

Paul and the Athens Epicureans: Between Polytheisms, Atheisms and Monotheisms

Renée Koch Piettre

The New Testament episode of Paul's encounter with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens, in chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles (vv. 16–34), illuminates the relationship between early Christianity and its intellectual and religious environment in the Roman empire. Here Paul the Apostle is in fact forced to explain his message in terms he attempts to make comprehensible for an audience of educated Athenians, in accordance with what he thinks he knows about that audience. At least that is how Luke, the writer of the Acts, tries to describe the episode, at which he was apparently not himself present.¹

This episode gives us the opportunity to raise questions about the paradoxical relations that can be imagined between Epicureanism and Paul's missionary practice, or more widely between Epicureanism and early Christianity. Research on this topic already has a fairly long history but has probably not yet found its direction, or the right tone or a conclusion.² A kind of Christian prejudice seems to be the rule in this area. Those who venture there immediately encounter in general two sorts of indignant reaction:

- From those who approach Epicureanism in the tradition of a free-thinking humanism and a materialist philosophy, the cry goes up: how can anyone introduce into the genesis of Christianity those fathers of atomism and a materialist hedonism, those liberators of humanity, or even those ancestors of dialectical Marxism,³ Epicurus or Lucretius? Are all religions not an 'opium of the people'?
- From historians and theologians of Christianity there is the same outcry: how can people dare to detect a similarity, still less a kinship against nature, between two doctrines as opposed as that atheism, for which Epicurus and his followers⁴ are frequently criticized, and the Christian faith? What is more, Paul warned his disciples against philosophy, for example in Col. 2.8: 'Be on your guard; do not let your minds be captured by hollow and delusive speculations based on tradi-

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tions of man-made teaching and centred on the elements of the universe⁵ and not on Christ.⁶

Epicureanism and Christianity: reasons for a comparison

Nevertheless there are good reasons for Hellenists to undertake the exploration, if only to eventually disprove this hypothesis. Here are some of them:

The Ancients did in fact put Epicureanism in the same category as Christianity, and considered both equally hateful and impious or atheistic: in this regard a passage is often quoted from a little work by Lucian of Samosata, *Alexander the False Prophet*. In the second half of the 2nd century AD this Alexander announced he was the prophet of a new god, the serpent Glycon, who was the child of the healer god Asclepius. He set the god's mysteries in the city of Abonotica, on what is the present-day Turkish shore of the Black Sea. And the liturgy for these mysteries began with the solemn banishing of unbelievers, and Alexander shouting 'Christians out!' with the crowd chorusing the response: 'Epicureans out!'⁷

Both doctrines of salvation (in this life or another) go back to a charismatic founder whose memory and cult they keep alive. Epicurus was hailed by his followers as a saviour god (*soter*), which in any case was not at all original during the Hellenistic period when kings especially could be similarly hailed (but we should note that the Seleucid king Demetrios I Soter was himself a fervent disciple of Epicureanism).⁸ More particularly they instruct us, but in different ways, not to fear death.⁹

The Epicureans, who seem to have integrated with remarkable success into Hellenistic and Roman society, nevertheless carried on from the outset a very lively argument with the other philosophical schools, particularly the Stoics. They were occasionally guilty of various obscure political manoeuvres,¹⁰ and were sporadically the butt of rejection and contempt whose extent is hard to gauge, in particular smear campaigns (and this is nothing new) regarding their sexual morals – and even in the end a real witch-hunt, with their writings being destroyed at roughly the same period as the persecution of the Christians.¹¹ The difference was that the Epicureans disappeared almost completely, while Christianity was becoming the dominant religion in the Roman empire. We may look back to Cicero's speech *Against Piso*, Plutarch's anti-Epicurean pamphlets, the burning of Epicurean writings organized and encouraged by Alexander of Abonotica according to the little work quoted above, some scandalous anecdotes recounted in Athenaeus and Elien,¹² which brings us up to the first half of the 3rd century. But already the Christians themselves have taken up the baton in criticizing the Epicureans (Origen, Lactantius), while disturbing connections nevertheless appear between the two schools, for instance with a certain Minucius Felix, a native of Africa, who tried to reconcile the new faith with the philosophical tradition around the 2nd or 3rd century.¹³ In 367 the emperor Julian the Apostate proclaimed himself delighted that the gods had almost annihilated the works of Epicurus:¹⁴ but Augustine, born in 354, states that in his youth he was tempted by the doctrine of Epicurus.¹⁵

