

HUMAN RELIGION IN GOD'S SIGHT

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We have looked at the fascinating subject of human religions and examined the questions they reply to. But we must go further -- we must evaluate what we have found. How must we judge these human religions? Are they merely human fantasy or is there something of God in them? Have these pagan peoples -- as we call them -- truly searched in their own way for God, or is their religion essentially rebellion against God and a flight from God? Once again many questions arise which must be answered.

The first thing we must do now is listen. So far we have simply looked around and reflected, but now it is necessary to listen to what God says. By merely reasoning we cannot obtain a clear view only. God himself can judge all this human religion correctly. Missionaries from all over the world have become more and more convinced of this since the Conference of Tambaran. We can no longer go by human Impressions, and we have learned to begin to listen reverently to God's Word. Hendrik Kraemer, in his books Christian Message in a Non-Christian World and Religion and the Christian Faith, strongly advocates listening intelligently, and during the last ten years many other authors have followed his example. When listening to God's Word, we want to formulate our findings very briefly. Within the scope of this study it is not possible to deal with all the Bible texts that speak of human religion. We shall therefore confine ourselves to discussing Romans 1, because a further reflection on what is said there will make the points we want to examine clearer to us.

The best way to proceed is to look at the part where Paul speaks of human religion, and examine it verse by verse. Paul is speaking here of the power of the gospel. In verse 17 he says: "For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith to faith." Then he goes on in verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness." The New English Bible has the following: "For we see divine retribution revealed from heaven and falling upon all the godless wickedness of men. In their wickedness they are stifling the truth."

Several thoughts demand our attention. In the first place, it is obvious that Paul wants to say that God evidently deals with man already in this world and that He retaliates for evil. The Apostle returns to this idea several times later on. In the same chapter he says three times over that "God gave them up" (vv. 24, 26, 28), that is to say, God gave them up to the dynamics of their own sinful train of thought. That is the divine retribution which Paul discusses in his epistle.

Our second thought concerns the Apostle's statement concerning hindering the truth. In the Greek language St. Paul uses the word *katechein*, literally, "To keep down." The King James Version translates it by "hold," the New English Bible by "stifle." It seems to me that in this case we should translate it by "repress." We intentionally choose a word which has a specific meaning in psychological

literature. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines the word "repression" as "the process by which unacceptable desires or impulses are excluded from consciousness and thus unacceptable desires or impulses are excluded from consciousness and thus being denied direct satisfaction are left to operate in the unconscious." This seems to agree with what Paul says here about human life. But we must mention that the word repression has received a wider meaning in more recent psychology. In Freudian psychology it specifically refers to unconscious desires of a more or less sexual nature. In more recent psychology it is also applied to desires and impulses of a very different nature. The impulses or desires which are repressed may be very valuable. Anything that goes contrary to the accepted patterns of life or to the predominant popular ideas may be repressed. Usually this happens unconsciously; a person does not even know that he is doing it; but it does happen and the results can be far-reaching. We are reminded of this psychological phenomenon recently discovered by Paul's usage of this word. He says that man always naturally represses God's truth because it is contrary to his pattern of life. Man's wickedness prevents this truth from reaching him; he automatically represses it.

In verse 19 the Apostle goes on to say: "... because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them." We must observe that the words "manifest in them" cannot mean that man really sees and understands this. The New English Bible has: "lies plain before their eyes." This seems more correct. Whether man comes indeed as far as seeing it is another matter. It is possible that man does not see it because it is automatically repressed, as a rule.

Verse 20 has an elaboration on the preceding thought. It shows that what was summed up in verse 19 as "that which is known of God" can be described as "His everlasting power and divinity." These two words are of great importance. The history of religion shows that man seems to be uncertain as to whether God is a "he" or and "it" -- a person or a power. In primitive religions we observe a distinction between animistic tendencies, which regard all supernatural things as persons, and dynamistic tendencies, which regard them as magical powers. Therefore it is very instructive that Paul mentions these two things here -- the power and the godhead. It seems that he immediately wants to preclude every attempt to reduce God to a mere impersonal power; but at the same time he wants to preclude every attempt to make him a "High God," far away in unreachable regions, without any influence on our daily life. Paul says: Through all centuries the fact that God is both a person to whom we can pray and to whom we are responsible, and also everlasting power, forces itself naturally upon man. These two characteristics of God are "clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made." The New English Bible has: "have been visible to the eye of reason." We prefer "being intelligently observed," does not refer to seeing with the eyes in this case, but neither does it mean that "seeing God's everlasting power and godhead" is attained by a process of reasoning. It is not a logical conclusion, but a flash that comes in a moment of vision. It comes suddenly to man, it overwhelms him. But still it does not lead to knowledge. Man escapes God's grasp, man represses the truth. Therefore he is "without excuse."

