

Resolving paradoxes with the Logic of "Not" in Javanese Puppetry: A re-reading of Wrekodoro and Dewaruci's mythology

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Abstract

There are a large number of text collections in Indonesia, related to wayang theme, cf Zoetmulder (1971). And the text collections do not consist only of wayang purwa, but also variations of theme such as wayang wahyu etc. In the mean time, a Japanese scholar Shoshichi Nagatomo proposed the concept of "*Asian Logic*," which differs from Western logic. In Western thought, things are often seen as black or white, good or bad. However, Asian logic embraces certain degree of ambiguity. Here, "good" characters can exhibit flaws, and "bad" characters can possess redeeming qualities. This concept resonates with the Javanese philosophy of "*ngono yo ngono neng ojo ngono*" (note: the phrase can be translated: "it is what it is, but it's also not"). This philosophy embodies the logic of "not," acknowledging the multifaceted nature of reality.

Introduction

Puppetry, or Wayang in Javanese, transcends mere entertainment. These intricate figures serve as a guiding light for the Javanese community, depicting the path to a noble life. There are a large number of text collections in Indonesia, related to wayang theme, cf Zoetmulder (1971). And the text collections do not consist only of wayang purwa, but also variations of theme such as wayang wahyu etc.

In recent times, Wayang has even become a popular metaphor for social and political figures in Indonesia. This article delves deeper, exploring how Wayang stories, particularly those featuring conflicts between protagonists and antagonists in the Mahabharata epic, can be interpreted as a manifestation of Javanese logic, or the logic of "not."

If the story of "Dewaruci" is known during the Late Majapahit period, the things described by Dewaruci to Wrekodoro (Bhima) are likely to be related with the religion that developed at that time, namely the Śaiwasiddhanta religion, whose teachings can be known from the Tuter books. Speak the oldest is Bhuwanakosa comes from during the reign of King Siṅḍok in the 10th century. In the book of Speech, knowledge is taught Śiwa religion which is centered on sacred

knowledge and proper knowledge of emptiness (*sūnya*) which is called by various names, including Paramaśiwa, Parameśwara, Mahadeva Shiva.



Figure 1. Wayang puppet depicting Wrekudoro and Dewaruci

Nagatomo's Notion of Asian Logic

Japanese scholar Shoshichi Nagatomo proposed the concept of "Asian Logic," which differs from Western logic. In Western thought, things are often seen as black or white, good or bad. However, Asian logic embraces ambiguity. Here, "good" characters can exhibit flaws, and "bad" characters can possess redeeming qualities. This concept resonates with the Javanese philosophy of "ngono yo ngono neng ojo ngono" (it is what it is, but it's also not). This philosophy embodies the logic of "not," acknowledging the multifaceted nature of reality.

Considering the above wayang tradition in Southeast Asia, this logic of "not" is not an absence of logic, but rather a different form of reasoning. It emphasizes the importance of intuition, symbolism, and a deeper understanding of the universe. Through the fantastical elements in Wayang, Javanese audiences glean valuable life lessons and explore the complexities of human nature.

The Myth of Wrekodoro and Dewaruci: A Realm Beyond the Scientific

The story of Wrekodoro encountering the giant Dewaruci exemplifies this logic. Wrekodoro, a Pandava protagonist known for his immense strength, shrinks himself and enters Dewaruci's ear after deep philosophy conversations. Scientifically, this feat seems impossible. However, within the framework of Wayang, the logic resides in the realm of the spiritual or the "not." Here,

the story transcends the physical world and delves into the symbolic, where Bima's journey represents overcoming inner challenges.

Moreover, that encounter with the Divine – if we interpret the myth not only just as myth of the past, but to represent how ancient Javanese people have longing of eternity in their hearts, cf. D. Richardson (2010) – can be re-read as how spiritual people in ancient Java considered union with God the Almighty as one of the highest virtue in their life, symbolized with tirta prawitasari (the sought-after *living water* in that story). In other words, we can also interpret with the more recent book of Sir D. Hawkins, *Power vs Force*, that by encountering with God Almighty, Bima who was known as a really brave knight, has been turned upside down in his worldview, and then become transformed into higher level of conscious awareness. Or if we follow the levels of consciousness as depicted in Hawkins' diagram, perhaps he was able to move up from around 200 scale (associated with brave) to become 500 in scale or may be higher.