It is possible to detect similarities between the organization and operation of the

two sects (I use the word sect in the sense the Greeks gave the word *hairesis*, which has given us heresy: a choice of doctrine that for the Ancients applied, from the Hellenistic period, to the philosophical options available, at it were, on the market, options that all included a theology and way of life whose specificities went as far as governing political activity, dress and diet).¹⁶ For example, Paul's use of letters both to work out and disseminate doctrine and to direct spiritually the many communities spread around the Greco-Roman world is quite similar to the network of Epicurean communities which were probably still very active in his time and operated via the internal circulation of people, books and letters, forming in fact a veritable network of influences present even in the highest circles of power. The great vitality of this network is well known to us from the lifetime of Epicurus up to Lucian's *Alexander*: in particular through the texts, which are still in the process of being deciphered, on the papyri from the Herculaneum library, whose original stock belonged to the Epicurean Philodemus, and those from the portico of the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenoanda, a veritable library on stone, on the Turkish mainland about the same latitude as Rhodes. The network was self-financing through contributions from its members. As for the Epicurean network's coverage, from the information we have we can draw a large tapering zone stretching from Egypt to Gaul (a 2nd-century Epicurean mosaic has been found at Autun in France), passing on the one hand through Syria, the Black Sea, Macedonia and the Po valley, on the northern arc; and on the other through Cyprus and Rhodes, the Peloponnese and Campania on the southern arc, though its presence in Africa still remains uncertain,¹⁷ as far as I know, and in the Iberian peninsula without evidence.¹⁸

Among these similarities I shall focus on three, relating to the climate of the communities, their behaviour and the emotional atmosphere – these are things that cannot be invented and are disseminated almost unconsciously:

(a) the Christian *agapê* in some ways recalls the Epicurean *philia*, which governed relations between the sect's members, and indeed it is significant that Paul does not use this latter term as if to emphasize the difference and mark out the Christian community as a new family governed by a spiritual kinship. Nevertheless in both cases there is a relationship of mutual confidence and affection that implies internal solidarity and abolition of all external social hierarchies: for the Epicureans kings, women, slaves, while remaining kings, women, and slaves, will nonetheless, in meetings of the sect, be treated on an equal footing with other members, with the consideration required to respect susceptibilities. This probably does not indicate a challenge to the established social order. But rather as within a household the wife or slave can also enjoy unquestioned confidence and authority, both sects function as private spaces. However, the differences remain considerable: for Paul women remain subject to men, even in the community space (and however eminent women's position may be among his co-religionaries), whereas in Epicurus's time women could direct the community in his absence; furthermore Paul mentions or implements veritable internal tribunals, a kind of internal government, as well as moral rules,¹⁹ of which we have no instance where the Epicureans are concerned. Another difference is that in Epicureanism a special bond of friendship links master to student and is raised into a veritable cult,²⁰ but without the least notion of subordination. By contrast Paul, who calls himself 'a servant of Christ', behaves like a

leader and disciplinary adviser, even when he also shows an older brother's tenderness.

(b) The coexistence of external social hierarchies and internal equality is common to both sects, but it poses a number of diplomatic problems for the Epicureans: in spite of everything each person's susceptibilities will have to be taken into consideration! Hence the need to adapt relationships and language depending on those speaking and being spoken to, even within the internal space. We have good knowledge of this thanks to a treatise by Philodemus on frankness or freedom of speech (*parrhêsia*), the principle of which governed internal relations but at the same time required a whole casuistry:²¹ in order to strengthen faith²² in the doctrine it was good to foster frank relations between members, who were to act as confessors to one another and admit the slightest doubt, be concerned about the least deviation, if necessary by alerting the whole community. However, there are recorded cases of exclusion among the Christians, and we even find the idea that it is necessary to cut off branches to heal the tree, whereas there is only a very small number of cases of deserters among the Epicureans.²³

(c) We have reason to compare 'speaking in tongues' among Christians possessed by the holy spirit during their meetings, like today's Pentecostalists, with the atmosphere that must have reigned at the Epicureans' festive meetings,²⁴ if we link it with the doctrine of the spontaneous expression of the voice of nature that was thought to be the origin of language and to which true speech necessarily conformed.²⁵ Paul says that from the outside meetings of the faithful possessed by the holy spirit made a rather bad impression and seemed like a sort of orgy or pandemonium.²⁶ At those meetings sharing food and passing round wine had an importance whose symbolic content was clearly very different from one sect to another.