Verse 21 repeats that man must in fact be regarded as one who knows: “knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks.” In the day of judgment man cannot claim that he did not know God. He knows God, even though he never comes to real knowledge because he is always busy subtly repressing this knowledge. Man desperately clings to his own egocentric pattern of life. As a result man went further and further astray: “all their thinking has ended in futility, and their misguided minds are plunged in darkness.” In this connection the Apostle thinks of the pagan religions as he has seen them for himself, with their statues, superstitions, and infatuation. He does not mean to say that these people have consciously or intentionally reflected God’s truth. Generally speaking, they do this unconsciously and unintentionally, but they are nevertheless guilty. The aerial of man’s heart can no longer receive the wave length of God’s voice, even though it surrounds him on all sides. But in his innermost heart man has turned away from God and now God has vanished out of his sight.

The next part shows what is the result of this attitude. It is remarkable that the Apostle uses the verb “exchange” (Greek *allasso* or *met'allasso*) three times. In doing this he once again touches upon one of those very remarkable phenomena which recent psychology has pointed out. This phenomenon of replacing, of substituting, is so common that we see it everywhere. It has been discovered that these repressed impulses of which we spoke, which “are left to operate in the unconscious,” are not dead. They remain strong, and try to reassert themselves again and again. Surely, they play no part in man’s conscious life, but they succeed in showing every now and again that they still exist. This has been illustrated by the story of the boy sent out of class at school who kept on throwing stones against the windows of the school to show that he was still there. Freud particularly has called attention to this phenomenon and inaugurated its study. He noticed that the impulses which have been exiled to the unconscious may very well reveal themselves in the errors we make, in our slips of the tongue. But they especially crop up in dreams, for them they get the chance to come to the surface.

This does not mean that they appear openly in dreams. The mind retains a certain censorship which causes them to appear only, or at least preferably, disguisedly. Here the process of exchange or substitution comes into the picture. The repressed impulses do come to the surface, but in a changed form, a substituted form. For example, a person may dream about his father but when analyzing the dream he realizes that a sexual inclination or relation lies at the bottom of it, something which he would be ashamed to tell his wife. In dreams things have a distorted form; a certain disguise and exchange takes place. Often symbolic figures appear in dreams which point back to what exists in the unconscious. Therefore psychoanalysis attaches much value to dreams, and they are often used to trace the deeper tendencies, the impulses in exile.

It seems to me that Paul touches upon these things. Man has repressed the truth of the everlasting power and the divinity of God. It has been exiled to his unconscious, to the crypts of his existence. That does not mean, however, that it has vanished forever. Still active, it reveals itself again and again. But it cannot

become openly conscious; it appears in disguise, and it is exchanged for something different. Thus all kinds of ideas of God are formed; the human mind as the *fabrica idolorum* (Calvin) makes its own ideas of God and its own myths. This is not intentional deceit – it happens without man’s knowing it. He cannot get rid of them. So his has religion; he is busy with a god; he serves his god – but he does not see that the god he serves is not God Himself. An exchange has taken place – a perilous exchange. An essential quality of God has been blurred because it did not fit in with the human pattern of life, and the image man has of God is no longer true. Divine revelation indeed lies at the root of it, but man’s thoughts and aspirations cannot receive it and adapt themselves to it. In the image man has of God we can recognize the image of man himself.

We have already mentioned that the result was that God gave them up. This is said three times in this short passage. In verse 24 we read that God gave them up to the vileness of their own desires and the consequent degradation of their bodies. In verse 26 this is repeated in the words: “God gave them up unto vile passions.” And in verse 28 the Apostle adds that God gave them up unto a reprobate mind. They could no longer resist the powers within which carried them along. Paul no doubt saw in his days abundant proof of this in the degenerated way of life of the Hellenistic world; he saw what man comes to when God gives him up to his desires and passions. He also saw that mythical religion has no weapon against this degeneration. He had learned what happens when man exchanges the true image of God for all kinds of myths. This weakens man’s ethical strength because consciously or unconsciously he then forms an idol according to his own liking.

This in summary is what Paul says in this passage regarding natural man’s tendencies and inclinations since the beginning of time. The history of religion illustrates this most convincingly. Now there are still a few points which demand our attention.

