

# Religion without fear

## Plutarch on superstition and Early Christian Literature<sup>1</sup>

H-J Klauck

Universität Würzburg, Deutschland

### ABSTRACT

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*After some introductory remarks on the role of fear in religious discourse and on the vocabulary of δεισιδαιμονία. Plutarch's treatise On Superstition is analysed according to its rhetorical outline. Questions of authenticity are discussed and answered by locating the essay in Plutarch's early career. Then we ask for the place of "fear of God" in biblical teaching and theology, compare it to Plutarch and show some limits in Plutarch's youthful thinking, which doesn't yet pay due respect to the life values of myth. We conclude with two New Testament passages, Romans 8:15, masterfully interpreted by Martin Luther, and 1 John 4:17f, excellently explained by 20th century's Swiss theologian and psychologist Oskar Pfister, and we show that these texts are propagating "belief without fear".*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

A new German dictionary, the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, tells us in the first of its several volumes under the entry *Angst*, fear: "In some religions, in Christianity for example, provoking fear and overcoming fear seem to be closely connected. But, on the other hand, the traditional religious-critical claim that religion originated in human fear has been proved insufficient for understanding fear and coping with it"<sup>2</sup>.

There are some sweeping allegations about Christianity in this quotation which need further reflection, but there is also a remarkable caution regarding some favourite ideas of religious critics old and new, from Lucretius, in his *De rerum natura*, to Sigmund Freud. One ancient author who has delivered a more nuanced and in some respects very modern analysis of the relation of religion to fear is Plutarch of Chaironeia (ca 45-125 A D), in an essay traditionally entitled *On Superstition*. To study his text and to confront it with early Christian literature is a challenging and rewarding task. That's what we will try to do now. We'll

begin with problems implied by the title, and follow with a concise survey of the content. After considering the essay's somewhat dubious authenticity very quickly, we'll take up some clues which will lead us to the New Testament, to two passages more specifically.

## 2 PLUTARCH ON SUPERSTITION<sup>3</sup>

### 2.1 The title *Περὶ δεισιδαιμονίας*

In Latin as in English, we are lucky to have the chance to distinguish between *religio* and *superstitio*, ("superstition"). In Greek this possibility does not exist, and superstition therefore doesn't exactly cover what Plutarch means when he speaks of *δεισιδαιμονία*<sup>4</sup>. The word is composed of the verb *δείδω*, ("I have fear") and *δαίμων*, not really demon, but more generally a superhuman, divine power, even a god. "Fear of demons" wouldn't therefore be a fitting translation either. The older meaning even seems to have been utterly positive: *δεισιδαιμονία* is equivalent to belief in god, religion.

The problem, by the way, becomes quite clear when we recall two well known verses from Acts. In Acts 25:19 the Roman prefect Festus tells King Agrippa that the Jews disagreed with Paul "about their own *δεισιδαιμονία*". Does the author Luke want us to understand that in a neutral sense: their own system of belief, their own religion? Or does he, Luke, slip into the role of his Roman speaker, who certainly considers the Jews to be something of a superstitious crowd, as Seneca does in his treatise *De superstitione*<sup>5</sup>? The English and the German translations are divided. In his Areopagus-speech Paul pays his audience the following dubious compliment: "Athenians, I see how extremely *δεισιδαιμονεστέροις* you are" (Acts 17:22) - extremely pious or extremely superstitious? Again translations are divided. To be sure, in Paul's speech this functions as a *captatio benevolentiae* and should therefore be understood in its positive sense, but there is more to it than that, because some verses earlier, in Acts 17:16, Paul is deeply distressed to see the city full of idols. I am convinced that Luke is playing on the ambiguity of the word and inviting us to read it on two levels.