We all know that one of the mystery of consciousness study if we read *Power vs Force* book, is how to move up to higher scale of consciousness. And even with hidden message in that wayang mythology which was characteristics of Javanese cosmogony, we can learn that to be in another state of conscious awareness, we need the help and encounter with God the Almighty, and rarely such an improved state of awareness can be done by that person alone. Interestingly, studies also seem to support that spiritually-growing person are more likely to be a much better either in the scale of EQ (*emotional quotient*) or AQ (*adversity quotient*). That would be another topic to be discussed in other occasion.

The Art of Softened Criticism: Humor in Javanese Puppetry

Let us analyse in a bit the context of "ngono yo ngono neng ojo ngono" (which seems to imply that even if someone tries to dispute something, it should be done in a more polite way). In the Javanese puppet tradition, there are known figures which do not belong to the Satria (knights) or Raksesa (giants), but are called Punakawan, who play the role of comedians. They can offer criticism to social conditions that happen in the village or town where the puppet drama is displayed, but it is done in a satiric and humorous way by the Dhalang (puppeteer).

This concept of softened criticism through humor is a fascinating aspect of Javanese culture. It highlights the importance of maintaining social harmony even when addressing sensitive issues. Here's a closer look at how this works:

- **The Power of Punakawan:** The Punakawan characters, with their witty remarks and slapstick humor, act as a social commentary device. They can poke fun at human behavior, societal norms, or even political situations.
- **Satire with a Smile:** The humor employed by the Dalang is often satirical. By using jokes and puns, the Dalang can convey critical messages in a way that is more palatable for the audience. People are more receptive to criticism when it's delivered in a lighthearted manner.

- Indirect Commentary: The beauty of this approach lies in its indirectness. The audience is left to interpret the underlying message within the humor. This allows for a deeper impact as people can come to their own conclusions.

This approach to criticism is not unique to Javanese puppetry. We see similar methods employed by comedians and satirists around the world. By using humor to soften the message, these figures can make important points without causing offense or social disruption.

Put in another way, the Javanese concept of "*ngono yo ngono neng ojo ngono*" and the role of Punakawan characters in puppetry offer valuable lessons in delivering criticism. By using humor and satire, we can create a space for constructive dialogue and positive change, all while maintaining social harmony.

At this point, it appears quite interesting to compare the role and methods played by Punakawan in folk puppet show with, for instance, paradoxism both as avant garde art and also social movement in Romania, especially during 1980s, We discuss this topic in the next section.

Discussion:

Paradoxism as social movement against totalitarianism, and all that

The definition of paradoxism (pă'r'â`döks`iz'm) is as given below:

- n 1 An avant-garde movement in literature, art, and philosophy, based on excessive used of . . antitheses, antinomies, contradictions, oxymorons, and paradoxes.¹

A more complete definition is described as follows: "PARADOXISM is an avant-garde movement in literature, art, philosophy, science, based on excessive used of antitheses, antinomies, contradictions, parables, paraphrases, odds, anti-clichés, deviations of senses, parodies of proverbs and aphorisms, against-the-grain speech, upside-down interpretations, nonsense, paradoxes, semi-paradoxes in creations. Paradoxism tries to find common parts to apparently uncommon things in any human field. It was set up by one of us (FS) around 1980s."²

Its origin came from suppression and totalitarianism during socialist regime in Romania back then, and it has been discussed in [12]. What's interesting here, is that we can hypothesize that paradoxism was a mixture of brave grassroot movement along with neutrality and thinking, then the movement can be considered belong to Hawkins's scale of consciousness ranging from 200 (brave). 250 (neutrality) up to 400 something (scale for thinking).

¹ Source: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/paradoxism>

² Source <https://fs.unm.edu/a/paradoxism-en.htm>

Provided such an interpretation is closer to the true to the past background of the movement, then it can be considered a step higher to scale of consciousness compared to average scale of consciousness according to D. Hawkins, somewhere around 190. But it seems unlikely that even with such an avant-garde art and literary books they can bring the majority of people to higher than that, with seems clear to the quite stagnant period over the years especially in Romania (of course, this is by no means to be a disregard to what has happened to Romania people in common at the time).

Similarly, in Javanese cosmogony, union between Divinity and humans becomes essence of aspiration, of which Prof Zoetmulder called the seven steps to become Perfect Man as *martabat* (cf. Zoetmulder, 1971). And the pinnacle of the seven steps is called "*manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*" or perhaps better termed as *unio mystica*. In our reading, while it can be argued otherwise, we can consider that such a *unio mystica* phase of spirituality can be compared to Hawkins' scale of around 600 or higher in his map of consciousness.

