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The social and political implications of expressing atheistic thought in Ancient Greece and the early Roman Empire, and why these implications changed over time.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

At Massey University, New Zealand

Presented by Grant Campbell Pegler

2023

Abstract

Atheistic thought is as old as known records exist. It is not surprising that over thousands of years, many people – we will never know the actual number, relative to population – have had doubts about the religious doctrines that were presented to them by their society, and to which they were expected to strictly adhere. However, until recent times, relatively few people have felt sufficiently free to express their heretical doubts, either orally or in writing.

The aims of this thesis are threefold. Firstly, to analyse the development of atheistic thought in Ancient Greece and the early Roman Empire. Secondly, to investigate the social and political implications of expressing such atheistic thought. And thirdly, to determine the reasons for the different outcomes which occurred as a result of these implications.

To achieve these aims, relevant philosophers and philosophical movements concerning this period have been investigated, with the use of both primary and secondary sources. The period under analysis starts in the time of the Greek philosopher/scientist Thales (born c.624 BCE). It also includes other pre-Socratic philosophers, Socrates himself, and the effect of the later deification of rulers. The study continues up until the time of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire by virtue of the Edict of Constantine in 313 CE – a total period of almost one thousand years.

The research has demonstrated that religion and politics were always inextricably intertwined during this long period, regardless of place or time. It also demonstrated that the implications for expressing atheistic thought varied greatly over time; however, the implications always depended on the political will of the ruling class at the time, whether this was an oligarchy, a monarchy, or a democracy. The political will of the ruling class maintained a close correlation with the religious belief and religious practice of the populace. Certainly, other religious cults were frequently tolerated, however any denial of the power or existence of the gods of the State was often treated with great severity. But the degree of this severity was always in the hands of the ruling political class.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my supervisor, Dr Jonathan Tracy, for his ongoing guidance and support. He has provided invaluable feedback during the writing of this thesis, and I would not have been able to satisfactorily complete it without his input.

I am also grateful to professor Adriane Rini for her very helpful comments in the chapter on the Philosophical Schools.

Also, grateful thanks to Associate Professor Geoff Watson for his valuable guidance on postgraduate matters generally.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife Denise Pegler-Mercier, for her unfailing support and co-operation during the writing of this thesis, during which she showed enormous patience at all times!

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INTRODUCTION

There is substantial evidence that religious doubters, religious agnostics, and complete atheists all existed at various times in Ancient Greece and early Imperial Rome. But what happened to them at that time? What were the implications for them? Were they persecuted for their non-belief? Were they ostracised by their fellow-citizens, or were they merely detested? Or were they perhaps exiled or killed for their unorthodox beliefs? Or were they tolerated and accepted – or just simply ignored? The answer, as this thesis will indicate, is that in different times and in different places, all these situations actually occurred. This thesis will also try to determine not only what happened to them, but also the reasons why they experienced these particular and varying outcomes.

The concept of atheism in Ancient Greece and Rome cannot be directly compared to our understanding of atheism in today's modern world. "Modern" atheism exists primarily because of two major current rivals to religious truth: the existence of a secular state, and the existence of modern science[1]. Disbelief in the supernatural, however, is very old[2]. In 4th Century BCE Athens, Plato imagined a conversation where a believer rebuked an atheist:

> You by yourself nor yet your friends are the first and foremost to adopt this opinion about the gods; rather is it true that people who suffer from this disease are always springing up, in greater or less numbers[3].

Historically, religion has always tended to dominate human cultures and societies, certainly as far back as we can trace it. Religious practice has been imagined to be the normal state of affairs, and any deviation has been seen as strange and remarkable. These normative claims have sometimes affected people's views of religion – they have seen religious belief as being ingrained into the human psyche. The post-Enlightenment West is seen by them as exceptional. This normative idea of religion was the catalyst for Karen Armstrong to redefine *Homo sapiens* as *Homo religiosus*[4]. Modern atheists however sometimes believe that they are the first people

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[1] Whitmarsh Tim, *Battling the Gods*, (2016), Faber & Faber, London, 4.

[2] One example can be found in Psalm 14.1 of the Bible (KJV): "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God". This was written during a time of an extremely devout society in ancient Israel.

[3] Plato, *Laws,* 888b, (trans. R.G.Bury).