The negative meaning, too, is very well attested, for example by Theophrastus, who gives us in his *Characters* (as nr 16) a portrait of a *δεισιδαίμων*, a superstitious man who exaggerates in his pious observances<sup>6</sup>. Three examples may suffice:

"Should he spy a snake in his house, if it be one of the red sort he will call upon Sabazius, if of the sacred, build a shrine then and

there... If a mouse gnaw a bag of his meal, he will be off to the diviner's (πρὸς τὸν ἐξηγητήν) and asks what he must do, and if the answer be 'send it to the cobbler to be patched', he neglects the advice and frees himself of the ill be rites of aversion... He never has a dream but he flies to a diviner, or a soothsayer, or an interpreter of visions, to ask what God or Goddess he should appease."

Plutarch, though, in his treatise deals not only with superstition, but also with atheism, and *δεισιδαιμονία* in this context means for him something more, something like fear of the gods, religion originating from fear, as pious *phobia*, compulsory ritual and obsessional act.

## 2.2 Disposition and content

Let's see now how Plutarch describes *δεισιδαιμονία* and how he compares it with atheism, in the form of a typically rhetorical synkrisis, by the way, as he uses it abundantly in his Parallel Lives. The following disposition of the essay takes into account stylistic and rhetorical devices and tries at the same time to give an idea of its content.

### 2.2.1 Exordium: Atheism and superstition (chapters 1-2)

- a) The common source and the difference
- b) Examples: Epicureans, Stoics, "wealth"
- c) Definitions and summary: λόγος/πάθος

In the *exordium* Plutarch first describes the common source of atheism and superstition: ignorance and blindness in regard to the gods. But atheism only means a false judgement, whereas in superstition *πάθος*, i.e. emotion, passion, is added to it. Let the Epicureans claim that atoms and the void are the beginning of the universe, or let the Stoics maintain that virtues and vices are physical entities, nobody really cares. But as soon as someone declares wealth to be his highest good, his "god", emotions come in, which will leave him sleepless, restless, speechless. Atheism says: there are no gods. That is wrong, but it only leads to a kind of indifference (*ἀπάθεια*) and frees you from irrational fear. Superstition believes in the existence of gods, but of such gods who are the cause of pain and injury for human beings. To sum up: Atheism is falsified reason (*λόγος*), superstition is an emotion (*πάθος*) coming out of false reason.

### 2.2.2 Narratio: A pathological disturbance of the soul (chapters 3-4)

- a) Fear as a special emotion
- b) Superstitious fear: description, examples
  - Bad dreams
  - Questionable remedies
  - A succinct question
- c) Flight from the gods?
  - Tyranny
  - Slavery
  - Sanctuary
- d) Beyond the limits of life

In the *narratio* Plutarch develops the theme of superstition as a pathological disturbance of the soul. He shows first in a stoic mood that most emotions are dangerous, because they urge the reasoning power into too many activities, but not so fear and, especially, superstitious fear. Its power ties down the soul and keeps it helpless and hopeless. You can't escape it, because your frightful gods are everywhere, even in your sleep and in your dreams. They are filled with ghastly images and horrible apparitions (*φαντάσματα*). Who is tormented in such way at night, will in the morning consult begging priests, magicians and a witch, and they will find solutions for him like smearing himself with mud, wallowing in filth, dipping himself in the ocean, casting himself to the ground and lying or sitting there all day. Plutarch asks the superstitious man directly: "The gift of sleep which the gods have given us as a time of recovering from our ills, why do you make it an everlasting torture chamber for yourself, since your unhappy soul cannot run away to some other sleep?" (166C). A tyrant might escape by moving to a free, democratic state. Slaves may ask to be sold to a master more mild, or may take refuge to a sanctuary. Not so with the superstitious man. because where should he flee, what country could he find free of gods? Temples are the very places where he suffers most, because he considers those gods to be despotic and tyrannical from whom we others ask wealth, welfare, peace, concord and success, for in reality they are gentle. And to make things still worse: Death, though the end of life for all men, is not the end of superstition, which transcends even the limits of life. Plutarch is, of course, playing on some well known eschatological myths, and he evokes them in powerful language (transl. Babbitt, LCL):

"The abysmal gates of the nether world swing open, rivers of fire and offshoots of the Styx are mingled together, darkness is crowded

with spectres of many fantastic shapes which beset their victim with grim visages and piteous voices, and, besides these, judges and tortures and yawning gulfs and deep recesses teeming with unnumbered woes” (167A).