But the comparison quite quickly reaches its limits insofar as for the Epicureans salvation lies in the specific asceticism leading to intellectual conversion, and for the Christians in an eschatological future that is near for us all but which conversion allows them to enter directly by themselves, and of which they are continually preparing the apocalypse by encouraging each other and enthusiastic renunciation. This situation advises Epicureans to make themselves available as necessary for leisure activities, while regularly sharing resources and even work²⁷ forms the basis of independence as regards food. Paul, who sometimes speaks favourably of benefits received²⁸ and launches great collections in the name of solidarity,²⁹ does not agree, on the other hand, that people should be dependent on their brothers and asks everyone to live off the work of their own hands, a situation that is hardly favourable to study. Finally we find exhortations to endurance, the moral fight, the pain and suffering of athletic effort, which are unthinkable in Epicureanism and similar to Stoic morality.³⁰

It was on this basis that N. W. De Witt thought he could assert that in several passages of his epistles Paul was addressing former Epicureans (especially among the Thessalonians and Corinthians), using certain key words from their vocabulary, whose meaning he subtly perverted: 'peace and salvation', 'plenitude', 'corruption' and 'incorruptibility', or the image of a 'song of victory' over death which no longer has its sting, an image that already featured in the *Vatican Sentence* 47; while the three

prominent ideas, 'faith, hope and charity', might together compose a typical anti-Epicurean slogan.³¹

Paul before the Athens Areopagus

Nevertheless there is only one explicit meeting between Paul and the Epicureans, specifically in chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles. And, as we have said, it is a hearsay witness who recounts the episode and maybe tells it in his own way.

We are in the early 50s of the Christian era. Paul on his second mission is in Athens, waiting to be joined by his companions Silas and Timothy. He preaches in the synagogue and also in public to whoever comes along. From Socrates and Plato we know the squares in Athens are crowded with people who have nothing better to do than sound off and try to bend the ears of idle young men.³² These people were called philosophers, and indeed there were some – Epicureans and Stoics, the other sects, except the Cynics, who no longer stooped to teaching in the open street – who were interested in this competitor and, amid the mocking remarks, were nonetheless sufficiently curious about new things to want to listen to him. But we should note that, in the implicit comparison with Socrates, it is Paul who has the role of philosopher, since he is assumed, as in the formal accusation against Socrates, who was found guilty of believing in new gods, to be teaching 'foreign gods'³³ or 'a new doctrine'.³⁴ They 'took hold of him'³⁵ and marched him to the Areopagus to question him. The text is ambiguous: is Paul being tried? The intention does not seem hostile: he is offered a platform so that he can be heard, rather than being put in the dock to be judged.³⁶ And Paul starts to preach 'standing in the midst' of the Areopagites,³⁷ but addressing the people's representatives as Socrates used to, calling them 'Gentlemen and Athenians', 'Citizens of Athens'.³⁸ He begins by describing them using a very strange phrase: 'You are in all things a little too superstitious',³⁹ but this is not a criticism, it is by way of congratulating them for keeping an altar for the 'unknown god',⁴⁰ a scruple that Paul's address reveals to be full of sense and foresight, since this in fact is the god Paul has come to announce, a creator god, a god who is *alive* like human beings – and not a kind of 'print', cast in gold, silver, marble, 'a work of human craftsmanship or design'.⁴¹ There again the phrase is interesting. It evokes both the sculptor's technique, carving, printing or moulding, and the written sign, the trace, as well as the whole thinking of Greek philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Epicureans) about the process of mental representation seen as a print left on the soul by the perceptions, even though they are intellectual perceptions. Thus the phrase links together the object-image and the subjective representation of the divinity, then rejects them both in the name of a god who is actually unknowable, since it is only by blindly 'groping'⁴² that we can find him, and find him not far away in fact but 'close to each one of us and truly alive'.⁴³ For a Greek this is something totally alien, this negation of the knowledge of God through representation, this groping and proximity instead of a fixed position (the sanctuary, the star or the Idea) which it would be possible to approach or retreat from, in distance or thought. Nevertheless the idea of a god-world, or a god immanent in the world, had existed in philosophical thought at least since Xenophanes, and the phrasing of v. 28:

