Fear, Anxiety, and Terror in the Seventeenth Century

by Andreas Bähr

In 1623, the Thirty Years War had already been going on for five years when the Jesuit priest and polymath Athanasius Kircher was awarded the mission to teach Greek at the Order’s college in the Saxonian city of Heiligenstadt. On the way there, as he reports in his autobiography, he was met by a remarkable “misadventure.” Although Kircher had to pass through one of the “heretical” Protestant regions, he threw caution to the wind, deciding not to hide his religious affiliation along the route. “I would rather die dressed in my Order’s habit than travel un molested in secular clothing.”[1] What outsiders feared, and what Kircher fully took in willingly, was shortly awaiting him in the “gloomy wild” “Höllental” (“Valley of Hell”) between Eisenach and Marksuhl. While in the woods, Kircher would be encircled by encamped riders, recognized by his habitus as a Jesuit, only then to be robbed, beaten, and injured. And in their furor the tormentors went even further. Since these “heretics,” as it seemed to Kircher, were not out solely for greed, but rather filled with “impalpable hatred against Jesuits,” they set on to hang their victim and so led Kircher to the tree prepared for executions.[2] When the threatened man recognized the hopelessness of the situation, he “in tears recommended myself with immense fervour to God and the Mother of God.”[3] Kircher prepared himself for martyrdom: “I thanked benevolent God for deeming me worthy to suffer death for the honour of His most holy name.”[4] His tears streamed “abundantly” and they had a remarkable effect. What flowed out as tears, returned as consolation to such an extent as Kircher had never known in his life.[5] “All my terror had vanished and I felt the greatest readiness to surrender for God my life and body.”[6] This tearful fearlessness, the willingness to “calmly” (composito animo)[7] accept what had been dreaded, made it possible to ward off the threat. Through the tears of the victim, one of the soldiers was so “seized with compassion” (commiseratione tactus)[8] that he appealed to his companions not to stain their hands with the blood of an innocent. Though the Jesuits had done evil, Kircher should not pay for it. Upon closer inspection, the clothing by which they thought they recognized him hid his true self. Whoever kills this innocent, so claimed the speaker, awaits divine punishment. The words did not fail to have effect. The riders released Kircher and, as he tells, returned his stolen goods to him. But that is not enough: “As if seized by panic, they fled into the forest, leaving me alone with my clothes and the papers I had been carrying.”[9] Only Kircher’s rescuer returned to ask for an intercession on his own behalf, so that the crime not be imputed upon him, and to urge Kircher to leave the dangerous area. This time the traveler heeded the advice, thankful to almighty God for the proof of his protection, if not without regret that, “such an opportunity of dying for the honour of God had been taken from me.”[10]

What has happened here? Athanasius Kircher recognizes that his own strength cannot help him get out of the life-threatening situation in which he has found himself. However, this understanding does not make Kircher despair, nor does it make him a defenseless victim – rather it leads to a God-fearing trust. Kircher’s initial fear turns into fearlessness, which takes away this fear’s cause; this fearlessness in turn frightens the adversaries and causes them to flee. This is noteworthy. After all, the victim here is by no means becoming the aggressor; he is not actively offering resistance. This means that the soldiers do not fear any physically violent action from the strengthened mental state of the victim, rather they fear the fearlessness of the martyr. This fearlessness is Kircher’s decisive weapon and in one of the soldiers it evokes empathy and a change of heart: the comprehension that Kircher is better than previously thought. For the others, it sets them in a “panicked fright.” This is a state characterized by emotional theorists of the time by an absence of rational thinking, a primary bodily reaction, and in Kircher’s description, only to be explained through the threat of divine punishment. In actuality, this was more than just a threat. The fear of punishment became a punishment in this world already, became a sanction, which prevented the action meriting sanction. The soldier’s fear was not caused by the fearless Kircher himself, but rather by God, who had bestowed him with this fearlessness and who would punish those that threaten the innocent.[11]

