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PRODICUS: DEIFYING USEFULNESS

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Summary. Prodicus probably distinguished two stages in the development of religion: the phase of divinizing anything beneficial and the phase of divinizing the discoverers of beneficial inventions would be proclaimed divine. The primary innovation of the theory lies in the motive for an introduction of divinities, namely appreciation: what is appreciated can be divinized whether part of nature or something invented by men.

Resumen. Pródico distinguía probablemente dos etapas en el desarrollo de la religión: la fase de divinización de algo beneficioso y la fase de divinización de los descubridores de invenciones beneficiosas, que serían proclamados divinos. La innovación principal de la teoría radica en el motivo para la introducción de divinidades, a saber, la apreciación: lo que es apreciado puede ser divinizado, ya sea parte de la naturaleza, ya sea algo inventado por los hombres.

Protagoras expressed his agnosticism with respect to the existence of the gods and their essence but did not deny the obvious fact of the existence of religion. In his mythological explanation, religion appeared at the dawn of humanity. By the presence of reason, people recognized their distinctive mark differentiating them from the animal world, and they saw in that rationality an infusion of something that stems from the higher plane, from the gods. Thus, the beginning of humanity is marked by the beginning of religion and only afterwards does the development of crafts take place.

Prodicus, a younger contemporary of Protagoras, does not have epistemological scruples in stating something about the gods, namely that they do not exist, and he brings the phenomenon of religion much closer to earth, in fact, quite literally. Prodicus “derived all of mankind’s sacrifices and mysteries and

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cults from the fair works of tillage since, in his opinion ... the idea of the gods comes to men in this way” (Themistius, *Or.* 30 = B5). The key to the emergence of religion is usefulness.

Prodicus is said to have distinguished two stages in the development of religion.¹ In the first stage, “the things that nourish and benefit us were first acknowledged and honored as gods.” The beneficial things included “the sun, the moon, and rivers and springs and in general anything that is beneficial to our life because of the benefit derived from them, just as the Egyptians [deify] the Nile” (SE 9.18 = B5). In the second phase, people who benefited others – “discoverers of foods and shelter and other skills” – were elevated to divine status (Persaeus, *ap. Philodemus, De pietate* col. 9 = B5). According to another source, “Prodicus says that those were accepted as gods who, when wandering, contributed to human welfare with discoveries of new crops” (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 21.2). That is, in the first phase, anything beneficial would be a subject of divinization, in the second phase, the discoverers of beneficial inventions would be proclaimed divine. The second phase places the emphasis of human impact on the development of human civilization – particularly in the area of agriculture; the first phase treats on a par natural entities and entities created by men. This would reflect the Sophist view of the development of human society from simple and disorganized to more developed and civilized as reflected in the myth of Protagoras. It could be, in fact, possible that the view of two stages in the development of religion was accepted by Prodicus.

Prodicus uses ethnographic data from different parts of the world and, to some extent, performs research in comparative religion. In particular, he uses data from Greek fertility cults, from Egypt where the Nile is worshipped, and probably from Persian religion he uses data concerning the veneration of the sun, moon, earth, fire, water, and winds as did Herodotus (1.131.2); the mysteries to which he refers are doubtless Eleusinian mysteries and probably other cults, such as Thesmophoria.² However, Greek religion, in particular, could be used in justifying the validity of Prodicus’ theory of religion. For the Greeks, the sun (Helios) and the moon (Artemis or Selene) are gods and so are rivers – for example, Achelous (Homer, *Il.* 21.194), Xanthus, i.e., Scamander (5. 77-78, 20.74), and Spercheus (16.174). The divinities of the first phase are still recognized and still worshipped.

¹ The two-stage theory of religious development was first claimed for Prodicus by Wilhelm Nestle, *Bemerkungen zu den Vorsokratikern und Sophisten*, *Philologus* 67 (1908), 556-558.

² Albert Henrichs, *The Sophists and Hellenistic religion: Prodicus as the spiritual father of the Isis aretologies*, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984), 143-144.