### 2.2.3 Argumentatio: Comparison of atheism and superstition (chapters 5-13)

- a) Too little and too much emotion (chapters 5-6)
  - Thesis (*propositio*)
  - Examples (*probatio*): hearing and seeing
  - Application (*applicatio*)

The *argumentatio* is the place where Plutarch in several chapters carries out the *synkrisis*, the comparison of atheism and superstition. In a first section he illustrates the idea from the *exordium* that atheism ends up with no emotion at all (*ἀπάθεια*), which is not completely satisfying somehow, but much better than superstition’s display of too much emotion (Plutarch now even coins the word *πολυπάθεια*). In some cases, for example, not being able to hear or to see is to be preferred. Tigers are driven mad by the sound of beaten drums and tear themselves to pieces. Obviously, less harm, then, is in deafness. And Heracles would have been better off if he hadn’t seen his sons at all, instead of seeing them and killing them in his frenzy. Similarly atheism, not seeing god at all, has some advantages over superstition, because the latter’s followers conceive

“the kindness of the gods to be frightful, their fatherly solicitude to be despotic, their loving care to be injurious... But they hold in contempt philosophers and statesmen, who try to prove that the majesty of God is associated with goodness, magnanimity, kindness and loving care... they fear the gods and flee to them for help, they flatter them and abuse them, they pray to them and blame them” (167D/E) -

The last sentence is a very keen comment on the ambivalent attitudes to the gods so characteristic of superstition.

- b) Days, bad and good (chapters 7-9)
  - In bad days: situations (difficult circumstances, illness, political defeat and grief) and paradigms: historical simile - (Tiribazos) - three examples from history (Midas, Aristodemos, Nicias) - three models from literature and life (Archolochos on seastorms, Hesiod

and plowing and sowing, Homer on Ajax and Agamemnon in battle: pray and act, act and pray!) - an ethnographic case.

-In favourable days: religious feasts, mockery and terror

In the next section the atheist and the superstitious man are shown by Plutarch in very bad times and in better days. Their behaviour differs significantly again. Whatever it is: unfavourable circumstances, illness, political defeat, death and grief, the atheist will try to help himself and will at most blame the force of destiny. The superstitious man accepts neither medical care nor help and comfort. He sees himself hit with full force by a heaven-sent stream of mischief. "He rolls naked in the mire as he confesses divers sins and errors of his - eating this or drinking that, or walking in a path forbidden by his genius (*δαίμονιον*)" (168D). To name only a few: Tiribazos, the Persian leader, gave up his desperate fight against his arrest when the soldiers told him that the king commanded it. The Athenian general Nicias, during the unlucky Sicilian expedition, remained inactive for several days, affrighted at the shadow of the moon in eclipse, and so caused a major disaster for his troops and for himself (Plutarch tells the same story at greater length in his *Life of Nicias*). According to the poets of old, in danger you should pray to the gods, but you should simultaneously also act. Of special importance for us is the very last negative case:

"The Jews, because it was the Sabbath day, sat in their places immovable, while their enemies were planting ladders against the walls and capturing the defences, and they did not get up, but remained there, fast bound in the toils of superstition as in one great net" (169C).

Contrary to what was sometimes thought, that has nothing to do with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A D, but is to be compared with 1 Maccabees 2:32-36, where the Jewish insurgents prefer to die rather than to fight on a sabbath, and even more with Josephus (*Against Apion* 1,209-210) who quotes a Hellenistic historian with the words: Because the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem every seventh day "neither bear arms... nor engage in any other form of public service, but pray with outstretched hands in the temples until the evening", and because they, "instead of protecting their city, persisted in their folly, Ptolemy, son of Lagus, was allowed to enter with his army... and the defect of a practice enjoined by law was exposed" (that takes us to the period 320-302 B C).

