THUCYDIDES AND RELIGION

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As many have noted, the gods are conspicuous by their absence in Thucydides. This must constitute a deliberate policy on the part of the historian, as no other literary genre of the period dispenses with the gods in the same way. Apart from poetry (e.g., tragedy), which is peopled by speaking and acting gods, prose genres, too, openly refer to divine intervention in human affairs. This is true of Herodotus,\footnote{See now Mikalson (2002).} true of fifth-century forensic oratory. Why this reticence about the gods in Thucydides? Was it because he was, in the words of an ancient commentator, “godless to a degree” (ἀθεος ἣρεμα)?\footnote{Antyllos ap. Marcellinum Vit. Thuc. 22.} Or could it be that his refusal to speculate on divine will and agency was a token of respect for a sphere of knowledge surpassing human comprehension? Both positions are, \textit{prima facie}, tenable. The first would suggest a historian who, in the wake of the sophistic enlightenment, omitted religion as an irrelevant, outmoded view of the world and human life; the second might see in Thucydides a representative of that “ancient simplicity”\footnote{To quote the subtitle of Williams (1998).} that recognized an inseparable divide between men and gods, and, while recognizing the superiority of the divine, concentrated on the human as the only sphere accessible to rational analysis. In fact a large part of previous literature on the question of “Thucydides and Religion” is concerned with this question of the personal piety/belief, or lack of it, in the author himself.\footnote{For a history of views on this question from the nineteenth through the twentieth century see Marinatos-Kopff (1978) 1–39 and (abbreviated) Marinatos (1981b) 1–16. In broad outline Marinatos traces the development from a nineteenth-century conviction that Thucydides was pious to an early twentieth-century view that he was a rationalist through-and-through. Her attribution of the source of this latter position to Meuss (1892) is a little misleading as Meuss assumes an “agnostic” position on Thucydides’ personal beliefs; what he does is go through the relevant passages in the History to show that none proves Thucydides’ belief in the gods.} I believe this approach is doomed to failure ultimately as there is simply no way of knowing whether Thucydides himself believed in the gods or
not; his reticence is total on this point. Although some have tried to deduce a modicum (or more) of personal belief in traditional religion from isolated remarks in the *History*, it is my belief that not one extant passage is sufficient to acquit, or condemn, the historian of the charge of atheism in our sense (denial of the existence of gods). But while Thucydides refuses to speculate on whether a god helped the Athenians or the Spartans at a certain juncture of the war, he took a keen interest in how actors on the historical stage interpreted what were commonly taken as divine signs, and how they viewed their own actions and positions with respect to divine goodwill. For Thucydides, contemporary religion is one aspect—a vital one—of the societies he wishes to depict at war. He refrains utterly from passing judgement on whether the gods favored one side or the other; but he records with accuracy how both sides sought to exploit the factor of divine favor in their own interests. As we shall see, Thucydides is primarily interested in religion—and by that I mean the world of the gods—as a key element in the psychology of the warring parties. Where people at the time were prone to read religious significance into “signs” in heaven or on earth, Thucydides is determined to undermine any confidence in the possibility of reading gods’ minds from physical evidence. Where historical characters make reference in their speeches to the gods, Thucydides reads these remarks as evidence of the psychological state of the speaker or his

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5 Esp. Marinatos (1981b), Oost (1975); the response of Dover (1988c) to Marinatos is fascinating; on the strength of the “plague oracles” he confirms her opinion that Thucydides’ choice of words reflects a belief “in the existence of some superhuman power . . . which could . . . communicate foreknowledge to humans” (69), but, in view of Thucydides’ sarcastic remark about prophetic utterances in 5.26.3f., believes the historian’s belief had changed in the course of the intervening years. It does not seem to me that the “plague oracles” reveal anything like “belief” in traditional religion in Thucydides (see below).

6 Let us not forget that “atheism”, being *atheos*, meant something quite different to fifth-century Athenians: it meant challenging accepted belief or practice in recognized cults. See Winiarczyk (1990) and (1992). In Winiarczyk’s catalogue of atheists (1984) only the Marcellinus passage is cited for Thucydides.

7 For quite a full catalogue of passages in which religion plays a part, see Jordan (1986). The remark of Crane (1996) 164, “no author of the classical period expresses less interest in religion than does Thucydides” seems to me wrong; one must distinguish between reticence about theodicy, i.e., the author’s judgement upon divine intervention in human affairs, and religion itself seen as a social phenomenon.

8 Flashar (1969) 31: “Die religiöse Dimension im Werk des Thukydides ist also unüberhörbar, aber Thukydides hält ein göttliches Einwirken von den das Geschehen auslösenden Kräften in seiner Darstellung fern”.