As to the second phase in the development of religion, it is enough to notice that popular religion presented the gods as givers of particular goods. For example, Athena was a goddess not only of wisdom but also of weaving, spinning, making pots, and building ships. Triptolemus was considered a son of Uranus, but some viewed him as a man who was made a god after death. He gave grain and culture to men and taught the use of the plough; he traveled all over the world to teach people how to grow wheat and corn. Aristaeus, a son of Apollo, taught people how to keep bees, raise vines and olives and invented bookkeeping. Demeter was a goddess of agriculture, productive soil, and fruitfulness of mankind. Dionysus was a god of wine. Hermes was a god of trade, travelers, commerce, and manual skill. Hestia was a goddess of the hearth. That much was uncontroversial. What was new in Prodicus' theory was reducing the gods to human status. They were givers of goods, but human givers, not divine. They were proclaimed to be gods by grateful men, and so, in reality, they are gods only in name, not in essence. The gods are thus men called gods; the gods are but a human invention.

The sources mention Prodicus' reference to specific deities. However, the sources are not in agreement on at what stage they emerged. Philodemus reports that according to Prodicus, Demeter and Dionysus are deified discoverers, and Sextus says that "bread was called Demeter, wine Dionysus," etc. because of their usefulness (9.18). It seems incongruous that Prodicus would at the same time say that Demeter is a deified person and deified bread. An explanation could be that Demeter was the name of a discoverer of bakery and Dionysus the name of a discoverer of winery, and so their names were used for the products of their inventions, which were also divinized. After all, Homer used the name of a god for a substance associated with a god when he said that "they spitted the entrails and held them over Hephaestus" (*Il.* 2.426). Prodicus could claim that divinization of discoveries may have been followed by divinization of discoverers with retaining the same name. In particular, the divinized bread was called Demeter, and then the name was transferred to the discoverer of bread.³

³ Therefore, it is not necessarily true that Sextus "grossly distorts" Prodicus' doctrine "by his metonymical identification of the deified benefactors with the *res utiles* with which they became associated, thereby as much obscuring the very distinction which Prodicus himself was careful to make." Prodicus knew metonymy as applied to gods, but he "could not accept such identifications without contradicting his own religious theory. Therefore, his reference to them must have been critical," Albert Henrichs, Two doxographical notes: Democritus and Prodicus on religion, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 79 (1975), 110 note 64.

As interesting as the problem of the existence of two phases in Prodicus' theory may be, it is of secondary importance. The primary innovation of the theory lies in the motive for an introduction of divinities. For his contemporary, Democritus, when he said that popular religion attributed divinity to various natural phenomena such as lightning, conjunction of stars, or eclipses of the sun, the motive was fear because people were afraid of them (SE 9.24 = 68A75).⁴ For Prodicus, it was appreciation⁵: what is appreciated can be divinized whether part of nature or something invented by men. The sun or water in general or a particular body of water is greatly appreciated as something that enables the very life of any living being and thus is divinized. Bread and wine, appreciated as maintaining and enhancing human life, are divinized as well.

It is interesting to observe that for Socrates and for the Stoics, the existence of useful things was a testimony of the beneficence of the gods, of divine providence, and of the existence of the gods. For Prodicus, it is the other way around: the existence of useful and beneficial things led to the creation of the gods by man. He could say that the existence of the gods is a proof of the existence of beneficial things in nature. An analysis of a society's mythology would reveal what is useful for the society although Prodicus would probably add that some connections between particular divinities and useful things could become obscured by time.

Does this make Prodicus an atheist? Prodicus' theory was espoused much later by Persaeus, a minor Stoic, who, according to Philodemus, was clearly "doing away with the divine or was a complete agnostic about it." The statement, however, seems to be too strong. The Stoics were keenly interested in demythologization of popular religion, but they were nevertheless believers in the existence of God who is in control of the events in the universe.⁶ Also, before Prodicus, explanations of human origin of popular religion were undertaken by

⁴ For Democritus, fear was also a source of various ideas considered the afterlife (Stobaeus 4.52.40 = 68B297).