To sum up: a main objection against superstition is that it does not allow men to do what they can do, that it does not let them put their best

efforts even into desperate situations, but provokes resignation and lethargy instead.

Let's change the scene now and have a look at atheism and superstition reacting to friendly conditions. The most pleasant things we enjoy, according to Plutarch, are religious feasts with banquets at the temples and so on. The atheist, when he sees it, gives way to disdainful and mocking laughter, the superstitious man, though participating in the rites, feels very miserable because of his deep-rooted fear.

c) Superstition as a form and cause of atheism (chapters 10-13)

aa) As a form of atheism

- New thesis
- Example: Anaxagoras and the Cimmerians
- An *argumentum ad hominem*
- Repulsive rites and myths: Artemis - Letho - the Syrian goddess
- Application: ambivalent feelings (murderer of tyrants as examples)

bb) As cause of atheism

- New thesis
- Natural philosophy and the notion of god
- Perversions of piety
- Abominable examples: human sacrifice - Typhons and Giants - Amestris, wife of Xerxes, and Hades - Xenophanes and the Egyptians

In the last section Plutarch denounces superstition as a form of atheism and even as the main cause of atheism. After some preliminary remarks he opens the new line of thought with a rather startling *argumentum ad hominem*:

“I for my part should prefer that men should say about me that I have never been born at all, and that there is no Plutarch, rather than they should say: “Plutarch is an inconstant fickle person, quick-tempered, vindictive about little accidents, pained at trifles. If you invite others to dinner and leave him out, or if you haven't the time and don't go to call on him, or fail to speak to him when you see him, he will set his teeth into your body and bite it through, or he will get hold of your little child and beat him to death, or he will turn the beast that he owns into your crops and spoil your harvest” (160F-170A).

In a very bold and striking way, Plutarch here uses himself as a symbolic example for the actions of certain gods who shouldn't exist at all, if people think them capable of such hostile actions. As a proof Plutarch evokes and implicitly criticizes some very questionable rites and myths (Artemis, Letho, the Syrian goddess). Plutarch's application of these examples dwells again on the ambivalent reactions resulting from superstition which is a combination of hate, dread and worship, to be compared to the feelings of the bodyguards of Alexander the Great and Caligula, who serve their masters but secretly wish to murder them. Superstition simply doesn't dare even think of what it really wants: to kill its gods to be free of them.

Instead, worst of all, superstition gives rise to atheism and supplies it with a defence. There is nothing wrong with the well-ordered cosmic harmony in the universe, in the heavens and on earth; there cannot lay the reason for deciding against the idea of God (an allusion to the platonic notion of the recognizability of god through the works of nature). Atheism rather is an answer to ridiculous perversions of piety brought about by superstition. For his last series of illustrations Plutarch has saved his strongest arguments. What could be more abominable than human sacrifice? Yet it was practised by the Gauls and Scythians and others, especially the Carthaginians, who sacrificed their own children, as Plutarch explains to us in a vivid and horrible picture. We take the opportunity to notice his consistent tendency to present superstitious rituals as something barbaric, exotic, imported to Greece from oriental and foreign countries.

We have to refrain from discussing all the cases Plutarch brings forward, but we should not miss, at least, what he has to tell us about the Carthaginians. He begins with an allusion to an attack on sacrificing living creatures in general, led by Empedocles. When Empedocles speaks of a pious father "who on the altar lays his beloved son and slays him" (171C), that sounds horrible, but in reality *metempsychosis* (the transmigration of souls) is meant, which softens the horror quite a bit. But not so the Carthaginians.

"No, but with full knowledge and understanding they themselves offered up their own children, and those who have no children would buy little ones from the poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or a moan; but should she utter a single moan or let a single tear fall, she had to forfeit the money, and her child was sacrificed nevertheless; and the whole area before the statue was filled with a loud noise of flutes and drums so that the cries of wailing should not reach the ears of people" (171C/D).