What is not so obvious, both in Hawkins and also Javanese nondual unity with the Divine inside humans (God-indwelling in human), is how to achieve such a highest scale of consciousness. That seems to be a great problem with all kinds of gnosis teachings, i.e. the role of Teacher of Righteousness even if one encounter with such a great teacher may be not so helpful (cf. if we compare it with term from Qumran scrolls, term such as Teacher of Righteousness). Prayer and meditations are of course quite helpful, but not yet sufficient to improve our phase of spirituality, except we encounter with the Divine, with God Almighty Himself.

That is what Christianity may offer a hint, that to achieve higher in the scale of consciousness, just another perfect knowledge or gnosis is not sufficient, even if for instance we learn properly *The Gospel of Thomas* (Leloup, 2005). That is because spiritual-inertia that we know as sins are unavoidable (as St Paul admitted it at his Letter to Romans chapter 7).

Therefore, enlightenment is more than just accepting the hidden knowledge or sudden inspiration to the "correct" hermeneutics of the texts or Nature, but to encounter and embrace the grace of God Himself, given through Jesus the Son of God, and then permit the Holy Spirit to guide him/her in daily and gradual process to higher consciousness scale.

Because at the end of day, the awareness of humanity cannot be separated from *ruach* and *nephesh* of God Almighty, which God has given to all humans since their birth (cf. Hildebrandt, 1995; Keener, 2022). That seems to us to be deficiencies of map of consciousness as spiritual ladder as described by D. Hawkins (note: it appears he is more inclined in Hinduism or Buddhism's meaning of enlightenment and Nirvana.)

We do hope that this small comparison section among different approaches to hidden knowledges, from Javanese puppet show (*wayang*) to teachings such as D. Hawkins will not put more obstacles to any reader in his/her pursuit of the True Love, that is God Almighty the Creator of Heavens and Earth.

Concluding remark

Javanese puppetry offers a unique perspective on logic, one that embraces the concept of "not." By delving into stories like Wrekodoro and Dewaruci, we gain a deeper appreciation for Javanese philosophy and its approach to understanding the world. This exploration not only enriches our understanding of Javanese culture but also broadens our perception of logic itself.

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Part of Ch 1 of Eternity in Their Hearts by Don Richardson

Peoples of the Vague God

THE ATHENIANS

Sometime during the sixth century before Christ, in a council chamber on Mars Hill, Athens ...

“Tell us, Nicias, what advice has the Pythian oracle sent with you? Why has this plague come upon us? And why did our numerous sacrifices avail nothing?”

Cool-eyed Nicias faced the council president squarely. “The priestess declares that our city lies under a terrible curse. A certain god has placed this curse upon us because of King Megacles’s grievous crime of treachery against the followers of Cylon.”

“Yes, yes! I recall now,” said another council member grimly. “Megacles obtained the surrender of Cylon’s followers with a promise of amnesty. Then he promptly violated his own word and slew them! But god still holds this crime against us? We have atoning sacrifices to all the gods!”

“Not so,” replied Nicias. “The priestess says her god still remains unappeased.”

“Who could he be?” the elders asked, eyeing Nicias incredulously.

“That I cannot tell you,” Nicias said. “The oracle herself seems not to know his name. She said only that ...”

Nicias paused, surveying the anxious faces of his colleagues. Meanwhile, the tumult of a thousand dirges echoed from the stricken city around them.

Nicias continued: “We must send a ship at once to Knossos, on the island of Crete, and fetch a man named Epimenides here to Athens. The priestess assures me that he will know how to appease that offended god, thus delivering our city.”

“Is there no man of sufficient wisdom here in Athens?” blurted an indignant elder. “Must we appeal for help to a ... a foreigner?”

“If you know a man of sufficient wisdom in Athens, summon him,” said Nicias. “If not, let us simply do as the oracle commands.”

Cold wind— cold as if chilled by the terror in Athens— swept through the white marble council chamber on Mars Hill. One elder after another pulled his magisterial robe around his shoulders and weighed Nicias's words.

"Go on our behalf, my friend," said the president of the council. "Fetch this Epimenides, if he will hear your plea. And if he delivers our city we will reward him."

