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HUMAN RELIGION IN GOD'S EYES: A STUDY OF ROMANS 1:18-32 J.H. BAVINCK¹

One of the most important questions all missionaries have to face when they approach their work is how to regard the non-Christian religions they will encounter. From time to time they will be asked 'What do you think of our religion?', and they will ask themselves whether it is possible to use elements in another religion as stepping-stones or as points of contact in evangelism. In many countries, especially in Eastern Asia, they will meet people who think that all religions are in the deepest sense identical. When I was in Java, a taxi-driver, a serious Muslim, expressed himself in just this way: 'Well, Sir, there are various cars in the world, very small ones and big American ones, Volkswagens and Cadillacs and others. All of them can take you where you want to go, but some are much more comfortable than others!' And he always added: 'Your religion is not very comfortable.' That was his conviction. It is clearly a very important problem of great significance for our whole approach to the presentation of the gospel.

In the first chapter of Romans, St Paul goes very deeply into this whole problem and says things of the greatest value for every missionary. We may start at verse 19:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became

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fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.

First Paul stresses the fact that there exists a more or less general revelation: 'what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.' In this revelation God is speaking to every individual, to every people in the world.

From there Paul reaches the conclusion that 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. The New English Bible rendering is worth noting: '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 points deserve our attention. In the first place Paul clearly says that God is already dealing in judgment with men and women in this world and that he returns their wickedness on their own heads. He returns to this point several times later on. It is quite astonishing that in this chapter he says as many as three times 'God gave them up ... God gave them up... God gave them up.' To what? To their own desires, to their own sinful trains of thought and course of life. That is the divine retribution. Sin punishes itself, as it were.

Repressing the Truth

The second point concerns the apostle's words on the struggle of men with the truth of God. St Paul uses the word, *katecho*, literally, 'to keep down'. The RSV renders it 'suppress' and the New English Bible 'stifle'. We could well translate it by the word 'repress'. I deliberately choose a word which has a technical meaning in the literature of psychology. Psychologists describe the activity of repression as follows: 'Repression is the process by which unacceptable desires or impulses are excluded from consciousness and thus, being

denied direct satisfaction, are left to operate in the unconscious.' What Paul is speaking of here can thus be easily translated by that word 'repression'. Of course this word has a much wider meaning than it usually carries in modern psychology. Freudian psychology applies it specially to 'unconscious desires having a more or less sexual nature'. In more recent psychology it also refers to desires and impulses of a very different nature. The impulses or impressions which are repressed may be very valuable ones; anything contrary to the pattern of life or the dominating tendencies of thinking or speaking may be repressed in the human soul. Usually this happens unconsciously. The individual himself does not know that he is doing it. But it happens with surprising strength and consequences. We may justifiably interpret Paul's words here in terms of this powerful activity brought to light by the psychology of our day. He says that human beings always repress God's truth because it is contrary to the whole pattern of their life. Human wickedness prevents this truth really reaching them; it has no chance to reach them, it is automatically repressed into the background of their consciousness.

In v. 19 Paul goes on to say that 'what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them'. The words 'plain to them' cannot mean that they *really* see and understand. In the New English Bible these words are rendered 'lies plain before their eyes'. That seems more correct. A person's actual seeing is another story. As Paul goes on to make clear, we always resist and repress what is before our eyes.

In v. 20 what was summed up in v. 19 as 'what can be known about God' is defined as 'his eternal power and deity' (or 'Godhead' – so the AV). These two words are of great importance. In the history of human religion some very remarkable tendencies are always discernible. One is the belief that God is the far-away God, sitting upon his heavenly throne but too far removed for us to come into contact with him. That is what is meant when we speak of 'high' gods. There are many high gods in the world, gods which are acknowledged as such by various peoples, but which have no real place in their religious life. They are too distant, and therefore these people prefer to pray to other powers, to souls and ghosts. God is the creator, he has made the world and all

that is in it, but he is not the object of adoration or of prayer. Such gods are regarded as more or less distant beings, powerless in actual life. God does not come to us, he cannot do anything for us.

The Power and the Godhead

Another tendency revealed in the history of religions is to regard God as an impersonal power, as mere power. He is not an 'I' but an 'it'. Human religion is always inclined to leave out one of the two: either it sees God only as a far-away God, and leaves out his power in human life, or else it regards God solely as impersonal power but does not see that God is God, a personal Lord. These two central tendencies are clearly discernible in the history of human religion.