#### 4 Peroratio: *Virtus in medio* (chapter 14)

Perhaps this last chapter could already be regarded as a *peroratio* to the whole treatise. According to Quintilian, in the *peroratio* pity should be evoked, the terror of the crime be summed up, all the floodgates of the emotions be opened (*Inst Orat* V 1:23,51 etc.). Otherwise we have as the *peroratio* only the very short chapter 14. No so much is to be said about that. It defines true piety (*εὐσεβεία*) as located halfway between atheism and superstition in a golden mean - a classic notion of course of peripatetic philosophy, but not at all unknown to Plutarch in other contexts, too<sup>7</sup>.

### 2.3 The question of authenticity

But there is, nevertheless, a certain asymmetry between the final statement and the main thrust of the argument. Atheism and superstition now seem to be equally distant from true piety and equally false, whereas in former chapters atheism fared much better, sometimes even looking like the only sensible option, and true piety was scarcely dealt with. Some older scholars thought that Plutarch was working with a cynic source favouring atheism without reservations, and that he only partly succeeded in transforming it<sup>8</sup>. A simpler answer might be found in the pragmatic intention of the essay, which obviously is not directed against atheism if this is criticized too, but against the pressing danger of superstition.

The authenticity of the whole text is sometimes questioned despite Plutarch's reference to his own person referred to above. This could be, we are told, the very sign of pseudepigraphy, as an unknown author's attempt to win Plutarch's authority for his product. These doubts are mainly grounded in the fact that in major points contradictions exist between *On Superstition* and the rest of Plutarch's religious-philosophical writings. Does he not explicitly accept and propagate there what he rejects here: demonology, oriental religions, eschatological expectations, omens and portents and so on?

It can't be completely denied that these are valid objections. One fairly popular solution works with a theory of inner development. *On Superstition* belongs to the earliest phase of Plutarch's writings; that is fairly sure, too, on stylistic grounds. Only in his early years did Plutarch display such an affection for rhetorical devices<sup>9</sup>. The more mature man, we are told, moved gradually away from the radical positions of youthful enthusiasm and opened himself more and more to mysticism and mystery, at the latest when he became high priest at Delphi at the age of fifty. For

the realm of eschatology that seems to be confirmed by Plato, Plutarch's favourite philosopher, who remarked in *Pol* 330D/E:

“If someone feels death drawing closer, he begins to fear things he didn't care for before at all. He had often heard narrations about the nether world, about judgement and torture, but he had laughed about it. But now he can't forget them any more, and he wonders: what if they are true”.

Even if the last point seems especially well taken, the full solution, in my opinion, is not to be found in this direction. There should, naturally, be some differences between the young student and the elderly Delphic priest, but there is also a remarkable consistency, if we only consider a sentence from *In Isis and Osiris*, one of his last and doubtless authentic works:

“For some go completely astray and become engulfed in superstition; and others, while they fly from superstition as from a quagmire, on the other hand fall, as it were, over a precipice into atheism” (67 [378A]).

Another and better strategy has been tried by F E Brenk<sup>10</sup>. Maybe we are wrong in our assumptions about the later Plutarch. Three times he narrates a lengthy myth dealing with the other world and with the afterlife, certainly, but does he really believe in it himself? That's not so clear. And his famous demonology is explained in the Pythian dialogues by a speaker who looks like the prototype of a modern guru. Plutarch does not necessarily identify his own position with that of this figure in the text. Perhaps he wants us on the contrary to read it as a well-planned caricature of religious obscurantism. On this view there is not so much superstition in the late Plutarch as is often thought, and the arguments against the authenticity of the early treatise lose force.

### 3 POINTS OF COMPARISON

#### 3.1 Some questions to be asked

“To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, we read in Sirach 1:14 (with *φοβεισθαι* in the Greek text). In the Old Testament, fear of God is nearly equivalent to piety and devoutness. To theophanies and angelophanies people react with terror and awe, and the divine agent has to tell them first: “Be not afraid”! The women leave the empty tomb “with fear and joy” (Math 28:8) - mixed feelings, ambivalent attitudes here, too? And in Hebrews 10:31 we are told: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”.

