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# Deisidaimonia, a Footnote to Acts 17:22\*

By H. ARMIN MOELLERING

What does St. Paul mean when he calls the Athenians δεισιδαιμονεστέρους in Acts 17:22? In order to understand the interpretative problem and to arrive at a reasoned conclusion, one must know something of the history of the term δεισιδαιμονία.

## NEUTRAL BEGINNINGS

To translate *deisidaimonia* as "superstition" is not only inadequate; it is misleading. The Greek word is compounded of δειδω — fear, and δαίμων — demon. Both of these elements are susceptible of misunderstanding. δειδω need not mean fear in the sense of craven dread. The word occurs, for instance, *Od.* 14, 389, with no unfavorable connotations, meaning simply to reverence. In this scene Eumaeus protests that the tale of Odysseus' sufferings, which he disbelieves, is poorly calculated to move him to kindness or hospitality.

οὐ γὰρ τοῦνεκ' ἐγὼ σ' αἰδέσσομαι οὐδὲ  
φιλήσω,  
ἀλλὰ Δία ξένιον δείσας αὐτόν τ'  
ἐλεαίρων.

There is no pejorative connotation here, for fear of Zeus is linked with, not contrasted to, the laudable motive of pity. In fact, for Homer θεοὺς δεδιέναι seems to

mean the same as θεοὺς αἰδεῖσθαι. Odysseus pleads with the Cyclops for mercy and the hospitality due strangers: αἰδεῖο, φέριστε, θεοὺς. In his blustering reply (ὅς με θεοὺς κέλεαι ἢ δειδίμεν ἢ ἀλέασθαι) the Cyclops splits the αἰδεῖσθαι of Odysseus into two related rather than contradictory elements, one of them being ἀλέασθαι, the other δεδιέναι (*Od.* 9, 269. 274). The distinction of δεδιέναι from αἰδεῖσθαι and τιμᾶν is later.<sup>1</sup> The parallelism is striking: θεοὺς δεδιέναι = θεοὺς αἰδεῖσθαι.

In similar fashion θεουδής (θεός-δεῖδω), instead of being a term of opprobrium in Homer, really means *pious*. Zielinski<sup>2</sup> understands the θεουδής of Homer as evidence of a religion and morality of fear. He agrees with Varro that cultic images contributed to the dissipation of such fear by giving the gods concrete and lovely forms so that the disquieting vagueness of the divine was eliminated. The great sculptors ("prophets of the chisel")<sup>3</sup> made the gods and goddesses a thing of beauty, thus ushering in the epoch of love for the gods to take the place of the era of fear. However, the element of fear was not totally banished but only severely limited: "Whoever persists in fearing those whom he should love was treated not as pious but as superstitious: This is the proper mean-

\* This study is excerpted and adapted from chapter two of *Plutarch on Superstition, Plutarch's De Superstitione, Its Place in the Changing Meaning of Deisidaimonia and in the Context of His Theological Writings*, a doctoral dissertation (Columbia University, Department of Greek and Latin) to be published in slightly revised and expanded form by the Christopher Publishing House, Boston.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bultmann's article αἰδώς, Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933—), I, 168.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Zielinski, *La Sibylle* (Paris: F. Rieder et Cie, 1924), p. 50 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.



ing of the word *deisidaimon*, 'fearing the gods.'"<sup>4</sup> But the thesis that this fear mentioned in Homer is identical with the dread of *deisidaimonia* is rightly rejected by Bolkestein.<sup>5</sup> Zielinski's thinking is dominated by the futile attempt to categorize Greek religion as one of love and Judaism as one of fear and Christianity again as one of love. This is obviously an oversimplified schematization. Neither can Zielinski's thesis be sustained by appeal to the fact that proselytes were designated οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, because fear has a favorable as well as an unfavorable meaning. It can be anxiety and dread, or it can be respect and proper deferential regard. Moreover, the proselytes were also called οἱ σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν, a parallelism which upsets the theory of Zielinski. Elements of fear and love have a distressingly complex way of intertwining. The superficial judgment that beautiful cultic statues could banish fear fails to take into account the vagaries of the human mind. Zielinski's artificial categories hardly supply the means for comprehending the paradox of the unhappy worshiper on the happy festival day (*De Super.* 169 E), or the key to the anguished ambivalence of the *deisidaimon* who, though hating the gods, yet worships and sacrifices in fear. (*De Super.* 170 E)