Other members of the council concurred. The calm-voiced Nicias arose, bowed before the assembly, and left the chamber. Descending Mars Hill, he headed for the harbor at Piraeus, two leagues distant by the Bay of Phaleron. A ship stood at anchor.

Epimenides stepped briskly ashore at Piraeus, followed by Nicias. The two men set out at once for Athens, gradually recovering their "land legs" after the long sea journey from Crete. As they entered the already world-famous "city of philosophers," signs of the plague were everywhere. But Epimenides noticed something else—

"Never have I seen so many gods!" the Cretan exclaimed to his guide, blinking in amazement. Phalanxes of idols lined both sides of the road from Piraeus. Still other gods in the hundreds festooned a rocky escarpment called the acropolis. A later generation of Athenians would build the Parthenon there.

"How many gods does Athens have?" Epimenides added.

"Several hundred at least!" Nicias replied.

"Several hundred!" Epimenides exclaimed. "Gods must be easier to find here than men!"¹

"Well said!" Councilman Nicias chuckled. "Who knows how many proverbs men have coined about 'Athens, the city glutted with gods.' As well haul rock to a quarry as bring another god to our city!"

Nicias stopped in his tracks, pondering his own words. "And yet," he began thoughtfully, "the Pythian oracle declares that we Athenians have yet another god to reconcile. And you, Epimenides, are to provide the necessary liaison. Apparently, in spite of what I have said, we Athenians still do need another god!"

Suddenly Nicias threw back his head and laughed. "For the life of me, Epimenides, I cannot guess who this other god could be. We Athenians are the world's foremost collectors of gods! We have already ransacked the theologies of many peoples around us, gathering every deity we can possibly transport to our city by cart or by ship!"

"Perhaps that is your problem," said Epimenides mysteriously.

Nicias blinked at Epimenides without comprehension. How he itched for clarification of that final remark. But something in Epimenides's demeanor hushed him. Moments later they came to an ancient marble-floored stoa near the council chamber on Mars Hill. Word of their arrival had already reached the elders of Athens. The council sat waiting.

"Epimenides, we are grateful for your—" began the president of the assembly.

"Learned elders of Athens, there is no need to thank me." Epimenides interrupted. "Tomorrow at sunrise bring a flock of sheep, a band of stonemasons, and a large supply of stones and mortar to the grassy slope at the foot of this sacred rock. The sheep must all be healthy, and of different colors— some white, some black. And you must prevent them from grazing after their night's rest. They must be hungry sheep! I will now rest from my journey. Call me at dawn."

Members of the council exchanged curious glances as Epimenides strode across the stoa to a quiet alcove, pulled his cloak around him for a blanket, and sat down to meditate.

The president turned to a junior member of the council. "See that all is done as he commands," he ordered.

"The sheep are here," said the junior member meekly. Epimenides, tousled and drowsy with sleep, emerged from his resting place and followed the messenger to a grassy slope at the base of Mars Hill. Two flocks— one of black and white sheep and one of councilmen, shepherds and stonemasons— stood waiting beneath a rising sun. Hundreds of citizens, haggard from another night of nursing the plague-stricken and mourning the dead, climbed surrounding hillocks and watched in suspense.

"Learned elders," Epimenides began, "you have already expended great effort in offering sacrifice to your numerous gods, yet all has proved futile. I am now about to offer sacrifices based upon three assumptions rather different from yours. My first assumption ..."

Every eye fixed upon the tall Cretan; every ear tuned itself to catch his next word.

"... is that there is still another god concerned in the matter of this plague— a god whose name is unknown to us, and who is therefore not represented by any idol in your city. Secondly, I am going to assume also that this god is great enough— and good enough— to do something about the plague, if only we invoke his help."

"Invoke a god whose name is unknown?" blurted an elder. "Is that possible?"

"The third assumption is my answer to your question," Epimenides countered. "That assumption is a very simple one. Any god great enough and good enough to do something about the plague is probably also great enough and good enough to smile upon us in our ignorance— if we acknowledge our ignorance and call upon him!"

Murmurs of approval mingled with the bleating of hungry sheep. Never had the elders of Athens heard this line of reasoning before. But why, they wondered, must the sheep be of different colors?

“Now!” called Epimenides, “prepare to release the sheep upon this sacred slope! Once you have released them, permit each animal to graze where it will. But let a man follow each animal and watch it closely.” Then, looking up to heaven, Epimenides prayed in a very rich and supremely confident voice: “O thou unknown god! Behold the plague afflicting this city! And if indeed you feel compassion to forgive and help us, behold this flock of sheep! Reveal your willingness to respond, I plead, by causing any sheep that pleases you to lie down upon the grass instead of grazing. Choose white if white pleases; black if black delights. And those you choose we sacrifice to you— acknowledging our pitiful ignorance of your name!”

