock, "There is Room for Us: A Reply to Bruce Ware," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002), 213.

doctrines that divide the classical and Open views. Especially interesting for this study, though, is how Geisler's defense of classical theism fares with regard to divine impassibility.

Geisler attacks other theologians for their inadequate formulations of the doctrine of impassibility. For example, he cites two examples from Clark Pinnock and Richard Rice as examples: God is "essentially unaffected by creaturely events and experiences. He is untouched by the disappointment, sorrow or suffering of his creatures," and, "[Impassibility] suggests that God does not experience sorrow, sadness or pain. It appears to deny that God is touched by the feelings of our infirmities."[59] Geisler then states that these descriptions "do not reflect the classical view," and that "no responsible classical theist would argue that God is emotionally detached from human events."[60]

Geisler clearly claims to represent the classical view of God's attributes, and laments that "impassibility is widely misunderstood" and that "evangelical theologians have either rejected the doctrine altogether or sought to modify it to alleviate tensions or inconsistencies they believe are inherent within the classical view of God."[61] It might be expected, then, that Geisler's definition and defense of divine impassibility would be in line with classical theism in general, and Thomas's view specifically.[62] As will be shown, however, this is not the case.

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[59]Pinnock and Rice, *Openness of God*, 12; as cited in Norman Geisler, H. Wayne House, with Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 172.

[60]Geisler and House, *Battle for God,* 172.

[61]Ibid., 170 and 171 respectively.

[62] Even the examples cited above that Geisler lists as "inadequate formulations" can be found in classical thinkers. E.g., Anselm writes, ". . . thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of your being. Truly, thou art so in terms of our experience, but thou art not so in terms of thine own. . . . we experience the effect of compassion, but thou dost not experience the feeling. Therefore, thou art . . . not compassionate because thou art affected by no sympathy . . ." from Anselm, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings, Proslogium,* S. N. Deane tr. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1988), 59-60. Further, as stated above, Thomas's view may be seen as the

Geisler considers God to be impassible but with some important qualifications to the traditional view. In line with Thomas and other classical thinkers, Geisler believes that God is without passions for these imply a desire for what one does not have, and God lacks nothing.[63] Geisler also denies that God can suffer.[64] Yet Geisler is quite clear in several places that he believes God has feelings and emotions, as an example from each of his main sources shows:

> However, to say that God is impassible in the sense that he has no passions or cravings for fulfillment is not to say that he has no feeling. . . . God has no changing passions, but he does have unchanging feelings.[65]

> This is not to say that God has no emotional states, but simply that His feelings are *not the result of actions imposed on Him by others*.[66]

> This does not mean that God has no feelings, but simply that His feelings are not the results of actions imposed on Him by others. His feelings flow from his eternal and unchangeable nature.[67]

In one of his most succinct statement concerning divine impassibility, Geisler writes, "It is literally true that God experiences feelings. God has feeling in an unchanging way, but not a

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pinnacle of classical thinking on the subject. See Weinendy,, 21, 114, 159-161, etc. as well as Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality," 62.

[63]Norman Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 29.

[64]Geisler and House, 170. See also Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume Two: God, Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 112.

[65]Geisler, *Creating God,* 29.

[66]Geisler and House, 170 [emphasis in original]. Oddly, Geisler also claims that "when someone acts, God responds with the perfectly appropriate emotion. However, His emotional response is not a reaction to new knowledge, but a response to the action based on His character." (Ibid., 186-87). This is similar to Richard Creel's argument for God's impassibility based on omniscience (which he limits to actualized possibilities). See Creel, 43-63. Geisler's use of reactive language here also seems at odds with his other writings, including the very passage under discussion: "Since God has no potentiality, His nature cannot be actualized by any creature in any way. If it were, God would be the effect, and we would be the cause." (*Battle for God*, 186-87)

[67]Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume Two*, 112.

changing way. He has feelings in an active sense but not a passive sense."[68] In Geisler's view, then, divine impassibility does not mean without emotion or feeling; rather it entails that God's emotions are unchanging and uncaused (by creatures). It appears that divine emotion for Geisler differs from human emotion only by degree, mutability, and causality.[69]

While Geisler does not cite any classical sources for his definition, it is clear that he considers it to be tantamount to the classical formulation of the doctrine.[70] He supports his view by referencing biblical passages concerning God's self-sufficiency and immutability, as well as theological arguments based on God's perfection, sovereignty, uncausality, pure actuality, and immutability.[71] Geisler also quotes theologians who uphold divine impassibility (in some form) such as the early and medieval church fathers (including Thomas), as well as Reformation and post-Reformation thinkers. What is conspicuous by its absence in Geisler's major works on the subject is any discussion of divine embodiment. Given Thomas's understanding of the necessity of embodiment for emotions or feelings, it is surprising that Geisler not only does not discuss the matter, but actually supports the view that God has emotions and feelings.

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[68]Geisler and House, 186.

[69]"God can do whatever good we can do, but he does not do it the *way* we do it. He does it in an infinitely better way than we do – an unchanging way." Geisler, *Creating God*, 107 [emphasis in original].

[70]In chapter two of *Creating God in the Image of Man?* Geisler labels the attributes of God as he understands them as belonging to "classical Christian theism" that he seems to equate with the theology of Thomas Aquinas who is cited 43/46 times. No citations of any kind are given in the impassibility section, however. (I am indebted to Professor Jason L. Reed for noticing this curious fact.)