⁵ According to Prodicus, "the sense of gratitude based on the assessment of value is the source of religion," Andrzej Bańkowski, *Prodikos z Keos i jego teoria religii*, *Euhemer* 6 (1962), no. 3, 17.

⁶ Adam Drozdek, *Theology of the Early Stoa*, *Emerita* 71 (2003), 88-89. Also, Cicero presents Persaeus' views in the context of discussing views of other Stoics, whereas Prodicus' views are presented among those who "utterly undermine all religion"; cf. Bańkowski, *op. cit.*, 20; Bernd Effe, *Προτέρε γενερή – eine stoische Hesiod-Interpretation in Arats Phainomena*, *Rheinisches Museum* 113 (1970), 179 note 51. According to later Stoics, those who benefited mankind "were translated to heaven through their fame and our gratitude" (Cicero, *ND* 2.62).

writers who did not reject the sphere of the divine, to mention only Xenophanes. Explanation of the human origin of the gods can very well be reconciled with religious beliefs. It is thus theoretically possible that Prodicus could be a believer in nontraditional deity or deities.⁷ However, this is highly unlikely. Sextus includes him on a short list of those who are called *atheoi*, i.e., those who say that God does not exist (SE 9.51 = B5), which means that it was not just Sextus' opinion that Prodicus was an atheist. Sextus is the only source in which Prodicus is explicitly called *atheos*. However, Prodicus' religious nonconformity is mentioned more than once. Already in his times, Aristophanes mentions him derisively as being praised by the Clouds after they appear on the scene as new deities (*Clouds* 360-361 = A5) and when he mentions him in the company of corrupting books and babblers (fr. 490 = A5). Also, Plato referred to him as Tantalus (*Prot.* 315bc). This is because Tantalus became a paradigm of "hubristic audacity" and "hubris against the gods," a parasitical blasphemer, and so Prodicus is presented as an arch-blasphemer.⁸ Finally, a fragment of Philodemus' *De pietate*, *PHerc* fr. 19, explicitly states that Prodicus maintains that the gods of popular religion do not exist.⁹ Still, an argument *ex silentio* could be made that he did not deny the existence of all possible divine beings and that he could have maintained that a divinity such as Anaximander's *Apeiron* or Anaxagoras' Mind exists. However, it is very unlikely that Prodicus made such an argument and the argument was not recorded. But a slim possibility exists that no testimony simply survived. The example of Xenophanes indicates that the denial of traditional gods can be reconciled with an arguably grander theological vision than traditional polytheism. Anaxagoras and Socrates are examples of philosophers who, notwithstanding their theology, were considered atheists¹⁰ and were accused of impiety. However, their theological views are known to us, and it is certain that atheism meant disbelieve in the traditional image of the gods, not complete disbelief in the existence of any divinity. Therefore, because there is no trace of Prodicus' positive theology, considering Prodicus as an atheist seems to be rather well founded.

⁷ The view that he could have been "an ardent worshipper of the gods of popular religion" (Marek Winiarczyk, *Methodisches zum antiken Atheismus*, *Rheinisches Museum* 133 (1990), 7) can be defended if the worship was done for social or cultural, but not for religious, reasons.

⁸ C.W. Willink, Prodikos, 'meteorosophists' and the 'Tantalos' paradigm, *Classical Quarterly* 33 (1983), 31-33.

⁹ Henrichs, *op. cit.*, 107; Albert Henrichs, The atheism of Prodicus, *Cronache Ercolanesi* 6 (1976), 15, 20.

¹⁰ Irenaeus 2.14 = 59A113; Plato, *Apol.* 26c; Xenophon, *Apol.* 10.

For this reason, it is very much in doubt that Prodicus “reserved a place for the gods.”¹¹ He mentions that reality is to be constituted by gods and how kindly they look upon those who persevere (Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.27-28 = B2), but the statements are made in a fictionalized conversation of Virtue and Vice with Heracles and so they have as much value about the true belief of Prodicus in the gods as the myth from the *Protagoras* has about true beliefs of Protagoras in the gods. Moreover, it is purely speculative that “Prodicus tries to reconcile popular religion and philosophy in some fashion without annihilating in the supreme power of the God of Nature the separate gods who are in some way his manifestations.”¹² There is no trace of Prodicus’ belief in the God of Nature and if he did express such a belief, the result of the reconciliation would be unacceptable for the religious because the gods would be removed from the world scene altogether. In this way, God would be manifested by natural resources and by inventive people only; therefore, the God of Nature would dissolve in Nature and in the social realm.