'It is in him that it is given to us to live, move and have our being' could be endorsed by Stoic listeners.⁴⁴ Moreover the Areopagus could feel it was on familiar ground when Paul went on to refer to a myth of the first man, blending Greek tradition and Jewish Genesis: this god is installed not in the immutability of an eternal present, like the 'blessed gods who always exist' of the Homeric poems, or Parmenides' motionless god, but simultaneously at the source of becoming and in becoming, since human beings belong to his 'race' (*genos*),⁴⁵ as if he also lived in their bodies, in their ability to reproduce. However, two other characteristics, comprehensible to philosophers, are opposed to Athenians' traditional beliefs: this god has no need of humans,⁴⁶ but it is he who established the space and time of human life,⁴⁷ whereas the Greek gods must traditionally be fed by the sacrifices made by humans,⁴⁸ and honoured on the dates and in the places human beings have set aside for them on their territory and in their calendar. Among the Greeks, apart from stories and experiences of divine epiphanies, humans go to the gods and allot them their place, with their consent and sometimes at their request; here it is Paul's God who comes to human beings, who find themselves caught up in a general plan, part of the destiny of the whole of creation. But the end must have sounded crazy to the ears of our Athenians: the master of time yet himself involved in time, this god 'has fixed a day' for a judgement that he entrusts to a *man* of his choosing, and by way of proof and assurance, since belief was not in fact automatic, he brought that man back from the dead, inaugurating at the same time the present time⁴⁹ of accomplishment, when all are required to convert and repent.⁵⁰

So the text contains a half-scholarly, half-confused game, a game of echoes of and contrasts with Greek tradition, especially philosophical tradition but also that of cult practice. In it Paul stands his ground as a philosopher rather than a prophet. Indeed it was in the area of philosophy and not beliefs that Christianity and Hellenism went head to head, and we see here the first symptoms of that.⁵¹ As far as the Greeks were concerned, Jews with their strange customs had only been acceptable hitherto as philosophers of renunciation, practising an asceticism, in their refusal to eat with others, that was comparable to that of the Pythagoreans or the Indian Brahmins.⁵² Calling Paul's action philosophical is backed up later in Acts by the refusal by Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, to recognize crimes the apostle is alleged by his Jewish co-religionaries to have committed. They accuse Paul of impiety.⁵³ Gallio replies that it is simply a question of reasoning, words, and a law that is internal to the Jewish community, none of which fall under his jurisdiction. Since Socrates, at least in a Roman administrator's view, philosophy seems to have won the right to speak freely about the gods and import all the new gods it wishes, including the goddess 'Resurrection'.⁵⁴

We should note furthermore that in this catechesis addressed to the Athenians there is no stress at all laid on an opposition between Greek polytheism and Judeo-Christian monotheism, nor even between the many and the one. Paul simply says he is bringing another god, a god whose place was waiting to be filled, in the form of an anonymous altar, in the Athenians' pantheon. And this situation is not by any means new in the Greek pantheon: for instance Dionysus is by definition a god from abroad with odd characteristics.⁵⁵ The difference lies elsewhere, in the opposition between fabricated, visible gods and a living but invisible god, in the opposition

between shining statues and a modest altar; the originality of Paul's message is in the temporal dimension of a revelation, the 'groping' approach to the knowledge of God, the call that follows to a spiritual conversion, and the blurring of the markers between life, death and divine eternity. And it is not all this that appears to shock the Athenians. What offends them is above all the issue of the resurrection of the dead, which they have in any case initially understood (or pretended to) to be the name of a new female divinity. Conversely what had shocked Paul was the multiplicity of artistic images of gods all over the city.

So, despite all the strangeness⁵⁶ of Paul's words, the Athenians have encountered a philosopher among other philosophers who does not act like the prophet for a monotheism but rather like the apostle for a new life, a life changed by moral and mental conversion, and – the only real anomaly – by the weird sign of the resurrection.

The honour of being admitted to dispute with or against the Areopagus, or more certainly with the Epicureans and Stoics at the Areopagus, was probably one of the coveted peaks of a career as an intellectual in the Greece of the first few centuries of our era. We have some other examples.⁵⁷ Paul was always amazingly capable of adapting his speech to his audience (this is so even when it comes to the language used: Paul is Jewish for the Jews, Greek for the Greeks, Roman for the Romans); here he has chosen a philosopher's language. Not only out of cunning and calculation: if this story is true and not just an anecdote tacked on to a legend, Paul embarks on an exercise in persuasion, probably in all good faith, that might have been of supreme importance for him, regardless of what the narrator of the scene tells us, since he is addressing people who were considered in his time the elite among the citizens and thinkers of Athens, not to say the whole Greek world. Through the apostle's words Christ will have to be able somehow to impose himself on that territory too, he will have to don the garments of his time and be read in words that are not his natural speech. Surprising similarities, not of doctrine of course, but of language appear in this way, even with *Epicurean* philosophy. However contemptuous Paul might be of Athenians' garrulous nonchalance, the good fortune of stepping up to the Areopagus platform is a challenge he has to meet.