[4] Armstrong, K., *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means*, (2010), Vintage, London, 13-34.

in history to find problems with religion. But scepticism about religion may have always been in existence - although unfortunately the archaeological record can offer us little in the way of concrete evidence - and the manifestation of this religious scepticism has not always been presented in the same way.

To fully comprehend atheism in ancient times, it is necessary to first understand the inextricable link between religion and civil society. This paper will indicate that it was often politically (and often socially) very difficult, and potentially dangerous, for anyone to openly doubt the existence of the gods. To deny the gods was to potentially upset the social order. For that reason, our knowledge of atheists in that ancient time is somewhat sketchy – not many Greeks publicly professed their scepticism. In the Greek world, the very earliest recorded doubters of accepted religion, from Thales onwards, were not necessarily complete disbelievers in the existence of the gods. Rather, they began to question the nature of the gods - as opposed to their existence - and they also began to question the role which the gods played in the world. There were differing grades of disbelief rather than outright denial of the gods' existence. They asked such questions as "Are the gods as professed by Homer and Hesiod really responsible for every single thing which occurs in the natural world?". Such questions could easily have led at the time to accusations of atheism, even though nowadays they seem like fairly harmless enquiries.

Two degrees of atheism in Ancient Greece have been identified[5]. One type denies the existence of the Olympian gods as they were commonly understood at the time (for example, because of their immoral behaviour, or the perceived absurdity of the myths surrounding them). The other type denies the entire concept of divinity. The first type, certainly in instances where a person perceived the gods to be of a lesser stature than was commonly accepted, is closer in modern terms to impiety (*asebeia*)[6], although this could also be regarded in some instances as heresy; the second type is closer to the modern concept of atheism (*atheos*). However, both forms of atheism were potentially troublesome to the Greeks, because the idea of questioning the nature of the gods in any way could have had serious political consequences. Such doubts, regardless of the particular grade of disbelief, could also potentially shake the social fabric of a city-state because of the intermingling of religious belief with everyday social behaviour, and inevitably therefore with politics. The following chapter will address this issue.

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[5] Duran, M., *Wondering About God – Impiety, Agnosticism, and Atheism in Ancient Greece*, (2019), Independently published, 3.

[6] *Asebeia* can also be defined as "ungodliness" or "want of reverence towards God". As defined in Strong, James, *Strong's Greek Lexicon*, (1977), Baker Books, Ada, Michigan.

CHAPTER 1: THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

As we know, religion in Greece was strongly interconnected with society and culture, and also particularly with politics, rather than being concerned solely with the welfare of individuals. Religion was a force which united societies. There was generally no belief in an intimate relationship between an individual and a god as there was later in the religion of Christianity. Religion and politics were inextricably intertwined in Greek society. The gods were seen as a real part of the world, just as the trees and the mountains were also a part of the real world. Politics could not function without the gods; and religion could not function freely without the blessing and guidance of the political leadership. The link between religion and the political leadership (whether this constituted monarchies[7], oligarchies/aristocracies or democracies) in each city-state will be seen to be central to our understanding of the way in which atheists and agnostics were treated. Certainly, there were sects within religion (and therefore also society), such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, Dionysism, and Orphism. These sects all had the common trait of concerning themselves with the fate of the soul in the afterlife. They were tolerated, primarily because they operated alongside accepted religion rather than in opposition to it. They were not in direct conflict with the politics of the *polis*, as Christianity was to be in a later era[8].

For everyday people, religion did not produce merely a pleasant feeling of serenity. On the contrary, religion impregnated every activity in society. The Greeks did not recognise any separation between the sacred and the profane, or between the religious and the secular, in ways which would be familiar to us today. A separation such as this would have had no meaning to the Greeks, because from their point of view the majority of actions by humans always had a religious dimension[9]. Unlike some divisions within Christianity (for example Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy), the Greeks had very little hierarchy within their priesthood[10]. While

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[7] "Monarchies" includes both hereditary kings and tyrants.

[8] Duran, 9 - 10.

[9] Zaidman, L.B., and Pantel, P.S., (Trans. Cartledge, P.) *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, (1992), Cambridge University Press, 92 – 101. Retrieved June 2022 from https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814457.011

[10] Fortune, R., *How closely linked was religion linked to the state and civic authorities?,* (2017), p.3,– Retrieved on 20 May 2022 from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320173535_How_closely_linked_was_religion_linked_to_the_state_and_civic_authorities

they derived wisdom and knowledge concerning the gods from Homer and Hesiod, they had no single source of Holy Scripture (as for example the Christian Bible or the Islamic Quran).