It is therefore highly instructive that Paul here mentions these two very things – the power and the Godhead. It seems as if he wants to preclude any attempt to reduce God to mere impersonal power, and at the same time to exclude every possibility of making God a high God, far away in unreachable regions without any impact on daily life. St Paul says that through all the centuries the two notions that God is both the person to whom we can pray and are responsible, and at the same time everlasting power, press themselves naturally upon human beings. These two attributes of God are clearly seen, being understood by (AV) or perceived in (RSV) the things that have been made. Both these renderings are preferable to the New English Bible's 'have been visible to the eye of reason'. The Greek *nooumena*, literally 'being intelligently observed', emphasizes that seeing with the eye is not intended in this verse; but at the same time it does not mean that seeing God's everlasting power and Godhead is attained by a process of reasoning. It is reached not as a logical conclusion, but in a moment of vision. It comes suddenly upon a person; it overwhelms him. But still it does not lead to real knowledge. The man or woman escapes God's clasp, represses the truth and so is without excuse.

Nevertheless in v. 21 we read that the human being must in fact be regarded as one who knows: 'although they knew God they did not honour him as God'. In the great lawsuit between God and humankind, the latter cannot plead that they did not know God. They know God but they never come to real knowledge because they are always busy resisting this

knowledge in the subtlest of ways. They cling to their own egocentric pattern of life with desperate tenacity. As a result humanity has gone further and further astray. All his thinking has ended in futility and his misguided mind is plunged in darkness. In this connexion the apostle thinks of the pagan religions as he has seen them himself, with their statues, their superstitions and all their infatuation. He does not mean to say that these people have consciously and deliberately rejected the truth of God. It normally takes place unconsciously and unintentionally, but it happens nevertheless and humanity is guilty. The aerial of their hearts can no longer receive the wavelength of God's voice although his voice surrounds them on all sides. In his innermost being, every person has turned away from God and now God has vanished out of sight.

Substitution

The next verses show us the result of this attitude. It is remarkable that three times in this passage Paul uses the verb 'exchange'. In doing so he once again touches upon one of those very remarkable phenomena which take place in human souls. It has been discovered that the repressed impulses, of which we spoke earlier and which are left to operate in our unconscious, are not dead. They are still strong and try repeatedly in all kinds of ways to come into play. True, they have no part in conscious life, but they succeed occasionally in showing that they still exist, like the school-boy sent out of the class room who keeps on throwing stones against its windows to show that he is still there. Freud has particularly highlighted this phenomenon and inaugurated its study. He has shown that these impulses which pass their exile in the unconscious reveal themselves in errors we make, in slips of the tongue, but most especially in dreams. It is then that they get a chance to come to the surface. This does not mean that they appear openly in dreams; a sort of censorship remains which causes them to appear only, or at least preferably, in disguise. Here the process of exchange or substitution comes into the picture. Repressed impulses come to the surface but are now changed; they have another form, another shape. Other figures are substituted for them. Psychologists are inclined to think that what we see in our dreams is a translated, transformed expression of repressed elements in our subconscious.

It seems to me that the process of exchanging the truth of God of which Paul is speaking here is an illustration of that same idea of substitution which is found in modern psychology. Elements of the truth of God are exiled to the unconscious, to the crypts of human existence. They have not vanished altogether; they are still active and reveal themselves again and again. But they cannot become openly conscious; they appear in disguise. Something else is exchanged or substituted for them. As Calvin said, the human spirit is a factory of idols. Humans begin to create ideas, myths and stories about God of every kind; not by intentional deceit – it happens without their knowing it, as it were.

These images come from a person's inmost being and hold him in their spell. He cannot get rid of them. He has his religion, he is busy with 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. Some essential quality of God has been pushed into the background because it does not fit in with the human pattern of life. The image humanity has of God is no longer true. Divine revelation indeed lies at the root of it but because it is not accepted in human thought it is repressed. In the image a person has of God he can recognize the image of himself.

We have seen already that the result of all this, thrice-repeated, is: 'God gave them up.' God gave them up to the vileness of their own desires and the consequent degradation of their bodies (v. 24). He gave them up to shameful passions (v. 26). And he gave them up to their own depraved reason (v. 28). A man or woman can no longer resist the powers in him which carry him along. St Paul no doubt had in his own day seen abundant proof in the degenerate way of life of the Roman Empire of what human beings come to when God abandons them to their own desires. He had also seen that human religion has no defence against this degeneration. And from all this he has learned what may happen when humans exchange the true image of God for any kind of myth. The ethical force of religion is weakened, because we let our inclinations join consciously or unconsciously in forming an idol fashioned according to our own thoughts.

