



THE ATHENS GREEK RELIGION SEMINAR, Tuesday, January 21, 2025

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Standing Sebomenos and Phritton in Front of the Gods

ABSTRACT

Fear is one of the most powerful driving forces in the history of humanity. Some have argued that one aspect of religion is to disperse fear and to comfort humans, but religion, as it happens, often relies on fear. A plethora of early Christian leaders in their writings and speeches insisted that a follower of Jesus feels fear, as if fear was an intrinsic part of the early Christian emotional regime and an emblem of Christian identity. But fear towards what or whom? First and foremost, one was expected to fear God; in fact, this was the case to such an extent that believers were sometimes even instructed to fear the lack of fear of God. My research will investigate the term 'fear of g/God' and will explore what the fear of a deity and a divine representative entailed and how the emotion of fear affected religiosity in the Greco-Roman world. After all, it seems that the more devout people were in antiquity, the intenser the fear they were expected to feel for divine power. To contextualise and offer comparisons with early Christian forms of fear, I will also look at the use of fear in Pagan contexts. Viewing the body and mind as separate and distinct is erroneous. Neuroscience has recently made astonishing breakthroughs in understanding human emotions and the detailed mechanisms by which they are produced in the brain. Historians traditionally (and regrettably) do not follow developments in neuroscience in order to gain a better grasp of human experience. My research will suggest that the early Christian use of fear was remarkable in the following aspects: 1) in the form of fear-astonishment, fear was used in early Christian stories to indicate the proper response to miracles, 2) in the face of acute danger and death, as in the acts of martyrs, the lack of fear and its replacement by joy was a pervasive emotional ideal, and 3), in the form of fear-dread, fear was used as an emotional ideal that designated total devotion.

The seminar takes place Tuesday, January 21, 2025, at 17.00 (Athens) in a hybrid format with live presence at the Swedish Institute at Athens and online via Zoom.

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