Prodicus assumes that man is a rational being because a measure of rationality is necessary to invent rites, cults, and deities representing things beneficial in life. Animals do not have religion because they are not rational, although, to paraphrase Xenophanes, if they could draw, they would make images of gods representing things beneficial to them. For most of them, they would be, as for humans, the moon, sun, and water. But in addition to those, for oxen would be hay, for bears would be honey, and for bees would be flowers.

The origin of religion according to Protagoras hardly lends itself to a rational explanation. Religion emerges first and then emerge language and different practical skills. The role of religion is also unclear if a sociological explanation is attempted. Prodicus removes any unclarity. By claiming that “the idea of the gods” is derived from “the fair works of the tillage,” Prodicus closes the door on the possibility that maybe the divine sphere exists – at least the sphere of traditional divinities – but is inaccessible for human cognition. The otherworldly sphere is removed from Prodicus’ universe. Religion is pure invention of men who elevate to the divine status what and who is useful: useful things and human benefactors. Prodicus is original in this because he is the only Sophist to deify human inventors.

The reason for choosing usefulness in his explanation of the phenomenon of religion may also be quite prosaic. Prodicus appears to have been

¹¹ Jacqueline de Romilly, *The great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992, 194; she is right, however, when she says that Prodicus “offers an anthropological and positivist explanation” of religion, p. 107.

¹² Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, New York: Philosophical Library 1954, 211.

touched by megalomania: it is hardly possible that any shy and modest teacher would charge the exorbitant fee of 50 drachmas for his lessons so that only a few could afford them.¹³ To be sure, such prices need to be justified somehow, and the usefulness would be certainly a top reason to pay for the lessons. This was not an unimportant problem for the Sophists as seen in Plato's account of longwinded justification given by Protagoras that, in spite of the fact that everyone is endowed with the political virtue necessary for the existence of the city, a Sophist is needed to set the city and its citizens on the right course. Prodicus may have gone further in such a justification by suggesting that usefulness was so appreciated by all peoples that it led to the emergence of religion. All religions witness to the veneration of the benefactors of people. Such benefactors are discoverers in civic engineering, cooking, and various "useful skills." Prodicus himself was renowned for his linguistic studies, in particular, the problem of synonymy. Using this skill, he certainly could teach his pupils more than they could say in prose. For him, this certainly was a useful skill and worthy of charging high fees. Therefore, a claim can be made that among the ones elevated to divine status are also the Sophists of old.¹⁴ The honor paid to them sufficiently justifies the usefulness of the Sophists. Furthermore, it is not impossible that Prodicus saw himself as a candidate for such an elevation by his contemporaries if only because he saw himself as a discoverer of the skill of discourse (Plato, *Phaedr.* 267b = A20). And, to some extent, he got his wish when Plato, probably tongue in cheek,¹⁵ called him divine (θεῖος, *Prot.* 316a = A2; θεσπέσιος, *Theaet.* 151b = A3a).

¹³ Plato, *Crat.* 384b = A11; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1415b15-17 = A12. Cf. the opinion that he was fond of making money, Philostratus, *Soph.* 1.12 = A1.

¹⁴ Protagoras says that the Sophist's art is ancient (Plato, *Prot.* 316d), an opinion which Prodicus very well may have shared. A possibility of divinizing philosophers is mockingly mentioned by Sextus 9.41 and immediately dismissed as ludicrous. It may not have been so ludicrous to Prodicus.

¹⁵ Zeller's claim that Plato mentions Prodicus in his dialogues only mockingly is documented by Richard Heinze, Über Prodikos aus Keos, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Classe* 36 (1884), 315-335.