There is also the danger that *δαίμων* may be understood in a too narrowly circumscribed sense, as if its meaning were equal to fiend or devil. In the earliest references *δαίμων* is clean of any such

connotations, referring merely to superior beings. The precise meaning of *δαίμων* in Homer is disputed. It has been suggested that *θεός* in Homer is more descriptive of the divine personality as delineated in cultus and mythology, whereas *δαίμων* refers more to the god's power and activity as manifested in life and nature, "the god of movement." Some would even see incipient connotations of malevolence associated with *δαίμων* in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. Also the Homeric description of an attacking, heroic warrior as *δαίμωνι ἴσος*, is supposed to indicate a feeling of dread associated with the term.<sup>6</sup> But since the gods also send maladies, these sophisticated distinctions seem to be overdrawn. Why should religious emotions associated with *δαίμων* or *θεός* differ if both were known to punish? The terms *θεοβλαβής* and *θεομανής* may be used for the more usual (*κακο*)*δαιμονιᾶν* and *δαιμονιζεσθαι* to denote mental illness. Ordinary speech of the fourth century B. C. indicates nothing more derogatory in *δαίμων* than in *θεός*. In fact the terms are interchangeable.<sup>7</sup> This is also reflected in the equation *δεισιδαίμων* = *δεισίθεος* in the Onomasticon of Pollux.<sup>8</sup> After some vacillation a pejorative significance began to attach to *δαίμων*, and the distinction between *εὐδαίμων* and *κακοδαίμων* became rigid. The connotations of *δαίμων* were further deranged by

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 53: "quiconque persistait à craindre ceux qu'il fallait aimer, était traité non de pieux, mais de superstitieux; c'est le sens propre du mot *deisidaimon*, 'craignant les dieux.'"

<sup>5</sup> H. Bolkestein, *Theophrastos' Character der Deisidaimonia* (Giessen: Toepelmann, 1929), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Foerster's article, *δαίμων*, in Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933—), II, 2, n. 5. Also Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1931, 1932), I, 362 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Demosthenes 18, 192 FG. At one time it is *ὁ δαίμων* who controls all. In the next instance events rest *ἐν τῷ θεῷ*.

<sup>8</sup> *Onomasticon* 1, 20.



the popular belief in demons as spirits of the departed who, equipped with superhuman powers, acted unpredictably. But Plutarch does not read any of the pejorative meaning of δαίμων into his understanding of *deisidaimonia*. This is not only evident throughout *De Superstitione*, but Plutarch distinctly calls *deisidaimonia* a fear-corrupted διάθεσις πρὸς τὸν θεόν.<sup>9</sup>

#### AMBIGUITY IN ARISTOTLE

And yet both elements in this compound term are subject to deterioration. Reverence may degenerate into dread; demons may be more exclusively and morbidly regarded as malevolent. An indication of this development may be seen in Aristotle when he describes two ways of maintaining a tyranny.<sup>10</sup> One method is to have recourse to naked power and unscrupulous subterfuge. The other is quite the reverse, namely, to mimic the procedures which help to establish a kingly government. An important point is to appear to exercise careful thought in using the public funds, even going so far as to render an account of the state finances which are never out of the tyrant's control anyway, so long as he is master. It is also in his best interests to demean himself in such a way that he will appear not harsh but dignified, and thus, rather than inspire dread, he will command respect.

Typical among the virtues the tyrant must seem to cultivate are: military valor; respect for his subjects, male and female; moderation in bodily enjoyments; religious zeal; readiness to honor the meritorious

citizen as if he were independent; avoidance of outrageous corporal punishment. It is in describing the religious disposition of the clever tyrant who simulates the virtues of a benevolent king that Aristotle uses the term δεισιδαίμων.<sup>11</sup>

First it must be remarked that the *tertium comparationis* rescues the advice given under this second rubric from any hint of condemnation, since the techniques borrowed from a proper kingly rule and misapplied to subserve the nefarious designs of the tyrant are not in themselves reprehensible; it is only the fact that they are used for a mischievous purpose which is blameworthy. Therefore Aristotle's ascription of δεισιδαίμων to the tyrant does not mean he regards this religious attitude as in any way reprehensible. It is rather a clever ruse in a tyrant's bag of tricks to appear as a religious man who stands in awe of the gods, for the ruler who so impresses his subjects will allay their apprehensive misgivings that they may suffer oppressive injustices. In fact, subjects will be less likely to revolt against the ruler whose allies are the gods.