Many city-states identified themselves as being Greek. Being Greek was determined by speaking the same language and worshipping the same gods. Despite this, the practice of religion and the adherence to various cults differed throughout the Greek world. The political system differed among the city-states also: some were democracies, some were oligarchies, and some were monarchies. Despite the differences in political make-up, religion and politics remained intertwined. Secular institutions as we have today were unknown to the Greeks. As Gandhi was quoted as saying, "Those who believe religion and politics aren't connected don't understand either"[11]. From this, we can arguably conclude that even in today's world, many governments are not entirely secular institutions.

According to Fortune, in Greek thought it was not clear what the difference was between administering the things of the world and administering the things of the heavens. They did not differentiate in their thoughts between religion, philosophy, science, and magic – they were all regarded as being essentially in the same general category. The gods were seen as being responsible for everything: natural phenomena, health, good harvests, wealth, general good fortune, and successful military campaigns. Herodotus expressed the notion of a panhellenic identity by putting this speech in the mouth of the Athenians:

> ….and next the kinship of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life, to all of which it would not befit the Athenians to be false[12].

Despite their panhellenism, the Greeks had a sense of belonging to their own particular community, and this aspect of their lives was also tied to religion[13]. The Greeks worshipped the primary god of their own community over all the other gods, and in many city-states the citizens were required to participate in the rituals which took place in the state shrines[14]. The interaction of religion with politics went further: the city-states built temples and sanctuaries which expressed their sense of identity, and this became an expression of their rivalry with other city-states. Cities tried to outdo each other with the elaboration and ostentation of the

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[11] Fortune, 3.

[12] Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.144.2, (trans. A.D. Godley).

[13] Osborne, R., *Greece in the Making 1,200 – 479 BC*, (2009), Routledge, second edition, 231.

[14] Whitley, J., *The Archaeology of Ancient Greece*, (2001), Cambridge University Press, 294.

gifts which they bequeathed to their gods[15]. It is within this climate that Pericles commissioned the building of five temples in the space of only thirty years[16]. A further example of the importance of religion to the Athenians was demonstrated by the Persians. When they defeated the Athenians at the battles of Thermopylae and Artemision, the Persian conquerors burned the Athenian temples and thereby humiliated the Athenian citizens. By doing this, Xerxes sought to demonstrate his divine superiority over the gods of Athens, as well as his contempt for the people. This conflict between them turned out to be, rather than just a conflict between men, a conflict also amongst the gods[17].

It is against this background that we are able to explore the first doubts which arose among some notable Greek citizens concerning the generally accepted omnipotence of the gods. It will become apparent that any doubts expressed concerning this omnipotence often led to serious social and political consequences for the instigator.

The earliest known religious doubters can be regarded as scientists as much as they can be regarded as philosophers. They began to enquire into the physical properties of the natural world. The question of who they were, how their beliefs developed, and the implications for them within Greek society, begins with the pre-Socratic philosophers, the first recorded one of whom is Thales.

CHAPTER 2: THE PRE-SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS – PART I

The Innovation of Thales

Thales of Miletus (c.624 – 548 BCE) is generally acknowledged as the first Greek philosopher. This was the view of several ancient writers, including Aristotle in *Metaphysics,* where Thales was referred to as the founder of natural philosophy[18], Thales was led by his proficiency in mathematics and astronomy to question many aspects of the natural world, including the role of the gods in the creation of the world and the interactions of Nature within it. His enquiry was almost certainly influenced by the location and circumstances of his upbringing in the Ionian city of Miletus. Being a port town on the Ionian coast, Miletus bridged Greek settlement to the West and Near Eastern civilisations to the East. Given that Thales was a wealthy trader, his cosmopolitan contacts would undoubtedly have introduced him to both Greek and Near

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[15] Shipley, G., AH1552 *Introduction to Greek History*, (1998), Leicester University, 343.

[16] Whitley, 343.

[17] Fortune, 4.

[18] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983 b21-22, (trans. H. Tredennick).

Eastern thought. He is often regarded as the one who introduced geometry to the Greek world – this arose almost certainly from his contact with the science, mathematics, and astronomy of Babylonia[19].

