

3. Romans 1 – Everybody Knows X

Let us look carefully at what the New Testament means when the word “God” is used. The following passage from Paul’s lengthy letter to Rome will do. I will again use the “X” substitution method to bypass the ideas that our minds typically attach to the word “God.” Then, we will be able to solve this portion of Paul’s letter for the meaning of “God” as Paul used that word. (I am using J.B. Phillips translation of Romans 1:18-24 and for clarity I am adding a few parenthetical phrases.)

Now the holy anger (awesome fury) of X is disclosed from Heaven (the realm of Mystery) against the godlessness and evil of those persons who render truth dumb and inoperative by their wickedness. It is not that they do not know the truth about X; indeed X has made it quite plain to them. For since the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of X, e.g. X’s eternal power and divinity, have been plainly discernible through things which X has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving these persons without a rag of excuse. They knew all the time that there is X, yet they refused to acknowledge X as such, or to thank X for what X is and does. Thus they became fatuous in their argumentations, and plunged their silly minds still further into the dark. Behind a façade of “wisdom” they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory (awesomeness) of the immortal X for an imitation image of a mortal human, or of creatures that run or fly or crawl. They gave up X: and therefore X gave them up to be the playthings of their own foul desires

So, what content for X does Paul’s text assume? If we fill in what we noted in Chapter 2 as a meaning for X in Psalm 90, this Pauline text is also well illuminated. If we assume that God is an idea in a human head that makes sense of everything (or at least many things), we can see that such a substitution does not fit the text. Indeed, any idea of God that humans create illustrates what Paul is pointing to with his phrase “an imitation image of a mortal human.” Any image, model, or art piece that humans have created is not X. X is not created by humans. X is what posits in being humans and all their creations.

Why can Paul say that humans already know X? This is so because what Paul means by X is the boundless power that is “discernible” in all the things that are commonly seen and known. Paul also claims that something called the “divinity” of X is “discernible” in all the things that are commonly seen and known. By “divinity” he probably means some sort of glory, majesty, or awesomeness that goes with the enormous power already mentioned. X is “invisible” but the effects of X are not invisible. Everything that has the power of being is empowered by X. Humans cannot get their minds around X, but their “deep inner beings” discern the presence of X. Clearly, X is the Awesome Mysteriousness that is creating, supporting, and ending every visible thing. The failure of humanity is not a lack of experience of X, but the refusal to come to terms with X and to worship X as their life meaning. Such worship means nothing more nor less than being realistic, for X is Reality with a capital R. Such capitalization is symbolic of boundless and inescapable power not created by human hands. X is not “a reality” created by humans to fit their preferences. X is *the* Reality that undermines every reality created by humans. X is the Infinite Truth that judges all our finite efforts toward truthfulness as well as all our overt lies.

Paul uses the word “Heaven.” This is a key word in Paul’s metaphorical system of thinking about profound experience. In fact it is a key word for Jesus and all the other teachers and authors in the biblical collection. But “heaven” is not part of our metaphorical vocabulary today. “Heaven” has died as a useful metaphor. We now know that there is no transcendent space in a literal sense – no angels, no devils, no gods and goddesses, no Big Person up there to take care of us. We no longer live in a double-deck universe. Furthermore, we can no longer helpfully use the double-deck

metaphor as a metaphor for talking about Ultimate Reality. We need to use other metaphors, and millions of us already do so. We describe the deep experiences of our lives, and we often use non-two-story means to share our experience of that Enigmatic Awesome Overallness streaming through our experience of ordinary objects, events, and persons.

Most of us today have great difficulty understanding how those who lived in past eras could talk about their primal experiences using the double-deck mode of talking. Most people think that those ancestors took supernatural space literally, as contemporary fundamentalists attempt to do. But the ancients were not taken up with our modern categories of "literal" and "non-literal." They lived quite comfortably in their double-deck universe. There was ordinary space and there was "divine" space. They may or may not have noticed that this double-deck picture was merely a metaphor created by the human mind. In any case, the metaphor served them well as a way to talk about the profound matters of their existence. It may be hard for contemporary people to grasp that Luther, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine were not literalists, but "existentialists" who knew (in their own way) that the double-deck metaphor was a metaphor. Jesus was also this kind of existentialist. When Jesus prayed "Our Father who art in heaven" he was saying in his culture what it would mean for us to say in our culture, "Like a good parent to us are You, Oh Awesome Mysteriousness shining through every rock, hair, and leaf of nature." The great saints of the past were not dumber than us: they simply used a different metaphorical language.

When we clearly understand this shift in metaphorical language, we can translate Paul's text into twenty-first century talk without losing what Paul was pointing to in his own life and without requiring ourselves to pretend that we can use his metaphorical language. With our own language we can point in our own lives to the very same dynamics of existence that Paul was expressing.