Is the fear of God in the Jewish-Christian tradition perhaps the same thing Plutarch is speaking of when he defines true piety (*εὐσεβεία*)? The answer is not so simple as that<sup>11</sup>. We are reminded by the quotations from Scripture that God is seen there especially as the judge before whom all men will have to justify their deeds, and he sometimes displays his anger and punishes the sinner. There is nothing like that to be found in Plutarch, at least not in this treatise. Does therefore the image of God in the Bible fall under his strictures? Does it produce what he denounces, namely the filling of poor human beings with neurotic fear? That even gains in significance through the fact that Plutarch indeed takes Judaism as an example of superstition and that some Latin authors do the same with Christianity.

We will first have to ask critically about Plutarch's conception of god, whether it is not too harmless and too smooth. He mainly thinks of the traditional gods of the Greek *polis*, who stabilize the harmony of society and grant men wellbeing and success: god in his words is something useful and helpful (*ὠφελῶν*). But attractive as it sounds, the lack of any notion of God as judge is no mere advantage of relief. The message of the judging God corresponds to the insight into the limitedness and the createdness of human existence and gives to it the final goal, the direction each freely designed pattern of life should take. Only the judging God guarantees the effective implementation of his righteous order of the world, which means more than the keeping up of a pre-stabilized harmony. It includes siding with and supporting the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the proverbial widows and orphans.

Plutarch's "theology" - in the sense of his teachings about god - does not take sufficiently into account the depths of human life, which might fail and lead to a breakdown. Some of the gloomy myths he incriminates try to do that at least, thereby fulfilling their function as myths: to give transparency to the experiences of life and to reduce them to some deeper causes in the form of a time-transcending narrative, though they do so in an inadequate way. Plutarch's criticism therefore is correct, but he himself gives no answer to the questions they put forward.

A last reflection in this context: It would perhaps already help a great deal if we only had to fear the one living God and nobody and nothing else. It could help us to gain freedom from human authorities operating by terror and suppression, freedom even, where necessary, from religious authorities thinking along similar lines.

But there are, fortunately, also texts in Scripture pleading for belief in God without fear and consequently without any form of superstition, and that is our final point.

## 3.2 Belief without fear

### 3.2.1 “Not back into fear again” - Romans 8:15

In Romans Paul had first proved the slavery of all men under the dominance of sin and then developed on justification through God in Jesus Christ as the only possible solution to men’s dilemma. In Chapter 8 he summarizes and gives an outline of the new life in the Spirit. The metaphors for the two phases Paul chooses in 8:15 are taken over from social life. It’s slavery against adoption as a child:

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery (*δουλείας*)  
to fall back into fear (*πάλιν εἰς φόβον*),  
but you have received a spirit of adoption (*υἰοθεσίας*)  
in whom we cry: Abba, Father!”

We have to combine that with Romans 6:18, i.e.: “you, having been set free from sin, have now become slaves of righteousness”. This new form of “slavery”, more metaphorically meant than ever, has to be carefully defined, and Paul does it through the interplay of the two verses. “Not again into fear”, “not back into fear”: that exactly marks the difference. There is no new tyrant instead of the old one, but only a caring father and service in a spirit of freedom and confidence.

In exegesis of Rom 8:15 “not back into fear” is explained rather often as a warning not to fall back into the Jewish observance of the Law which created a system of fear. But that is not convincing. It does not give enough credit to Jewish self-understanding seeing the Law not as a burden, but as a gift. It does not do justice to Paul’s much more dialectical appraisal of the Law, and, finally, it underestimates the anthropological value of what Paul is saying here.

What fear, sign of the former, unredeemed life, in this verse really implies no one has more clearly observed than Martin Luther. In his commentary on Romans on this topic some sentences are to be found which remind us immediately of Plutarch’s analysis of religious fear: “In the spirit of fear you cannot cry, you can scarcely open your mouth and whisper... Fear tightens and compresses everything as experience shows. It doesn’t say ‘Father’, but it hates God and dreads him and secretly mutters against him like an enemy and a tyrant”<sup>12</sup>. Thus Luther.