[71]Geisler does not defend impassibility in *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (as explicitly stated on pages 21-22). However, he does so in the two other works considered here: *The Battle for God*, 172-84, and *Systematic Theology Volume Two*, 113-121.

Geisler's definition and defense of impassibility demonstrate a departure from Thomas, as well as some of the church fathers that he cites for support.[72] This is not to suggest that Geisler's view is necessarily in error, only that it is not that of Thomas in particular, nor classical theism in general.[73] It might be the case that Geisler's focus on attacking Open Theism's view of divine immutability and omniscience led to his failure to include the issue of divine embodiment in his writings on the subject of God's emotions.[74] Indeed, Geisler states that the "root issue and core difference is that neotheists [as opposed to classical theists] do not ground God's feelings in His unchangeable nature."[75] While immutability may be the root issue in the Classical versus Open Theism debate, it is certainly not the root issue with regard to divine impassibility.

It seems that what Geisler has gained in his definition of impassibility in defense of God's immutability and omniscience he has given up with regard to incorporeality. If the

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[72]In *The Battle for God* Geisler cites several church fathers in support of his view of impassibility. However, both Thomas and Clement disagree with Geisler's view that God experiences anger: "When the Hebrews mention hands and feet and mouth and eyes and entrances and exits and exhibitions of wrath and threatening, let no one suppose on any account that these terms express passions of God." *Stromata,* 5.11, 68.1-3 in G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1952), 8-9. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 89, 14. Geisler also cites Gregory Thaumaturgus and (under Methodius) Lactantius - two of the few early writers who actually affirmed God's suffering/passibility. Sarot states that "Gregory does ascribe suffering to God, though he also tries to show how God's suffering should differ from human suffering. And Lactantius explicitly engages in the refutation of the doctrine of divine impassibility." See "Does God Suffer? A Critical Discussion of Thomas G. Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*" (colloquium, Utrecht, Netherlands, March 23, 2001). http://www.arsdisputandi.org /index.html? http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/ articles/000018/index.html (accessed November 17, 2007). See also Creel, 5.

[73]In "Does God Suffer?" (cited above) Sarot notes that "among the Church Fathers the belief that God is impassible is most popular." He lists only two who disagree (Lactantius and Gregorius Thaumaturgus).

[74]Geisler's only mention of the incorporeality defense is in a brief discussion concerning Tertullian's view of the suffering of Christ (the validity of which is not explicitly affirmed). See *The Battle for God*, 190 fn. 8. This same admission of feelings in a defense of divine impassibility is also found in Phillip R. Johnson, "God Without Mood Swings" in Douglas Wilson, ed. *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), as well as Paul Helm, *Divine Impassibility: Why Is It Suffering?* http://www.reformation21.org/ Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/2006_Issues_1_16_Articles/Divine_Impassibility/94 (accessed November 20, 2007).

[75]Geisler and House, 191.

majority of scholars are correct in linking emotions to bodies, then "unchanging emotions" would only require that God have an "unchanging body."[76] If Geisler is indeed the best example of an evangelical defining and defending classical impassibility today, then there may be little to halt the growing move toward a divine passibilism that requires divine corporeality.[77]

Conclusion

Unlikely as it might sound to many Christians today, the view of God as emotional has opened a door for the denial of other classical attributes just as much as Process Theology's denial of divine incorporeality or Open Theism's rejection of God's exhaustive foreknowledge. As Wolterstorff himself once commented, "Once you pull on the thread of impassibility, a lot of other threads come along."[78] According to Aquinas and others, all of God's 'attributes' are really limited human descriptors of God's single, simple, and spiritual nature (*actus purus*).[79] They are conventional ways of expressing different aspects of God's nature as an accommodation to

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[76]This is certainly not what Geisler concludes. See Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume Two*, ch. 6. It is possible that he might defend a position similar to Jonathan Edwards who has sees the will as the cause of (and essentially equivalent to) the affections (of which passions are a more intense subset), and bodily change as the accidental effect of the disposition of the will [e.g., Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, vol. 2 of John E. Smith, ed., *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New haven, Yale University Press, 1959), 96-99], but Geisler does not state this.

[77]A very helpful discussion of this issue that affirms the classical / thomistic position does appear in one recent evangelical publication. However the article itself was penned by a Roman Catholic (further affirming my conviction that classical impassibility has all but disappeared from popular evangelical circles): Patrick Lee, "Does God Have Emotions?" in Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson, eds. *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 211-30.

[78]Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Does God Suffer?" *Modern Reformation* 8, no. 5 (September/October 1999), 47 as cited in Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 138.

[79]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 14. See also *Summa Theologiae* I q. 3 and I q. 12 a. 4.

mankind's finite intellect. Thus, to change any of them in any degree is to change all of them (i.e., God's entire nature) to the same degree.[80]

The same confession cited in the introduction which describes God as being *without body, parts, or passions* also considers God to be *one, living, true, infinite, perfect, pure, spirit, invisible, immutable, immense, eternal, and incomprehensible*.[81] The popular denial of God's impassibility has already led some theologians to conclude that incorporeality must be given up as well. If Aquinas is correct and this trend continues, there may be little to stop the wholesale rejection of all the orthodox attributes of God (as classically understood) if theological consistency is maintained.

[80]An example of the importance of this doctrine for thomists can be seen in the fact that Eleonore Stump spent three pages on this issue in a paper on Aquinas' moral theory. Eleonore Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (June,1986): 181-98.

[81]Schaff, 606.

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