Paul and the Athens Epicureans

Indeed, among the theological models that form the background to Paul's speech we should not forget the doctrine of the Epicureans. Why do we privilege Epicurean philosophy here and not the Cynics, the Academy or the Stoics, which everyone normally cites frequently in relation to Paul's letters?⁵⁸ And why despite the atheism of which the Epicureans are so often accused? Paul probably knew them at close quarters, and there were good reasons for that.

Tarsus, where Paul grew up, was a very cultured town in Strabo's opinion.⁵⁹ Philosophers of opposing tendencies ruled it alternately. The mildness of its climate and the relaxed nature of its way of life were also renowned.⁶⁰ Paul, who took pride in the title of Roman citizen,⁶¹ must have come from a rich well-established Jewish family, and had doubtless enjoyed the best possible education, which was probably

not very different from the Greek model: archeologists digging at Sardis in Lydia even uncovered a gymnasium with baths and an integrated synagogue!⁶² Furthermore, in the Syrian and Anatolian area Epicurean ideas were very widespread and we have considerable evidence to that effect up to the 2nd and perhaps 3rd century of our era.⁶³ And Epicureanism was peculiar in this respect, that it was spread throughout all levels of society, as an active minority, and not just among intellectual circles.

Thus Paul cannot have had too much difficulty in getting on the Athenian philosophers' wavelength, and he was easily able to find the tone that was familiar to the milieu, weaving in jargon from the different schools and taking care not to appear ridiculous in front of his audience: nothing can have prevented him from even receiving honours from the illustrious Areopagus. Here we need to draw a comparison with a Greek inscription which postdates Paul's visit to Athens by at least half a century. The inscription comes from the town of Rhodiapolis on the southern coast of Anatolia.⁶⁴ The text probably dates from Trajan's reign (98–117). It concerns one Heraclitus, a rather exceptional character. He got himself noticed because of a unique combination of poetic and philosophical talents and his evergetism, which won him, in addition to his country's praise, honours from the greatest cities in literary Greece, Alexandria, Rhodes and Athens. And in Athens he boasts that he was congratulated by the Epicurean philosophers and the Areopagus. The Areopagus was a prestigious court owing to both its antiquity and its composition: its members were former *archontes*, the annual leaders in Athenian politics. For instance, we know that a certain Lysiades, son of Phaedrus the Epicurean, and most likely an Epicurean himself, had been an *archon* and consequently an Areopagite in 50 BC.⁶⁵ There is no reason why other Epicureans should not have followed him in that position as the years went by. But there were probably just as many Stoics there, since we also know, from Plutarch's⁶⁶ evidence and an honorific decree from the Areopagus,⁶⁷ of a Stoic philosopher this time, Sarapion by name, who is reputed to have had talents very similar to Heraclitus: on philosophical and serious topics he is supposed to have composed poems whose art reminded people of Homer and Hesiod rather, says the text, than the 'outpourings of the Pythia'.⁶⁸ We do not know which of the two, Heraclitus or Sarapion, tried to compete with the other, and whether it was the Epicurean or the Stoic who first had the honour of a decree from the Areopagus, but the comparison of Sarapion's scholarly art with grandiose oratory suggests a criticism of a predecessor – why not our Epicurean Heraclitus? Indeed a comparison of Epicurus with a prophet appears in Lucretius, who himself adopts an inspired tone.⁶⁹ We should note that it is possible that the honours granted by the Areopagus to the Epicurean poet Heraclitus may have been encouraged by the influence of a noble Epicurean lady of the time, the empress Plotina, wife of Trajan.⁷⁰

With Paul we are not yet in Plotina's period, but the Areopagus may, from his time, have included a greater or smaller number of Epicureans, since some elements of the apostle's speech seem to be directed to Epicurean ears. Let us list the features that justify putting forward this thesis.