Paul speaks of the Last Judgement and the fear of God. We find the two themes combined in 2 Corinthians 5:10-11: “For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense... Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade

others. "But for him, obviously, that is part of a message which tries to free men from tormenting neurotic fear. He favours faithful confidence in God on a double ground, past and future, past, deliverance from sin, and future, eschatological fulfilment of the communion with God. Romans 8 ends with the triumphant words: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword"? (8:35). No, nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). Love is the theme with which we will continue.

### 3.2.2 "No fear in love" - 1 John 4:17-18

- 17a "Love has been perfected among us in this:  
b) that we may have boldness (*παρρησία*) on the day of judgement,  
c) because as he is,  
d) so are we in this world.
- 18a There is no fear (*φόβος*) in love,  
b) but perfect love casts out fear,  
c) for fear has to do with punishment,  
d) and whoever fears (*ὁ δὲ φοβούμενος*),  
e) has not reached perfection in love."

In 1 John 4:17-18 we detect two contrasting semantic fields, on the one hand love, perfected love, combined with boldness of speech, on the other hand fear and related to it the day of judgement in verse 17 and punishment in verse 18<sup>13</sup>. The author alludes to well known eschatological expectations: the coming of God or Christ for the final judgement and the punishment of the wicked, but he does not dwell on these points. His message, on the contrary, is: Whoever believes and loves and is loved by God, may be quite sure even now that he or she has no reason for fear this coming day. The christological confirmation in verse 17 ("because as he is, so are we in this world") needs some explanation: "as he is" means as Jesus Christ is now, namely living in constant communion with the God of love, and so do we do here on earth, according to verse 16: "those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them". The fear of verse 18 not only keeps its gaze fixed on the final punishment, in some way it anticipates final punishment, for fear implies a lack of perfect love and that is for the author of 1 John the very core of eschatological punishment: to be separated from the loving God, not being able to share in His presence.

In the history of interpretation these verses from 1 John have had a very peculiar fate. Again and again theologians have felt bound to pay fear

its due respect. We hear: 1 John is only speaking of slavish fear, which might in itself have a high pedagogical effect. Fear is cast out only by perfected love which is not attainable for most. Only a small spiritual élite is able to reach this state of fearlessness; to propagate it for the masses would be much too dangerous.

A notable exception is Oskar Pfister, a Swiss protestant theologian, friend of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung and one of the first to introduce psychoanalysis into pastoral theory and practice. In his book of 1944 on "Christianity and Fear" he speaks of 1 John 4:18 as words "worthy of the highest admiration" and he declares: "So the bolt of the gate to Christian belief is shut to tormenting fear for all times"<sup>14</sup>. Those, at last, are clear words, free of any misunderstanding, worthy to be quoted and repeated.

We have tried to understand Plutarch, we have criticized him, but we also have learned from him, at least I hope so. He helps us to detect anew the wealth of anthropological insight and pastoral care of words like "not into fear again" or "there is no fear in love, because perfect love will cast out fear". We should not fall back below the level of thinking jointly reached by Plutarch, Paul and the unknown author of 1 John.

## NOTES:

- 1 Guest lecture at the University of Pretoria, the University of Potchefstroom for CHE and St John Vianney Seminary, Pretoria. To all my hosts I am very grateful for their overwhelming hospitality.
- 2 R Schlesier, "Art. Angst", in: *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*. Bd. I, Stuttgart 1988, 456.
- 3 Text and translation: W R Paton, I Wegehaupt, M Pohlenz, H Gärtner, *Plutarchi Moralia*. Vol I (BSGRT), Stuttgart 1993, 338-354; F C Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia*. Vol II (LCL 222), Cambridge 1971, 451-495; R Klaerr, in: *Plutarque, (Euvres morales. Tome II (CUFr)*, Paris 1985, 239-261; G Lozza, *Plutarco: De superstitione*, Milano 1989 (new edition; formerly as TDSA 68, Milano 1980). There is also a charming old German translation, which was read by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, namely J F S Kaltwasser, *Plutarchs moralisch-philosophische Werke*. Erster Theil, Wien-Prag 1796, 449-470. For secondary literature, cf *inter alia* G Abernethy, *De Plutarchi qui fertur de superstitione libello*, Diss. phil., Königsberg 1911; U von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, *Griechisches Lesebuch I/2*, Zürich 1965, 328-338; *Erläuterungen II/2*, Zürich 1966, 203-212; R Strömberg, "Om Plutarchos' Skrift Περὶ δεισιδαιμονίας. Ett Bidrag till skildringen av senantikens religiositet", in: *Festkrift tillägnad Axel Boethius*, Göteborg 1949, 141-149; A J Festugière, *Épicure et ses dieux* (Mythes et Religions), Paris 1968, 77-80; M Smith, "De