Epimenides sat down upon the grass, bowed his head and waved a signal to shepherds guarding the flock. Slowly the shepherds stepped aside. Quickly, eagerly, the sheep spread out across the hillside and began to graze. Epimenides, meanwhile, sat still as a statue, eyes to the ground.

“It’s hopeless,” a frowning councilman muttered under his breath. “It’s early morning, and I’ve seldom seen a flock so eager to graze. Not a one will choose to rest until its belly’s full, and who will then believe ’twas a god that caused it to recline?”

“Epimenides must have chosen this time of day on purpose, then!” responded Nicias. “Only thus may we know that a sheep which lies down does so by the will of this unknown god and not by its own inclination!”

Nicias had hardly finished speaking when a shepherd shouted, “Look!” Every eye turned to see a choice ram buckle its knees and settle onto the grass.

“And here’s another!” roared a startled councilman, beside himself with wonder. Within minutes a number of choice sheep lay resting on grass too succulent for any hungry herbivore to resist— under normal circumstances!

“If only one rested, we’d have said it must be sick!” the council president exclaimed. “But this! This can only be an answer!”

Turning with awe-filled eyes, he said to Epimenides, “What shall we do now?”

“Separate the sheep that are resting,” the Cretan replied, raising his head for the first time since he had called upon his unknown god, “and mark the place where each one lay. Then let your stonemasons build altars— one altar on each animal’s resting place!”

Enthusiastic masons set to work mortaring stones. By late afternoon the mortar was sufficiently hardened. Every altar stood ready for use.

“Which god’s name shall we engrave upon these altars?” asked an over-eager junior councilman. All heads turned to hear the Cretan’s reply.

“Name?” replied Epimenides thoughtfully. “The Deity whose help we seek has been pleased to respond to our admission of ignorance. If now we pretend to be knowledgeable by engraving a name when we have not the slightest idea what His name may be, I fear we shall only offend Him!”

“We must not take that chance,” the president or the council agreed. “But surely there must be some appropriate way to— to dedicate each altar before it is used.”

“You are right, learned elder,” Epimenides said with a rare smile. “There is a way. Simply inscribe the words *agnosto theo*— to an unknown god— upon the side of each altar. Nothing more is necessary.”

The Athenians engraved the words as their Cretan counselor advised. Then they sacrificed each “dedicated” sheep upon the altar marking the spot where that sheep rested. Night fell. By dawn the next day the plague’s deadly grip upon the city had already loosened. Within a week, the stricken recovered. Athens overflowed with praise to Epimenides’s “unknown God” and to Epimenides himself, for bringing such amazing help in such an inventive manner. Thankful citizens placed garlands of flowers around that huddle of unpretentious altars on the side of Mars Hill. Later they carved a statue of Epimenides in a sitting position and placed it before one of their temples.²

With the passage of time, however, the people of Athens began to forget the mercy which Epimenides’s “unknown God” had bestowed upon them. At length they neglected His altars on the slope below Mars Hill. They returned to the worship of the several hundred gods who had proved helpless to remove the curse from their city. Vandals demolished some of the altars and pried stones loose from others. Grass and moss encroached upon the ruins until ...

One day two elders who remembered the significance of the altars paused among them on the way home from council. Leaning upon their staffs, they gazed wistfully upon the creeper-covered relics. One elder removed a patch of moss and read the ancient inscription hidden beneath: “ ‘*Agnosto theo.*’ Demas— remember?”

“How could I forget?” Demas replied. “I was the junior member of council who stayed up all night to make sure the flock, the stones, the mortar and the masons would all be ready by sunrise!”

“And I,” responded the other elder, “was that over-eager junior member who suggested that each altar should have the name of some god engraved upon it! How foolish of me!”

The speaker paused, deep in thought. Then he added, "Demas, you will think me sacrilegious, but I cannot suppress my feeling that if only Epimenides's 'unknown God' would reveal Himself openly to us we might soon dispense with all these others!" The bearded elder waved his staff with mild contempt toward rank beyond rank of deaf-mute idols— more now than ever— lining the crest of acropolis.