This then means: it is not Athanasius Kircher who is acting, but his God. The fear with which he “attacked”[12] the soldiers physically drove them to flee. Similar events were observed by the Dominican nun Maria Anna Junius in late summer of 1634, as Swedish troops besieged the Monastery of the Holy Grave near Bamberg; and by eyewitnesses in September 1683, when the Turks panicked and abandoned their camp after a two month long siege of Vienna. Contemporary reports declare with surprise that the Swedes, like the Ottomans, had no immediate reason to flee, for in the moments in question, their military positions were in no way unfavorable. Thus the observer could only explain this event as divine intervention. God “struck” the godless with fear, the fear of the orthodox, and drove them away in this manner.[13]
These "strokes" of fear are not to be understood as metaphors. This also becomes clear in those cases and situations in which the outlined principle works the other way round. If fearlessness drove away what was feared, fear, in turn, attracted it. Of this many contemporaries were convinced. Physicians were especially aware of this. They (as well as many laymen) purported that those who feared the plague were especially apt to becoming its victims. In this sense, fear was self-fulfilling. Fear appeared to many to be more terrifying than what was feared: as something more violent than the imagined violence. Here, too, a divine sanctioning mechanism stood in the background; an immediate correlation of human acts and conditions. Whoever does not trust in God, thus the core of the idea, would be punished by what he fears -- a punishment for his fear. This theological explanation governed the medical explanation. Thus, doctors also knew (to turn things once more around): If fear made the terrifying pathogen grow, then fearlessness was able to expel it.[14]

How was all of this conceivable? It is not to be understood if we assume that the terms "fear," "anxiety," and "terror" meant what was ascribed to them through Enlightenment categories since the late eighteenth century: a psycho-mental event. In contrast to their psychological conceptualization, in the seventeenth century these emotions were ascribed a specific physical influence, a form of violence originating in an action of God.[15] Anguish and fear were thus not conceived as "feelings," but rather as "affects" and "passions." They were not yet localized in the secluded and impenetrable "depths" of a person, but rather in a space, linking men to the divine.[16] Kircher's affectus did not function in or between "individuals," who acted, felt, and communicated intentionally, but instead operated in a divinely constituted space, which equally encapsulated the micro and macro cosmos. In the Höllental, Athanasius Kircher did not even try to save himself, rather the opposite, and because of this he was saved: through a fearlessness which did not aim at physical survival, but rather at the immortality of the soul. This fearlessness transcended physical borders of the person. This also means: it was not placed beyond linguistic articulation, but in itself constituted a language -- the language of divine power. Kircher's tears show this aspect in a particular way. They do not represent the pater's fear, but rather overcoming the fear; and they "touch " one of the soldiers with compassion and send the others fleeing.

Kircher could remember his "accident" in this manner, because for him, as for so many of his contemporaries, fearlessness did not represent a therapeutic exercise. It was, in his view, not a condition of individual well-being, but rather a religious, moral demand, and norm. The goal here was not the absence of fear, not its psychological "mastery," but instead its rightful manifestation and form. Drawing on Augustine and Thomas Aquinas: a filial, loving fear of God, not a servile one, the fear of sin and not of its punishment. Fear and fearlessness decided the relationship of man to God. Kircher reports not only of his fear of the soldiers, but above all of his overcoming that fear through his faithful and pious fear of God. In recalling his (physical) rescue in the Höllental, he provides evidence that his soul was also saved, and he shows that in the overcoming of fear, fear itself was essential to salvation history. Before Voltaire dared to answer the question of theodicy negatively, as a rule there existed no doubt that in order to liberate people from fear, God has to first set in him fear, anguish, and terror -- God alone, mind you, and not the belief of Him. Only religious philosophers and psychologists of modernity displaced the source of godly fear into the self, the psychophysical organism of the person.

Whoever tries to discover what people in the early modern era actually felt will only find, in the end, what he himself feels. But whoever asks for historical concepts of emotion becomes able to reflect upon the conditions and linguistic foundations of one's own perception. This makes emotions so interesting for historiography and research on the Early Modern. To remain with the chosen example: the question should not be whether people in history were afraid or not (as has been done in the tradition of Jean Delumeau). What should be asked is the historical meaning of fear, anxiety, and terror and the functions of describing them. The spatial dimension of these affects, their religiously grounded, semantic differentiation, and the forms of their autobiographical thematization, cast light onto the differences between modern and early modern perceptions of fear and anxiety. They show the relevance of fear for the constitution and the destabilization of a social, cultural, and personal order.

Further Reading


[3] Ibid. 480-1.

[4] Ibid. 481.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.


[9] Ibid. 481.

[10] Ibid.


[14] For details see Bähr, Furcht und Furchtlosigkeit, esp. ch. 4.3 and 4.4.

[15] Against this, cf. Hartmut Böhme, "Vom phobos zur Angst. Zur Transformations- und Kulturgeschichte der Angst," in Pathos, Affekt, Emotion. Transformationen der Antike, Martin Harbsmeier and Sebastian Möckel, eds. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2009), 154-84. In all too modern interpretations Böhme assumes, that the affects themselves were attributed an agency. Moreover it restricts the affectual agency to pre-classical Greece.


Citation