- Superstitione (Moralia 164E-171F)”, in: H D Betz (ed.), *Plutarch's Theological writings and early Christian literature* (SCHNT 3), Leiden 1975, 1-35; see also the following notes. For basic informations on Plutarch's life, his writings and his thinking see H J Klauck, *Die religiöse Umwelt des Urchristentums II: Herrscher- und Kaiserkult, Philosophie, Gnosis* (KStH 9.2), Stuttgart 1996, 124-142.
- 4 Cf P J Koets, *Δεισιδαιμονία. A contribution to the knowledge of the religious terminology in Greek* (Diss. phil. Utrecht), Purmerend 1929, especially 68-83; H Moellering, *Plutarch on superstition. Plutarch's De Superstitione. Its place in the changing meaning of Deisidaimonia and in the context of his theological writings*, Boston <sup>2</sup>1963.
  - 5 The essay is lost; for the fragments cf M Lausberg, “Senecae operum fragmenta: Überblick und Forschungsbericht”, in: *ANRW* II/36.1 (1989) 1888-1898.
  - 6 See D Klose, *Theophrast: Charaktere* (Reclams Universalbibliothek 619), Stuttgart <sup>2</sup>1981; H Bolkestein, *Theophrastos' Charakter der Deisidaimonia als religionsgeschichtliche Urkunde* (RVV 21.2), Gießen 1929; M Stein, *Definition und Schilderung ins Theophrasts Charakteren* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 28), Stuttgart 1992, 199-201.
  - 7 Cf E Barardi, “Plutarco e la religione: 1' εὐσεβεία come giusto mezzo fra δεισιδαιμονία e ἀθεότης”, *CCICr* 11 (1990), 141-170.
  - 8 See H Erbse, “Plutarchs Schrift Περὶ δεισιδαιμονίας”, *Hermes* 70 (1952), 299f.
  - 9 See F Krauss, *Die rhetorischen Schriften Plutarchs und ihre Stellung im Plutarchischen Schriftenkorpus*, Nürnberg 1912, especially 60-76.
  - 10 In his excellent study, *In mist apparelled. Religious themes in Plutarch's Moralia and Lives* (Mn.S 48), Leiden 1977, especially 9-84.
  - 11 For the following paragraphs I am heavily indebted to the article of my colleague and friend M Theobald, “Angstfreie Religiosität. Röm 8,15 und 1 John 4,17f im Licht der Schrift Plutarchs über den Aberglauben”, in: *Lebendige Überlieferung. Prozesse der Annäherung und Auslegung* (Festschrift H J Vogt), Beirut/Ostfildern 1992, 321-343; in addition see H Braun, “Plutarchs Kritik am Aberglauben im Lichte des Neuen Testaments”, in: H Braun, *Gesammelte Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt*, Tübingen 1962, 120-135.
  - 12 M Luther, *Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/16*. Bd. 2, Darmstadt 1960, 93.
  - 13 For a more fully developed argument, see H J Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (EKK XXIII/1), Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1991, 268-273.

- 14 O Pfister, *Das Christentum und die Angst. Eine religionspsychologische, historische und religionshygienische Untersuchung*, Olten <sup>2</sup>1975, 18, 488f.