The context of δεισιδαίμων in Aristotle both supplies a definition and indicates a danger. To be δεισιδαίμων is τὰ πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς φαίνεσθαι ἀεὶ σπουδάζοντα διαφερόντως and φροντίζειν τῶν θεῶν. But in the warning appended, δεῖ δ' ἄνευ ἀβελτερίας φαίνεσθαι τοιούτων it is apparent that religious scrupulosity can easily impel to excesses which will make the tyrant look ridiculous. Although Aristotle does not seem to regard this excess as properly belonging to the adjective δεισιδαίμων, the pejorative tendency of

<sup>9</sup> *Non Posse* 1101 E. Cf. 1092 C, where superstition emerges as a ταρακττουσα ἔννοια περὶ θεῶν.

<sup>10</sup> *Politica* 1313 A ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1315 A.



the term as implying fatuous, extravagant piety is already apparent.<sup>12</sup>

#### FOR XENOPHON A TERM OF PRAISE

Xenophon uses the term twice. In his sketch of Agesilaus he describes the exemplary piety of his hero and concludes: ἀεὶ δὲ δεισιδαίμων ἦν, νομίζων τοὺς μὲν καλῶς ζῶντας οὐπω εὐδαίμονας, τοὺς δὲ εὐκλεῶς τετελευτηκότας ἤδη μακαρίου.<sup>13</sup>

The second reference is equally clear. Xenophon tells how Cyrus had given out the watchword Ζεὺς σύμμαχος as the rallying cry for his soldiers. When the king himself began the paean, all the pious joined in. A psychological explanation is given by Xenophon: ἐν τῷ τοιούτῳ γὰρ οἱ δεισιδαίμονες ἤττον τοὺς ἀνθρώπους φοβοῦνται.<sup>14</sup> Here again the designation is one of praise. Those who fear the gods are less fearful of men, including the enemy.

Thus the three recorded usages of δεισιδαίμων before Theophrastus are in a favorable sense, with two of the occurrences of the term being found in one author and the other already indicating the direction the pejorative development will take. And yet this absence of any denunciatory tones does not yet establish that the term was never used in *malam partem* prior to Theophrastus.<sup>15</sup> The argument from silence, often unconvincing, is

<sup>12</sup> Cf. P. J. Koets, *Deisidaimonia, a Contribution to the Knowledge of Terminology in Greek* (Purmerend: Muusses, 1929), p. 8. This study conveniently lists and classifies the usages of *deisidaimonia*.

<sup>13</sup> *Agesilaus*, 11, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Cyrus* 3, 3, 58.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that only the adjectival form and not the abstract δεισιδαιμονία occurs in these references is quite without significance.

particularly unsatisfactory here since we possess only a part of the pertinent literature, and furthermore, that which we do have includes almost nothing from the critics most likely to regard *deisidaimonia* as an evil, namely the Sophists and older Cynics.

Even after Theophrastus δεισιδαίμων is not uniformly a term of reproach. The investigations of Koets led him to the conclusion that where we find this term used in inscriptions the meaning is always favorable.<sup>16</sup> The term and its cognates occur both *bono* and *malo sensu*. The meaning intended by the author cannot be determined by consulting chronology. It is rather the author's theological views which determine the sense with which each writer invests the term.<sup>17</sup>

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT

Neither δεισιδαίμων nor δεισιδαιμονία are to be found in the Septuagint, whereas in the New Testament each word occurs once, δεισιδαίμων in Acts 17:22 and δεισιδαιμονία in Acts 25:19. In the celebrated passage Acts 17:22 ff. Paul begins his address on Mars' Hill: ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, κατὰ πάντα ὡς δεισιδαιμονεστέρους ὑμᾶς θεωρῶ. The meaning of δεισιδαίμων here hinges on the interpretation one accepts for the speech as a whole, and this interpretation in turn is necessarily implicated in theological considerations. Therefore, in order to vindicate the explanation of δεισιδαίμων as set forth in this study, attention is called to several theological points.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Koets, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hendrik Bolkestein, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed *formgeschichtliche* study of Luke's technique of interspersing his narrative with speeches and the relationship of his usage