Today as then, everybody knows X, the same X that Paul was talking about. But few of us acknowledge X and worship X as the core meaning of our lives. It is still true that the masses of our age have given up X and therefore X has given them up to be the playthings of their own foul desires. "Foul desires" covers more than our drug addictions and our sex addictions. Our core foulness has to do with our desire to be the creator of our own reality, rather than allowing our true lives be given to us by X.

And what is X? X is the Reality for which we are making a substitution when we create our own reality. Birds do not try to create their own reality. Squirrels do not try to create their own reality. They perceive and interpret their experience with mental products we might call multi-sensory reruns. They do not use the type of mental products we call symbols. For example, four is a symbol used by humans to see a common quality between four clouds, four days, and four dogs. Among living species only humans have such a capacity. Humans (using the symbols of mathematics, language, art, and religious forms) have the capacity to put together a mental picture that can be substituted for reality. Our ability to do this is a great and useful gift, but it also presents us with a temptation not faced by birds and squirrels. The temptation is to live in terms of the pictures we have created rather than the Reality we are attempting to picture. Our yielding to this temptation makes us the most dangerous species on the planet. Our yielding to this temptation means that we worship our own creations, a state of living that Paul interprets as rebellion against Reality, the Reality for which we have built a substitute. While it may seem almost inevitable that humans confuse their own pictures of reality with Reality, Paul is saying that there is no excuse for it. Furthermore, Reality "responds" to our unrealistic substitutions with the consequences that derive from our trusting in those substitutes. We don't get rid of Reality or the Power of Reality by building our substitutes. Since we have given up

Reality for substitutions, Reality gives us up to the consequences of our living with substitutes. Paul sees this substitution process as the primal root of the corruption of the human species. And he calls it “foolishness.” Let us hear Paul’s words again:

Behind a façade of “wisdom” they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory (Awesomeness) of the immortal X for an imitation image of a mortal human, or of creatures that run or fly or crawl. They gave up X: and therefore X gave them up to be the playthings of their own foul desires

So when we see humanity waging wars in defense of their religious creations, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires. When we see humanity abusing and belittling persons who do not fit into their cult-group of beliefs and morals, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires. When we see humanity destroying the planet in the name of free enterprise, economic growth, a still bigger population of humans, a style of wastefulness and consumer obsession, and other substitutes for sober realism, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires. When we see humanity killing the truth tellers of their times rather than listening to them and changing their ways, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires.

In other words, this is the core problem of humanity: having given up Reality for a substitute, and thus being stuck with the substitute that we have created. The consequence of this is that Reality has given us up to be the plaything of our substitute, our own unrealism. And, according to Paul, there is no excuse for this. Here are Paul’s words on excuses:

It is not that they do not know the truth about X; indeed X has made it quite plain to them. For since the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of X, e.g. X’s eternal power and divinity, have been plainly discernible through things which X has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving these persons without a rag of excuse.

Reality is mysterious to the finite human mind, yet our elemental conscious being can experience this Mysteriousness. Though this Absolutely Mysterious Reality is beyond our mental reach, this Mysteriousness is discernible. It is commonly seen and known. Mysterious Reality is not some far away idea that we have not yet thought up. Mysterious Reality is like a truck crashing into the side of our car. Mysterious Reality reaches us through some snake biting our toe, some cancer growing in our bowels. Mysterious Reality reaches us through a large host of pleasant things as well. Reality touches us in the “miracle” of having been born at all. Reality comes to us through the gift of our amazing body and its intricate functioning. Reality is the entire Mystery of empowered “actualities” that we cannot avoid. There is no excuse for making substitutes for Reality and then (1) forgetting that they are substitutes and thereby entering into the illusion that these substitutes are Reality or (2) using these substitutes as our ground for fighting against Reality.

By “fighting against Reality” we mean viewing Reality as our enemy because Reality does not operate by our values. Violent destruction is as much a part of Reality as surprising creation. A mega-star violently explodes. A volcano, flood, storm, or fire destroys a whole town or city. A cheetah runs down an antelope and eats it. A band of humans slaughter another band of humans. People often protest that any Reality that empowers or permits such violence cannot be “good” enough (by our standards) to deserve our worship. So we create some other “being” to be our “good,” our “God,” our “worship.” Perhaps we imagine that this self-created “being” is real enough and powerful enough to interfere with the course of nature on our behalf. Paul wants us to

know that these gods of our own creation do not even exist. There is no divine being coming to rescue us from Reality. And our fight with Reality is far worse than useless. Reality always wins. Fighting against Reality is a hopeless way to live. As Søren Kierkegaard so intricately describes, fighting Reality results in despair. There are many forms of despair: unconscious despair; painfully conscious secret despair; restless plunging into sensuality or noble work; suicide; defiantly creating and defending a fake self; defiantly becoming a living proof to our selves that Reality is no damned good. All of these states of despair are needless; and the alternative is close at hand – namely, humbling ourselves before Reality in trust that the Reality that is actually confronting us is providing for us the best case scenario for our lives. According to Paul this is the “faith” that saves us from the despair (hell) we have been cast into because we have worshiped our creations rather than that Final Creative Force from which we cannot escape.