When Paul criticizes the Areopagites for being 'a little too superstitious', he uses a word that means 'fearing the gods' and may refer to religious scruple as well as

superstition; and the high road to Epicurean salvation in fact consists of teaching people no longer to fear the gods. If Paul has an audience of Epicureans, the phrase becomes full of meaning, both flattering in tone and harsh in content. But the Epicureans in fact also practised a similar mixture of blame and praise, as we find Epicurus himself doing when in a letter he praises a gesture of enthusiasm from a disciple but calls it contrary to physical doctrine.⁷¹ The phrase that Paul then uses to reject idols moulded or imprinted on the soul may be an allusion to the Epicurean doctrine of the mental perception of divine images,⁷² supported by their ubiquitous representations in religious statuary. Instead of that mere visual and intellectual representation Paul suggests another approach to the divine, and this approach is in fact through what the Epicureans considered the supreme sense, the one to which all knowledge can in the last analysis be reduced: touch,⁷³ a blind 'groping'. Similarly it is by contrast with the Epicurean doctrine of gods unassociated with humans, far away in the between-worlds, that the mention of the Christian god's closeness assumes its full meaning, while on the other hand the plenitude of this Christian god and his living nature link in with the self-sufficiency and the life of Epicurus's god (denial of need for others, *prosdêsis*, is found in Epicurus in the context of the gods⁷⁴). The emphasis on the resurrection of the dead directly contradicts the Epicurean maxim that says death is an end that no longer involves us: compared with the dissolution of the body's ties, the 'material aggregate' (*sustasis*) of Epicurean language, the Christian argues that the body is physically reconstituted after death (*anastasis*). Finally the idea of having to make a change in mindset, the idea of a conversion (*metanoein*), is, under another name (*epi-spasmos*: the notion of an irresistible attraction to the mental image of the gods when they are postulated as anthropomorphic), at the heart of the doctrine and probably of a certain Epicurean practice, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere.⁷⁵

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Why should Paul have expressed himself before the Areopagus in terms that spoke to Epicureans? Apart from the likely presence of Epicureans in that respected Council, as suggested by the context and the inscriptions mentioned, the philosophy of the Garden had to be (with the caricatured and characteristic thought of the Cynics, but also in forms of syncretism at work in Stoic morality, which was being written at the same period, with Seneca and shortly after Musonius Rufus or Epictetus) the doctrine that everyone was most likely to know because, as I have suggested, it was the most widespread and also the easiest to get a handle on, especially in Syria where it took hold as early as the 3rd century BC. Indeed Paul had spent some considerable time in Antioch in Syria. Epicureanism had probably acquired an image that was both academic and accessible but to a middling sort of audience: people felt honoured to be able to approach those intellectuals, especially because they were flattered they managed to understand them despite the barrier of their school's jargon, which was quite easy to break through. But Paul knew them almost too well: he was able to play on their references, turn them to his advantage and to the glory of his beliefs. Maybe he had already converted many Epicurean people, in Syria and elsewhere.

So we might ask whether Paul's speech is all cunning and adaptability. Do we not need to make an honest effort to explain, to ourselves as well, the belief system we are defending when we are face to face with reputable opponents who are using their own language? Paul must have felt obliged to take on that language, and even that materialist mode of thought, in order to explain where he was coming from. In the case of the Epicureans he could not accuse them of atheism: in fact did they not have too many gods, and would it not very easily have been possible to turn the criticism back on him, since the Christians did not escape it? Nor of polytheism: had the Athenians not kept a place for the god he brought them? He himself does not stress at all that his god is the only one, but he does stress his creative activity, his providence and his in some way physical closeness, which makes him to a certain degree adaptable to a materialist doctrine like the Stoics'. Here divine ontology is essentially materialist. Christian spirituality, and more specifically the philosophical framework inspired by Plato in which Christianity later defined itself, are not yet in place.

In this case we can understand how it was that Paul failed before the Areopagus: he did not win the crown and honours that were later awarded to a Heraclitus of Rhodiapolis or a Sarapion. He had to give up competing on the terrain of Greek intellectual values, where other Jews, like Philo of Alexandria, had attempted to shine. At Corinth, his next stop, he made up his mind to work with his hands to support himself: the intellectual break led *de facto* to a social break far deeper than the literary or semi-literary retreat of the Garden.

What this example shows us is that at the time of the Acts there was no great gulf between atheism, polytheism and monotheism. We see at work here an attempt at religious self-definition in relation to the environment in which the subject is placed. Doctrine arises out of constant interactions and feeds on what it denies.

Renée Koch Piettre
École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. See Acts of the Apostles 17.14–15: Paul was alone in Athens. It is assumed that the witness was Dionysius the Areopagite, whom he converted that day.
2. Was Epicureanism absorbed by Christianity, as was argued by N. W. De Witt (*Epicurus and his Philosophy*, 1954; *St Paul and Epicurus*, 1964)? But W. Schmid (1984 [1964]), *Epicuro e l'epicureismo cristiano*, showed that the Fathers of the Church did not have a deep knowledge of Epicureanism. The comparison started up again with, for instance, Diskin Clay (1986) on the organization of the Epicurean sect, David Konstan (1996) on friendship in Greece (see the joint volume edited by John T. Fitzgerald [1996], or the joint publication [1998] of Philodemus' treatise 'On freedom of speech', in *On Frank Criticism*), Clarence E. Glad (1995) on Epicurean and Pauline psychagogy. Also Abraham J. Malherbe (1987) and (1992), particularly pp. 301–4. See also Fitzgerald et al. (2004).
3. We should remember Karl Marx wrote his doctoral thesis on the philosophy of nature in Epicureanism and Democritus.
4. See Obbink (1989).

