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**ENCLOSING, NOT ENCLOSED :  
THE EARLY CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD**

One of the baffling philosophical issues that sends Lucian's hero, Menippus, on his flight to heaven for answers is whether the universe is finite or infinite, whether the All is circumscribed or not (*Icaromenippus* 7). It is generally conceded that the Greek intellectual tradition identified the intelligible with the limited and found it difficult therefore to associate the unlimited with the divine. Yet it was in this same tradition that Philo and the church fathers found resources for a new doctrine of God that ultimately resulted in a reversal of the Greek evaluation of the infinite. The importance of the development can hardly be exaggerated. On one reading of the evidence, it may even be said that the conception of God's infinity served, after many transformations, as a presupposition in the emergence of the modern physical sciences<sup>1</sup>. It was one of the merits of Robert M. Grant's book on the early Christian doctrine of God to have uncovered some of the complex sources of the new teaching<sup>2</sup>. It is our intention here to extend the range of considerations that have a bearing on this issue.

The debate in the early church came to a focus in the formula "enclosing, not enclosed" and related expressions. The use here of the verb "to enclose" (περιέχειν) seems to have two main sources: (a) the pre-Socratic description of the originative substance as divine and enclosing all things<sup>3</sup>, (b) Aristotle's discussion of the infinite (*Phys.* 3.4-8, 202b 30), of place (4.1-5, 208a 27), and of the void (4.6-9,

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1. IVOF LÉCLERC, *The Nature of Physical Existence* (London, 1972).

2. *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville, 1966) 105-10.

3. Cf. ARISTOTLE. *Phys.* 3.4, 203b 7; *De caelo* 3.5, 503b 10; *Metaph.* 12.8, 1074a 38.

213a 12). The antithesis, "enclosing, not enclosed", first gains currency in Philo as a description of God and seems to owe its striking formulation to an impulse to go beyond the Greek tradition in emphasizing the divine transcendence<sup>4</sup>.

To say that God encloses all things and is not enclosed means for Philo (a) that God is immaterial and not in a place<sup>5</sup>, (b) that he is unknowable in his essence<sup>6</sup>, and (c) that he is creator of all things (*Migr. Abr.* 183; cf. *Leg. alleg.* 3.51). Such themes presuppose a God who transcends the cosmos and is not simply (as in Greek philosophy) a factor in the totality of things. To be sure, the emphasis on God's immateriality reflects, as an isolated theme, Plato more than the Bible. But it points here in a new direction. For ultimately, it was to provide a context within which the infinite "could be detached from the concept of the corporeal, with which it had been essentially united in Greek thought"<sup>7</sup>. An indication of the novelty of Philo's thought in this connection is the emphasis, perhaps for the first time, on the idea that the essence of God is unknowable<sup>8</sup>.

Philo, however, has an ambivalent attitude toward the infinite as such<sup>9</sup>. Once he goes so far as to say that it is not right to think that God is in contact with "infinite and confused matter" (*Spec. leg.* 1.329). In such sentiments the influence of the Greek philosophical tradition is strong. To be sure, that tradition was itself changing, but the very restricted application of the term "infinite" to the divine hypostases by Plotinus illustrates how even the most mystical of the Greek philosophers drew back from a positive evaluation of the unlimited<sup>10</sup>. One reason that the church fathers went farther than Philo in this regard is

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4. Cf. Harry A. WOLFSON, *Philo* (2 vols.; Cambridge, 1947) 1. 247-51, 317-22. Wolfson connects the formula with the Rabbinic teaching that God "is the place of the world, but the world is not his place" (*Gen. R.* 68.9).

5. *Migr. Abr.* 182; 192-93; *Somn.* 1.63; 1.185; *Sobr.* 63; *Post. Cain.* 15; 18.

6. *Somn.* 1.184; *Conf. ling.* 138; *Post. Cain.* 15; 18.

7. LECLERC, *Physical Existence*, 65. Leclerc is speaking of Origen, but the comment is equally relevant to Philo.

8. WOLFSON, *Philo*, 2.94-164. But see now John M. Dillon (*The Middle Platonists* (London, 1977) 155) who suggests that Philo was dependant on Platonism for his view of God as incomprehensible.

9. A. M. J. FESTUGIÈRE, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, Vol. IV: *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose* (Études Bibliques; Paris, 1954) 109.

10. Hilary ARMSTRONG, "Plotinus's Doctrine of the Infinite and Its Significance for Christian Thought", *Downside Review* 73 (1955) 47-58.