"If ever He should reveal Himself," said Demas thoughtfully, "how will our people know that He is no stranger but a God who has already participated in the affairs of our city?"

"I think there is only one way," the first elder replied. "We must seek to preserve at least one of these altars as evidence for posterity. And the story of Epimenides must somehow be kept alive among our traditions."

"A great idea!" Demas glowed. "Look! This one is still in fair condition. We'll hire masons to polish it up. And tomorrow we'll remind the entire council of that long-ago victory over the plague. We'll get a motion passed to include the maintenance of at least this altar among the perennial expenditures of our city!"

The two elders shook hands in agreement. Then, locked arm in arm, they hobbled off down the path, jubilantly clicking their staffs against the stones of Mars Hill.

The foregoing is based mainly upon a tradition recorded as history by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek author of the third century A.D., in a classical work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.³ The basic elements in Diogenes's account are: Epimenides, a Cretan hero, responded to a request borne to him from Athens by a man called Nicias, asking him to advise the city of Athens in the matter of a plague. Arriving in Athens, Epimenides obtained a flock of black and white sheep and released them on Mars Hill, instructing men to follow the sheep and mark the places where any of them lay down.

Epimenides's apparent purpose was to give any god concerned in the matter of the plague an opportunity to reveal his willingness to help by causing sheep that pleased him to lie down to rest as a sign that he would accept those sheep if they were offered in sacrifice. Since there would have been nothing unusual about sheep lying down apart from one of their usual grazing periods, presumably Epimenides conducted his experiment early in the morning, when sheep would be at their hungriest.

A number of sheep rested, and the Athenians offered them in sacrifice upon unnamed altars built especially for the purpose. Thus the plague lifted from the city.

Readers of the Old Testament will recall that a hero named Gideon, seeking knowledge of God's will, "put out the fleece." Epimenides did Gideon one better— he put out the whole flock!

According to a passage in Plato's *Laws*, Epimenides at the same time also prophesied that 10 years in the future a Persian army would come against Athens. He assured the Athenians, however, that their Persian foes "will return back again with all their hopes frustrated, and after suffering more woes than

they inflict.” This prophecy was fulfilled. The council, for its part, offered Epimenides a talent of coins for his services, but he refused to accept payment. “The only reward I desire,” he said, “is that we here and now establish a treaty of friendship between Athens and Knossos.” The Athenians agreed. Ratifying a treaty with Knossos, they then gave Epimenides safe transport back to his island home.

(Plato, in that same passage, pays tribute to Epimenides as “that inspired man,” and credits him as one of the great men who helped mankind rediscover inventions lost during “The Great Flood.”)

Other details in this account concerning the cause of the curse are from an editor’s footnote on Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric*, book 3, 17: 10, found in the Loeb Classical Library, translated by J. H. Freese and published in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The explanation that none other than the Pythian oracle instructed the Athenians to summon Epimenides is found in the previously mentioned reference from Plato’s *Laws*.

Diogenes Laertius himself does not mention that the words *agnosto theo* were inscribed upon Epimenides’s altars. He states only that “altars may be found in different parts of Attica with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement.”

Two other ancient writers, however— Pausanias in his *Description of Greece* and Philostratus in his *Appolonius of Tyana*— refer to “altars to an unknown god” implying that an inscription to that effect was engraved upon them.

That such an inscription was engraved upon at least one altar in Athens is verified by a first-century historian named Luke. Describing the adventures of Paul, the famous Christian apostle, Luke mentions an encounter awesomely illuminated by the foregoing story of Epimenides: “While Paul was waiting ... in Athens,” Luke began, “he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17: 16).

If Athens boasted several hundred gods in Epimenides’s time, by Paul’s day there may have been hundreds more. Idolatry, by its very nature, has a built-in “inflation factor.” Once men reject the one omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God in favor of lesser deities, they eventually discover— to their frustration— that it takes an infinite number of lesser deities to fill the true God’s shoes!

When Paul saw Athens prostituting man’s sacred privilege of worship upon mere wood and stone, horror gripped him! He took immediate action. First: “He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks” (Acts 17: 17).

Not that Jews and God-fearing Greeks were the ones practicing idolatry! Not at all. They were, however, the people most responsible to oppose the idolatry rampant in their city.

Perhaps Paul found them so accustomed to scenes of idolatry that they could no longer mount a persuasive offensive against it. In any case, Paul launched his own offensive. He reasoned also, Luke says, “in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17: 17).