However striking the similarities of form may be to the Stoic-Cynic diatribe, the content of Paul's message is different, for even the preceding context shows that Paul's Gospel is substantially at variance with Hellenistic *theologoumena*. Paul is stirred to inward anger as he beholds the idols in the city (verse 16). It is not that the heathen view identified the image with the deity, but rather that in this presumption to worship God through images of human devising there lurk the *Eigensinn und die Eigenmächtigkeit des Menschen*.<sup>19</sup> In the erection of altars and the manufacture of images a repudiation of Paul's concept of grace is at work. Karl Barth calls it: *dieser Streit gegen die Gnade der Offenbarung zugunsten eines eigensinnigen und eigenmächtigen Himmelstürens*.<sup>20</sup> Barth sees Rom. 1:18 ff. and Acts 14:15 ff., as well as the Areopagus speech, as uniformly

of this device to classical antecedents, particularly Thucydides, see Martin Dibelius, *Die Reden der Apostelgeschichte und die antike Geschichtsschreibung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1949), reprinted in his *Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte*, edited by H. Greeven (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1951), pp. 120—162. Two other essays in this latter volume are concerned with the Areopagus sermon: "Paulus auf dem Areopag," pp. 29 ff., and "Paulus in Athen," pp. 71 ff., translated into English in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956). The Stoical element in Paul's address is analyzed by Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Berlin and Leipzig: Teubner, 1913), pp. 13 ff. Werner Jaeger later came to reject the thesis of Norden that "the author of Acts must have used as his literary pattern a work about the pagan preacher and miracle worker Apollonius of Tyana." Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1961), p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Vol. I, München: Chr. Kaiser, 1932; Vol. I 2 and succeeding volumes, Zollikon, Zürich: Evangelische Buchhandlung, 1938—), I 2, 332.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

condemnatory of man's wickedness, and of wickedness which, paradoxically, is not profane, secular aversion from God, not rebellious insubordination, but man at his religious best.<sup>21</sup>

It is therefore incorrect to conclude that Paul means to compliment the Athenians when he calls them *δεισιδαιμονεστέρους*. The criticisms in the ensuing speech make it abundantly clear that it is not his intention enthusiastically to endorse Athenian religiosity. His deliberate references to the resurrection both in the market place before his address on Mars' Hill and at the conclusion of his speech make it evident that he knowingly offended his audience with this thoroughly un-Greek doctrine. Neither is it acceptable to assume that in his *captatio benevolentiae* he means to begin with a rude reproach which would immediately alienate his audience.

It is therefore likely that he invests the term with a certain ambiguity so that his hearers will feel they are being commended for their religious scrupulosity, and yet he will be free to proceed to criticize their inadequacies and commend his own faith to them. From the viewpoint of Paul's Gospel, the religious activity of the Athenians is idolatry. And yet in their misguided exertions and concerns Paul sees a striving for God which he undertakes to turn in a new direction. The New English

<sup>21</sup> "Gerade das vermeintlich beste Tun der Menschen, nämlich dieser ihr Gottesdienst, ist 'Gottlosigkeit.' Ihre Frömmigkeit ist 'Dämonenfurcht.'" *Ibid.*, p. 332. Even when Paul quotes Aratus in v. 28, it is not Aratus in his original sense, but Aratus infused with Christian meaning. "Es war heidnische, aber eben sofort christlich interpretierte, gewissermassen getaufte und also schon nicht mehr heidnische Weisheit, die Paulus auf den Plan geführt hat." *Ibid.*, III<sup>2</sup>, 417.



Bible nicely catches up the force of the comparative form and the ambiguity by translating: "I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous." The King James rendering, "too superstitious," is wrong, and the Revised Standard Version's translation, "very religious," implies a commendation at variance with the strictures which follow. In

Acts 25:19 (ζητήματα δέ τινα περί τῆς ἰδίας δεισδαμονίας εἶχον), where Festus describes Paul's case to Agrippa, *deisidaimonia* is used in a neutral, objective sense for "religion." The strangeness of this religious controversy is intimated in the adjective ἰδία, not in the noun δεισδαμονία.

Palisades Park, New Jersey