5. In Greek: *stoicheia tou kosmou*. In this phrase, though the 'elements' (*stoicheia*) may make us think of atoms (Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*, 86), the word *kosmos*, 'the ordered universe', is incompatible with Epicurean thought, according to which there is no order governing the universe.
6. Quotations in English from the Bible are from the New English Bible (2nd edn 1970), adapted where necessary (translator's note).
7. Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 38.
8. See a papyrus from Herculaneum on the life of Epicurus Philonides, whose classes King Demetrios attended daily (edited by I. Gallo, 1980).
9. In this area the sects, whether philosophical or religious, competed with one another: the Epicureans would remain firm in their contentment 'even in the bull of Phalaris' (a bronze bull placed in a fire), the Stoics would commit suicide if they could no longer bear pain, and the Christians run towards martyrdom laughing and singing. See Bowersock (1995).
10. See for instance Plutarch, *Moralia*, 434d; Athenaeus V, 215b.
11. Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 47.
12. Aelian, *Varia Historia* IX, 12, see Athenaeus, XII, 547a; Aelian, fr. 92a–92k in the Domingo-Forasté edition.
13. Simpson (1941).
14. Julian, *Epistle* 89b, I, 2, 169, 15–18 (ed. Bidez). Augustine too confirms that the Epicureans had almost disappeared by his time (*Epistles* 118, 21).
15. Augustine, *Confessions* VI, 26.
16. See Hadot (1995).
17. But see De Witt (1954: 351 *et seq.*).
18. See, for example, Canfora (1993). I am preparing a book on Epicureanism to be published by Belin (Paris).
19. I Corinthians 5–7. See Glad (1995: 315–32).
20. See Clay (1986, 1998).
21. For instance, it was advisable to be aware that frankness should be used with greater care towards women than men, since the former were often very touchy.
22. The word *pistis* is used by the Epicureans too, but with a different meaning (persuasion, conviction brought about by rational discourse).
23. When someone asked Arcesilas, the sixth successor to Plato in the Academy, 'why students were abandoning the other schools in favour of Epicurus's, but never the Epicureans', Arcesilas replied that 'men can become eunuchs, but eunuchs cannot become men' (Diogenes Laertius, IV, 43).
24. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1098b and 1125b.
25. Lucretius, V, 1028–90; Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 76.
26. I Corinthians 14.
27. Diogenes of Oenoanda, fr. 56 (ed. Smith).
28. Philippians 4.12–16.
29. 2 Corinthians 9.
30. 2 Timothy 2.3–6.
31. See I Corinthians 13. For the references, see the Index in De Witt (1954), *Epicurus*, s.v. Paul, Saint.
32. See Plato, *Gorgias*, 485d. In the 2nd century Celsus describes very similar behaviour among Christians (Origen, *Against Celsus* III, 50).
33. *Xenōn daimoniōn*, v. 18.
34. *Kainē didachē*, v. 19.
35. *Epilabomenoi de autou*, *ibid.* Apart from Socrates' appearance before his judges, the writer may also have had in mind the appearance of Jesus before the 'Council of the ancients of the people, high priests and scholars', the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, Luke 22.63–71 (Matthew 26.57–66; Mark 14.53–65).
36. For some while people wondered if the allusion was to the hill of that name or the Council of the Areopagus: quite clearly it is the Council, which in Paul's time 'carried out the government of the city, . . . in particular being responsible for the education given to the young', and it was no longer housed on the hill but probably 'in the rooms of the royal Portico, adjacent to the Portico of Zeus