His family was probably of Phoenician background[20], which may have enhanced his cosmopolitan outlook. However, he was not limited to philosophic and scientific enquiry in the precincts of Miletus alone. He travelled widely in his quest to understand the natural world. His travels took him beyond the Greek world, and it is thought that he visited Egypt specifically to extend his mathematical knowledge[21]. His scientific analysis (radical at the time) challenged the Greek belief that the gods were entirely responsible for the creation of the world, and everything within it. The religious beliefs of the time had been previously recorded (and possibly modified) by Homer and by Hesiod. Homer's descriptions of the gods and their influences reflected much of the accepted cosmogony of his own time. These beliefs had been largely passed on to the world that Thales knew. He was, nonetheless, an original thinker, extending the influence that he had derived from both Greek and Near Eastern cultures[22]. He decided that the world had origins which were not supernatural, and he concluded instead that water was the basis for all matter. This was in itself a bold step in a Greek world where the gods reigned supreme and were regarded as being as much a part of reality as, (say) the air that we breathe. Aristotle recorded Thales' hypothesis on the nature of matter in this manner:

> Thales, the founder of this school of philosophy, says the permanent entity is water (which is why he also propounded that the earth floats on water). Presumably he derived this assumption from seeing that the nutriment of everything is moist, and that heat itself is generated from moisture and depends upon it for its existence (and that from which a thing is generated is always its first principle).[23]

His intellectual status among his peers and the legacy that he left for later generations were undoubted. He was named as one of the Seven Sages of Ancient Greece in Plato's *Protagoras*

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[19] Whitmarsh, 56.

[20] Freely, J., *The Flame of Miletus: The Birth of Science in Ancient Greece (And How It Changed the World),* (2012), Tauris & Co. Ltd, London, 7.

[21] Russo, L. *The Forgotten Revolution: How Science Was Born in 300 BC and Why it Had to Be Reborn*, Translated by Levy, Silvio, (2013), Springer Science & Media, Berlin, 33.

[22] O'Grady, P., *Thales of Miletus, The beginnings of Western Science and Philosophy*, (2016), Routledge, London, 71.

[23] Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* Book 1, Section 983b, (trans. H. Tredennick).

and *Republic.* In *Republic* the discussion centres on “pursuits that make men better or worse in public or private life”. Socrates is quoted as saying:

> …are many and ingenious inventions for the arts and business of life reported of Homer as they are of Thales the Milesian and Anacharsis the Scythian?[23]

Diogenes Laertius wrote this concerning Thales:

> [Thales] was the first to receive the name of Sage, in the archonship of Damasias at Athens, when the term was applied to all the Seven Sages, as Demetrius of Phalerum mentions in his *List of Archons*[24].

The term “sophist” was sometimes applied to Thales, and when used at this time it can be regarded as meaning ‘wise man’, rather than practiced in the art of sophistry[25]. The membership of the college of ‘Seven Sages’ varied over time, but Thales was always included, and was always the first mentioned.

Where did his knowledge extend, and what did he promulgate to begin to slowly shake the religious norms of the time? The depth of his knowledge is a starting point. Thales’ elevation to the status of ‘sage’ was a result of his wide achievement in scientific fields. He was highly esteemed in the field of mathematics during his own lifetime, and a theory of geometry still bears his name. He is credited with devising practical areas of navigation, and with being the author of books *On Nautical Astronomy, On the Solstice*, and *On the Equinox,* although his authorship is not unequivocally proven[26].

Herodotus records that Thales foretold an eclipse of the sun, possibly on the basis of his knowledge of Babylonian tables and charts. Herodotus wrote:

> They (Medes and Lydians) were still warring with equal success, when it chanced, at an encounter, which happened in the sixth year, that during the battle the day was suddenly turned to night. Thales of Miletus had foretold this loss of daylight to the Ionians, fixing it within the year in which the change did indeed happen[27].

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[23] Plato, *Republic*, 10.600A (trans. Paul Shorey).

[24] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.22, (trans R.D. Hicks).

[25] O’Grady, 273.

[26] Wilbur, J.B. and Allen H.J. eds, *The Worlds of the Early Greek Philosophers*, (1979), Prometheus Books, New York, 32.

[27] Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 1.74, (trans. A.D. Godley).