So what is “God” in the texts of Paul? It is that Mysterious, Awesome, Unrelenting, Inescapable Reality that has posited us, sustains us, and will inevitably eliminate us from the course of history. This X, this God, is a daily confrontation that everyone knows who is willing to know what they know. Is this “knowing” a belief in some alien Big Other that takes away our freedom and responsibility? No, it is not a belief at all. It is a conscious noticing. We can simply notice that the Reality that is actually confronting us is positing us in being with our freedom and responsibility. Our primal act of freedom is choosing to be free rather than vegetating in all our excuses and withdrawals and compulsions. Our primal act of freedom is choosing whether or not we will serve and obey the Reality that is limiting us as well as providing us with our freedom and our options (possibilities) toward the future.

The inexcusable “sin” of which Paul is accusing us is our rebellion against the actual limits and possibilities of our lives in favor of some substitute, some unreality that we have created to match our preference for a life that is different from the one that we cannot escape. This self-created attitude results in bondage, not freedom. When we are in our freedom, we are free to rebel against Reality, but this rebellion creates bondage. When we use our freedom to rebel against Reality and our freedom, our freedom is spent: we are thus delivered up to unfreedom, to bondage, to be the plaything of our own foul desires. As strange as this may sound, a devotion to the Final Determining Power liberates us to be our full freedom. Being so “determined” does not mean that we are a tale already told, just waiting to unfold. No, our freedom will create part of the tale. The Determining Power is determining us to be freedom. When we rebel against this Power we create for ourselves some sort of box in which we live, separated from Reality and from the reality of our Freedom. And this box is an alive state of living, a compulsive, defensive, destructive slavery from which we will have to be rescued or we will end up in the hell of despair.

Some will complain that this “God” of Paul’s is not personal. This is not true. It is very personal for Paul. It is his devotion, his papa/mama, his cause, his drive, his life, his personal worship even in death. The vision of a big Person in some parallel universe that assists us to rebel against Paul’s X is then and now sheer illusion. No such Big Person exists. In that sense Paul is an atheist. He does not trust in the gods that humans create. He only trusts the UNCREATED CREATOR of his and our lives.

If we define “existing” as emerging or “showing up” out of nothingness, then Paul’s God does not exist. Paul’s God is the Source of all existing things, processes, events, happenings, possibilities, pasts, futures, as well as our freedom to share in the unfoldment of these existing things. Paul’s God is that Void, that No-Thing-Ness, out of which all existing “things” “show up,” have their day, and then pass away. And it is not just Christians who have worshiped this God, this ONE Finality that “jealously” opposes our worship of anything less.

By the seventh century of the Common Era, Christians, Jews and other religious adherents had created a wide variety of humanly created objects of worship. In this confusing situation Mohammed lived and spoke. Mohammed looked around, saw all these "gods" being worshiped, and came to the conclusion that all of them were without "reality." So in his primary teaching he said in effect, "There are no gods, ----- save One, the Reality that makes clear that there are no gods." The monotheism of Mohammed was not an invention of one more "god" to join the pantheon of things people worship, but a sort of atheism that swept clean the corrupt worshipping (superstitions) of his culture. Mohammed in his originating impulse was restoring to his culture a vision of the monotheism that had lived in original Judaism and Christianity. That many of Mohammed's followers made of Allah one more religious idol to add to the mix of religious inventions, should not cloud our minds to the originating impulse of this seventh century recovery of radical monotheism.

Writing in the twentieth century about radical monotheism, the Christian theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, spoke of the twilight of the many gods (meaning-givers that we rely upon to give meaning to our lives) – family, nation, work, status, virtue, sex, and so on. Not only do these finite meaning-givers fight with one another, but since they are all finite realities, they fail us in the end. When all these lesser gods have died in their failure to provide our lives with enduring meaning, we are left in a Great Space, a Great Emptiness, a Great Void. Radical Monotheism means making this Void our Theos, our ONE Theos, our sole meaning-giver, devotion, life trust, life calling. We are thereby making the Truly Ultimate our ultimate concern and thereby establishing our lives in an unassailable Trust. This Ultimate does not die. Our whole life long, this Ultimate is trustworthy to be its special mode of trustworthiness. Having died to all our false expectations of a god to save us from Reality, we now live realistically before Reality with a capital "R." The capitalization of the word "Reality" points to a Reality beyond words, a Reality beyond mental imagery, a Reality that cannot be described, yet a Reality that empowers everything that we can describe, and continually challenges our descriptions and inspires us to enrich our descriptions with greater realism. We "know" this Final Reality not with the knowing of our minds, but with the knowing of our core awareness of being aware. Our minds come into play in a secondary fashion. We understand with our minds after, not before, we trust with our "souls" in the Reality that is positing us in our self-aware existence. This Reality is the solution to the X in Paul's text.