General Revelation

If we have understood Paul correctly so far, there are a few further points which we must consider. First, it is clear that the existence of a general revelation is undeniably taught here. Hendrik Kraemer has called the phrase 'general revelation' a misleading term. He claims that the 'whole concept is, in its ordinary use, tainted by all kinds of notions contrary to the way the Bible speaks about revelation'. There is certainly some truth in this claim. A concept of general revelation has been used too much in the philosophical sphere. It has been taken for granted that autonomous reason could lead human beings to a certain body of natural theology. But the revelation of which Paul speaks here is entirely different. The conclusions of philosophic reasoning are not under discussion at all. In this context the Bible accentuates God's everlasting concern for all men and women. 'He left not himself without witness.' Time and again humankind is confronted with the certainty that God exists and actually encounters him. But each time he resists these impressions and escapes them. Yet God still concerns himself fully and personally with human beings. It is not easy to explain how God does it, but it happens.

General revelation is a very important factor in world history. God meets humanity in many ways and humanity is aware of it too, although he continually tries to resist it. If we want to use the term 'general revelation', we must not use it as if one can conclude the existence of God from the revelation by logical reasoning. This may be possible but it only leads to a philosophic notion of God as first cause. Such is not the biblical conception of general revelation, for in the Bible this has a much more personal nature. It is divine concern for the totality of humankind and for each individual. His everlasting powers are plain to us; they overwhelm us; they strike us suddenly, in moments when we thought they were far away they creep up on us; they do not let go of us, even though we do our best to escape. Escaping, repressing is the human answer to God's revelation, an answer that becomes visible in the history of human religion.

We are here given an understanding of the phenomena of human religion. The heathen who believes in gods and spirits and bows down before his idol, shows that he is touched by God and that God has in some sense sought him. But at the

same time he reveals that he has himself been busy repressing what is absolutely necessary if one wants to come to God. His image of God is distorted. Something essential is eliminated. He may not have done this intentionally, but all the same he is without excuse. He has received an image of God from his parents, has grown up with the religion to which he adheres. But his religious life contains something very personal, something belonging only to him. While seeking God intimately, he at the same time tries to escape him. His religion is always ambiguous, full of hesitation and discrepancies. We can apply this in the case of the Buddha. He gained great new insight concerning the world and human life. God touched him and struggled with him. God existed in that moment. Buddha answered to it in his way. In this answer the hand of God is still visible, but so too is the result of human repression and substitution. The case is the same when we think of Mohammed. In the night in which Mohammed received his first revelation, the night on which the Koran says that the angels descended, God concerned himself with him and touched him. God struggled with him on that night. And God's hand is still visible in the answer of the prophet, but so is the result of human repression and human substitution.

Divine-Human Encounters

The history of religion contains a dramatic element. It includes divine approach and human rejection, rejection hidden by the appearance of human concern with God. But the god whom human beings seek is different from the true God because the uncanny process of repression and exchange has been at work. If this is true, various kinds of distinctions can be made. We are always ready to repress and to exchange, but are we always successful in these two things? God can at times stop, as it were, the noiseless engines of repression and substitution and overwhelm a person to such a degree that he is for the moment powerless. We must also take account of the work of the Holy Spirit within a person, even if he constantly resists it. The way in which Isaiah speaks of Cyrus, the anointed king, who was called by name and girded by God, indicates that the Bible certainly leaves us with the possibility that God may anoint with his Spirit and gird to a task to which he calls them those who do not really know

him. This is evidence that there are gradations in the history of human religion. I am not now speaking of religions as systems, but of individuals regarded as adherents of those religions. In my own missionary service I more than once met Muslims and Hindus who we felt were not very far from the kingdom of God. Their whole approach to the problem of religion was remarkably true, remarkably serious. In such cases, we may come to the conclusion that God has been very active, also outside the boundaries of his church.

The history of religion is a very remarkable thing; its main theme is that holy work of God in his general revelation to which humans are always reacting. Because the hand of God is still visible in some way, that gives us room to go into individual lives and to approach them with the important question how they personally have reacted to what God has been doing with them. When we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, we do not begin the discussion; our listeners already have history behind them, there has already been a certain discussion with God. As we preach the gospel, the drama between God and humankind starts a new period. Now it becomes more dangerous but also more hopeful; Christ now appears to a person in a new form. He was already present in human seeking and because he did not leave himself without a witness, Christ was already wrestling to gain the person although he did not know it. The profound words of St John describe this when he speaks of 'the true light that enlightens everyone'; 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it'. In the preaching of the gospel this same Christ once again appears to a person, but in much more concrete and visible form. He awakes him from his long disastrous dream. The repression and the exchange are done with at last, but only believing surrender.

It has always been my experience that the men and women with whom we come into contact in missionary work in the course of serious discussion begin to acknowledge that they have already had an experience of God, and begin to become aware of the fact that they have already acted upon revelation. I always felt that we could preach the gospel of Christ to them in the certainty that they themselves would come to acknowledge that they recognized what we were speaking of and began to feel it had a bearing on what they had done already, but that a new chapter of their life was now opened.