- Eleutherios on the western side of the Agora at the end of the Panathenaic way'. Paul 'could expect after this interrogation to be officially authorized to teach in public' (Saffrey, 1991: 79). See also Hugédé (1982: 99–154).
37. There have been many commentaries on this text. For example Norden (1913: 3–140); Dibelius (1939); Des Places (1969: 329–61); Dupont (1984: 380–423), 'Le discours à l'Aréopage'.
 38. *Andres Athenaioi*, v. 22.
 39. *Kata panta hōs deisidaimonesterous*: or 'especially religious'? (v. 22).
 40. *Agnōstōi theōi*, v. 23. For the archeological discussion around this altar see Leclercq (1938). For the interpretation see Norden (1913).
 41. *Charagmati technēs kai enthumēseōs anthrōpou*, v. 28.
 42. *Psēlaphēseian*, v. 27. The verb is familiar to users of the Greek bible, the Septuagint; Luke uses it in the passage where the resurrected Jesus invites the disciples to 'touch' him (Luke 24.39), but it is also attested among the Epicureans (Epicurus and Philodemus).
 43. *Ou makran apo henos hekastou hēmōn huparchonta*, v. 27.
 44. See Diogenes Laertius VII, 147, and in general Cicero, *On the nature of gods*, II.
 45. Here Paul quotes a line from a poem by Aratos, who came from Tarsus like him: 'We are of the race of God' (contrast with Pindar, *Nemean* VI, 1–3). This same line had already been quoted two centuries earlier by the Alexandrian Jewish writer Aristobulus. As H. D. Saffrey (1991) explains, it is 'simply the Hellenistic Jewish interpretation of the Genesis text'.
 46. The idea of divine autonomy is of a piece with that of divine perfection and it is part of every rational definition of the god.
 47. V. 26. These words may possibly be understood with reference to the doctrine of Providence as the Stoics argued it.
 48. As depicted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* or Aristophanes' *Birds*.
 49. *Ta nun*, v. 30.
 50. *Metanoein*, *ibid*.
 51. With varying emphases it is as such a head-to-head that writers have generally described Paul's speech at the Areopagus. Apart from Norden, Dibelius, Des Places, Dupont, quoted above, see Nock (1972: 63–8); Malherbe (1989).
 52. See Theophrastus quoted by Porphyry, *On abstinence* II, 26; Clearchus quoted by Josephus, *Against Apion* I, 179; Megasthenes quoted by Clement, *Stromateis* I, 15, 72, 5 (texts cited in Borgeaud, 2004: 84–7).
 53. 'This man is inducing people to worship God in ways that are against the law' (Acts 18.12–16).
 54. Are Paul's listeners confusing the Resurrection (*anastasis* in Greek) with a goddess who would form a pair with Jesus?
 55. See for example Euripides' *Bacchanals*.
 56. This idea of strangeness appears in v. 20 in the word *xenizonta*.
 57. See Damis the Epicurean in Lucian, *Zeus trag.*, and Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* IV, 19.
 58. See for example Malherbe (1989). Epicurus is cited only as a negative contrast, which is what he largely remained in the patristic tradition; see Jungkuntz (1966).
 59. Strabo noted that 'the inhabitants of Tarsus have devoted themselves so passionately not only to philosophy but also to all the intellectual disciplines that they have surpassed Athens, Alexandria and every other place where philosophers have directed schools and given classes' (XIV, 5, 12–15): see Lentz (1998: 47).
 60. See Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* I, 7.
 61. For a dossier on Paul's Roman citizenship: Lentz (1998: 63–73).
 62. Kraabel (1978); Trebilco (1986); Lentz (1998: 51).
 63. Crönert (1907); Smith (1996).
 64. See Tod (1957); Oliver (1975).
 65. See Raubitschek (1949: 101–3; 1991: 337–44).
 66. Plutarch, *Moralia* 396f, see 402f.
 67. Oliver (1973).

68. We may think of the art of Lucretius, the Latin poet: a didactic poem, an oracular tone, in a hexameter borrowed from the epic tradition.
69. Lucretius, III, 14.
70. She had simultaneously encouraged the 'sacred synod of theatre people', an association of actors, dramatists and other intellectuals brought together under the emperor's 'sacred' patronage: that 'sacred synod' about which we in fact read, in the Rhodiapolis inscription, that it too bestowed its honours on Heraclitus.
71. Use of the word *aphysiologētos*, see Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes* 17, *Moralia* 1117b.
72. Called *eidōla*, see earlier in the text of Acts the term *kateidōlon* describing Athens as 'full of idols'.
73. According to the Epicureans every sensation stems from a contact between the emanations of perceived bodies and the sense organs. See Lucretius, IV, for details of the processes.
74. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 77 (no *prosdēsis tōn plēsion*, no 'need for close relationships').
75. Piettre (1998). The chief reference is a text attributed to the Epicurean Demetrius Laco, recently published under the title *La forma del dio* and edited and translated by Mariacarolina Santoro (2000).

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