Who did happen to be there? And how did they react? Luke explains: “A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbling trying to say?’”

Even an apostle can experience difficulties in cross-cultural communication!

“Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods’ ” (Acts 17: 18).

Why this latter comment? Doubtless the philosophers heard Paul speak of Theos— God. Theos was a familiar term to them. They, however, commonly used it not as a personal name, but as a general term for any deity— just as “man” in English means any man and is not considered suitable as a personal name for any one man.

The philosophers must have known, however, that Xenophanes, Plato and Aristotle— three great philosophers— used Theos as a personal name for one Supreme God in their writings.⁴

Two centuries after Plato’s and Aristotle’s time, translators of the Septuagint— the first Greek version of the Old Testament— grappled with a major problem: Could a suitable equivalent for the Hebrew name for God, Elohim, be found in the Greek language? They rejected the name Zeus. Even though Zeus was called “king of the gods,” pagan theologians had chosen to make Zeus the offspring of two other gods, Cronus and Rhea. An offspring of other beings cannot equal Elohim, who is uncreated. Finally the translators recognized the above three philosophers’ fortuitous use of Theos as a personal Greek name for the Almighty. Theos, in this special usage, was a name still unencrusted with barnacles of error! They adopted it. So also Paul adopted Theos for his New Testament preaching and writing!

It may therefore have been not Theos, but the unfamiliar name Jesus which caused the philosophers to think that Paul was “advocating for eign gods.” Perhaps also they were astonished that anyone would want to bring still another god to Athens, god capital of the world! Athenians, after all, must have needed something equivalent to the Yellow Pages just to keep tabs on the many deities already represented in their city!

How did Paul respond to the suggestion that he was advocating superfluous foreign gods in a city already glutted with gods?

Jesus Christ had already given Paul a masterful formula for coping with cross-cultural communication problems like this one at Athens. Speaking through a vision so persuasive that it filled Paul with new insights and so bright it left him temporarily blind, Jesus had said: “I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light” (Acts 26: 17-18).

Jesus’ logic was faultless. If people are to turn from darkness to light, their eyes must first be opened to see the difference between darkness and light. And what does it take to open someone’s eyes?

An eye-opener!

But where could Paul— born a Jew, reborn a Christian— find an eyeopener for the truth about the supreme God in idol-infested Athens? He could hardly expect a religious system totally committed to polytheism to contain an acknowledgment that monotheism is better.

Ah, but as Paul “walked around and observed” (Acts 17: 23) he found something in the midst of “the system” that was not “of the system”— an altar not associated with any idol! An altar bearing the curious inscription “to an unknown god.” Paul discerned a difference between that altar and the idols. It was his ally— a communication key which would probably fit the locks on the minds and hearts of those Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. When they invited him to present his views formally in a setting more conducive to reasoned discussion than the marketplace, Paul was ready.

Paul’s venue was a meeting of “The Areopagus,” i.e., The Mars Hill Society— a group of prominent Athenians who met on Mars Hill to discuss matters of history, philosophy or religion. It was on that same hill, nearly six centuries earlier, that Epimenides once grappled with the problem of pestilence in Athens.

Paul could have launched his Mars Hill address simply by calling a spade a spade. He could have said, “Men of Athens, with all your fine philosophies you still condone idolatry if not actually practice it! Repent or perish!” And every word might well have been true!

Further, he would have been trying to “turn them from darkness to light,” as Jesus commanded. But it would have been like a batter hitting the ball and running straight to second base. One must touch first base first! That is why Jesus included the command “open their eyes” as a prerequisite for turning people from “darkness to light.”

Paul “ran for first” with the following words: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious [remarkable restraint, considering how much Paul loathed idolatry]. For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship [some with Paul’s background might have preferred to call them ‘filthy idols’], I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”

Then Paul voiced a pronouncement that had waited six centuries for utterance: “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17: 22-23). Was the God whom Paul proclaimed really a foreign god as the philosophers surmised? Not at all! By Paul’s reasoning, Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian God, was anticipated by Epimenides’s altar. He was therefore a God who had already intervened in the history of Athens. Surely He had a right to have His name proclaimed there!

But did Paul really understand the historical background of that altar and the concept of an unknown god? There is evidence that he did! For Epimenides, in addition to his ability to shed light upon murky problems of man/ god relationships, was also a poet!