(1) It is clear that this passage teaches unmistakably that there is a general revelation. Hendrik Kraemer calls the idea “general revelation” a “misleading term.” He says: “The whole concept, in its ordinary use, is tainted by all kinds of notions, which are contrary to the way in which the Bible speaks of revelation. This may be true. The cause, no doubt, is that the concept has been used too often in a philosophical sense. Too often it has been taken for granted that man’s reason could lead him to develop a certain natural theology. But the revelation of which Paul speaks in this passage is entirely different. He does not have in mind philosophical conclusions of the human mind nor infantile natural theology. The Bible emphasizes God’s everlasting concern for man. We read that God “left not himself without a witness” (Acts 14:17). Time and again man knows that God exists and that man is actually confronted with Him; yet each time man suppresses these convictions and flees from them. But God still concerns Himself with man in a very concrete and personal way. We cannot explain how God does this. In Romans Paul speaks about the invisible characteristics of God which He manifests in the things He made. In Acts 14 he mentions the rain and fruitful seasons and the gladness with which He fills our hearts. But much more can be

said about this. God has created the first year of man in such a way that during his life as a small child he finds peace and safety only in the protecting and sustaining nearness of his mother, and thus He gives a father and mother something of His own image which they retain in later years. God meets man in storm and thunder as well as in the radiant beauty of a glorious summer morning. God occupies Himself with man's conscience, his innermost being. God reminds him again that responsibility and guilt do exist. Who can trace the hidden ways by which God proves His existence to man? God has His own hidden means of approaching man.

(2) This explains the existence of phenomenon-religion. The man who believes in gods and spirits and bows before his idols shows that he is touched by God and that God is seeking him. But he shows at the same time that he himself is busy suppressing that which is absolutely necessary for a person to come to God. His image of God is distorted; something essential to it is eliminated from it. He does not do this intentionally, but, all the same, he is without excuse. He received his image of God from his parents; he grew up with the religious life contains also something very personal, something belonging only to him – while seeking God earnestly he at the same time tries to escape from Him. His religion is always ambiguous, full of hesitation and discrepancies. In the first chapter we stated that religion, by its very nature, is a response. It is never man seeking and speaking spontaneously; it is always an answer on his part to something that he feels as a revelation. We must now add that all the great religions in history are man's answer embodying this mysterious process of repression

We can show this concretely. In the night of the *bodhi* when Buddha received his great, new insight concerning the world and life, God was touching him and struggling with him. God revealed Himself in that moment. Buddha responded to this revelation, and his answer to this day reveals God's hand and the result of human repression. In the "night of power" of which the ninety-seventh sura of the Koran speaks, the night when "the angels descended" and the Koran descended from Allah's throne, God dealt with Mohammed and touched him. God wrestled with him in that night, and God's hand is still noticeable in the answer of the prophet, but it is also the result of human repression. The great moments in the history of religion are the moments when God wrestled with man in a very particular way.

The history of religion contains a dramatic element. It includes the divine approach and human rejection. This rejection is hidden because man apparently is seeking God and serving Him, but the God he seeks is different from the true God because of the uncanny process of repression and exchange that enters in. It seems to me that we can thus formulate the testimony of the Bible concerning human religions.

(3) If this is true, it seems to me that we can make certain distinctions. We can say that natural man is ever busy repressing or exchanging. But does he always succeed to the same degree? That depends on the strength with which God approaches him. God can at times, as it were, stop the noiseless engines of repression and exchange and overwhelm man to such an extent that he is

powerless for the moment. There is, also, always the silent activity of the Holy Spirit inside man, even if he resists Him constantly. The way in which Isaiah speaks of Cyrus, the anointed one, who was called by His name and girded by God (Is. 45:4,5), indicates that the Bible certainly leaves the possibility open for God to anoint those who do not know Him with His Spirit and to gird them for certain tasks to which He calls them.

This shows that there are gradations in the history of religion. We always encounter the powers of repression and exchange, but that does not mean that they were always of the same nature and strength. We meet figures in the history of non-Christian religions of whom we feel that God wrestled with them in a very particular way. We still notice traces of that process of suppression and substitution in the way they responded, but occasionally we observe a far greater influence of God there than in many other human religions. The history of religion is not always and everywhere the same; it does not present a monotonous picture of only folly and degeneration. There are culminating points in it, not because certain human beings are much better than others, but because every now and then divine compassion interferes, compassion which keeps man from suppressing and substituting the truth completely.

(4) A final remark we must make in this connection is that this is very important for the fulfillment of the missionary task. When a missionary or some other person comes into contact with a non-Christian and speaks to him about the gospel, he can be sure that God has concerned Himself with this person long before. That person had dealings more than once with God before God touched him, and he himself experienced the two fatal reactions - suppression and substitution. Now he hears the gospel for the first time. As I have said elsewhere, "We do not open the discussion, but we need only to make it clear that the God who has revealed His eternal power and Godhead to them, now addresses them in a new way, through our words." The encounter between God and that man enters a new period. It becomes more dangerous, but also more hopeful. Christ now appears in a new form to him. He was, of course, already present in this man's seeking; and, because He did not leave Himself without a witness, Christ was wrestling to gain him, although he did not know it. John describes this in a most delicate way: the Logos "lighteth every man" and "the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not" (John 1:9, 5). In the preaching of the gospel Christ once again appears to man, but much more concretely and in audible form. He awakes man from his long, disastrous dream. At last suppression and substitution cease - but this is possible only in a faithful surrender.

The Church between Temple and Mosque (Chapter 9), J. H. Bavinck (1965)