And Paul quoted Epimenides's poetry! Leaving a missionary named Titus to strengthen churches on the island of Crete, Paul later wrote instructions to guide Titus in his dealings with Cretans: "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1: 12-13).

The words Paul quoted are from a poem ascribed to Epimenides. Notice also that Paul called Epimenides "a prophet." The Greek word is *prophetees*, the same word Paul commonly used to refer to both Old and New Testament prophets. Surely Paul would not have honored Epimenides with the title of prophet apart from knowledge of Epimenides's character and deeds! A man whom Paul could quote as rebuking others for certain evil traits was, by implication, judged by Paul as not noticeably guilty of those traits himself!

Further, in his Mars Hill address Paul states that God has "made every nation of men ... so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17: 26-27). These words may constitute an oblique reference to Epimenides as an example of a pagan man who "reached out and found" a God who, though unknown by name, was in reality not far away!

Presumably members of the Mars Hill Society were also familiar with the story of Epimenides from the writings of Plato, Aristotle and others. They must have listened with admiration as Paul began his address on that perceptive cross-cultural footing. But could this Christian apostle, trained under Gamaliel the Jewish scholar, hold the attention of men weaned on the logic of Plato and Aristotle long enough to get the gospel across to them?

Following his stunning opening remarks, Paul's success in the main part of his address would depend upon one thing. Call it "gapless logic." As long as each successive statement which Paul made followed logically from statements preceding, the philosophers would listen. If he left a gap in his reasoning, the philosophers would cut him off at once! It was a rule of the philosophical training they had received— a discipline they imposed upon themselves and would just as readily require of any stranger who claimed to have propositions worthy of their attention.

Could Paul's gospel presentation pass this severe scrutiny?

For several minutes Paul fared very well indeed. Beginning with the testimony of Epimenides's altar Paul proceeded next to the evidence of creation. Then he moved on from the evidence of creation to the inconsistency of idolatry. By then he had worked his way to a position where he could even identify Athenian idolatry as "ignorance" without losing his audience. He went on to say, "[Theos] now ... commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (Acts 17: 30-31).

In other words, having found and used an “eye-opener” to get to “first base,” Paul was “heading for second” in obedience to Jesus’ second command— he was seeking to turn the Athenians “from darkness to light!” Then he went on to say: “He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

And here— for the first time— Paul left a gap in the logic of his Mars Hill address. He mentioned the resurrection of the man God authorized to judge the world without first explaining how and why He had to die in the first place.

The philosophers pounced at once— to their own spiritual impoverishment. “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ At that, Paul left the Council” (Acts 17: 32-33).

Paul had already exposed their inconsistency in tolerating, if not actually abetting, idolatry. That alone was no small accomplishment among a panel of men who prided themselves for rational consistency! As seekers of truth they should have followed through with Paul on the implications of at least his opening remarks, instead of faulting him for a subsequent technicality.

Not all, however, discredited Paul for his mention of the resurrection: “A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus” (Acts 17: 34). Second-century tradition says that Dionysius later became the first bishop of Athens! His name is derived from that of Dionysus— a Greek god whose theology included a death-resurrection concept! Could there be a connection between that concept and Dionysius’s personal response to a man who so boldly championed a teaching of resurrection?

Later the apostle John, continuing Paul’s approach to the Greek philosophical mind, appropriated a favorite Stoic philosophical term— the Logos— as a title for Jesus Christ. A Greek philosopher named Heraclitus first used the term Logos around 600 B.C. to designate the divine reason or plan which coordinates a changing universe. Logos means simply “word.” Jews, for their part, emphasized the memra (Aramaic for “word”) of the Lord. John saw the Greek logos and the Jewish memra as describing essentially the same valid theological truth. He represented Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of both when he wrote, “In the beginning was the [Logos], and the [Logos] was with [Theos], and the [Logos] was [Theos].... The [Logos] became flesh, and lived for a while among us” (John 1: 1,14).

With this vital juxtaposition of both Greek terms— Theos and Logos— in relation to Elohim and to Jesus Christ, Christianity presented itself as fulfilling rather than destroying something valid in Greek philosophy!

In fact, such terms and concepts were clearly regarded by Christian emissaries to the Greeks as ordained by God to prepare the Greek mind for the gospel! They found these fortuitous Greek philosophical terms to be just as valid as Old Testament messianic metaphors such as “Lamb of God” and “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah.” And they used both sets of terminology with equal freedom to set the Person of Jesus Christ within the context of both Jewish and Greek culture, respectively.

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