One aspect of this prediction by Thales to be considered was the potential that it could have been regarded as subversive, because it was a claim which contradicted the notion that eclipses are signs of divine displeasure, or divine warnings of calamities to come.

Thales also tried to explain the reason for the annual flooding of the Nile as being the Etesian winds which blew the water back up the river from its mouth[28]. This was clearly not a person who credited the gods with being the immediate cause of all things. Conversely, there is no evidence available to us that he denied the existence of the gods. However, he did question the origin of natural phenomena, enquiring as to whether they were created by gods or by natural principles and physical laws.

Thales and later Ionian philosophers were monists[29]. They searched for a single material as a source which explained the origin of natural phenomena. Although Thales' conclusion was water as this source, and although his theory was later overridden by other philosophers (and of course by modern science), he was innovative in his postulation, especially given the firm belief within society that the gods as depicted by Homer and Hesiod were the source of all natural occurrences.

No extant writings of Thales exist, but his legacy is profound among later Greek historians and philosophers. Aristotle again:

> Some think that the soul pervades the whole universe, whence perhaps came Thales' view that everything is full of gods[30].
>
> Thales too, to judge from what is recorded of his views, seems to suppose that the soul is in a sense the cause of movement, since he says that a stone has a soul because it causes movement to iron[31].

Thales was clearly not considering the gods in the traditional polytheistic manner. Instead, he was concerned with the source of the *power* in things, which he (apparently) held to be divine. He was a hylozoist – he concluded that all matter has life[32].

His observation of the ubiquity and the importance of water for most life forms suggests the direction in which his thoughts were progressing. The evaporation-rarefaction processes which are easily observable may have reinforced his theory. When Aristotle opined that Thales got the

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[28] Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 2.20 (trans. A.D. Godley).

[29] From the Greek word *monos* (single).

[30] Aristotle, *De Anima*, 411b, 10-12, (trans. W.S. Hett).

[31] Ibid., 405a 20-22, (trans. W.S. Hett).

[32] Wilbur and Allen, 34-35.

notion that 'water is the origin of the nature of moist things'[33], the significance of this proposition, as promulgated by Thales, was not limited to a simple query about water being the source of all things. The significance was instead that he tacitly raised the question 'What was the ultimate nature of the world?'. This was undoubtedly a departure from the generally accepted polytheistic belief of the time[34].

The Roman philosopher Seneca praised Thales for his early pioneering scientific work. However, he disagreed with Thales regarding Thales' postulation that water is, among other things, the cause of earthquakes. Seneca went to some length to explain the fallacies in Thales' argument, suggesting instead that earthquakes are (most likely) caused by the movement of air underground. While Seneca believed that some natural phenomena had natural rather than divine causes, he did not deny the presence and power of the gods. Neither did he demonstrate any concern with Thales' apparent doubting of the accepted interpretation of divine power[35].

How is Thales' statement 'all things are full of gods', as quoted by Aristotle (above), to be interpreted? And also, that a magnet has a soul because it causes iron to move? Copleston suggests that if the existence of a world-soul is inferred from this, and if this world-soul is necessarily God – meaning that God created all things out of water – then an interpretation like this is too free to be realistically acceptable. However, Thales is the first known Greek philosopher to suggest the idea of unity in difference. While holding fast to the notion of unity, he attempted to account for the apparent diversity of the many things in existence, using water as the basis. The traditional theistic worldview posited difference without unity, with different types of natural phenomena being caused by different gods. Thales demonstrated to us the origin within Greek knowledge of one of the initial theories, which slowly led Greek belief from pure myth and into the fields of science and philosophy[36].

Thales - Social and Political Implications

Two hundred years after Thales declared that 'all things are full of gods', Plato cites this apophthegm as being especially significant[37]. As Jaeger emphasises, in the time of Plato the philosophy of nature had previously been suspected in the Greek world as being a source of

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[33] Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* Book 1, Section 983b, (trans. H. Tredennick).

[34] Copleston, F., *A History of Philosophy, Vol.1*, (1946), Burns and Oates, London, 22-23.

[35] Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, *Natural Questions*, Book 6, Section 6.1, (trans. Harry M. Hine).

[36] Copleston, 23-24.

[37] Plato, *Laws* 899b, (trans. R.G. Bury).

atheism, and this return to identifying the gods as being omnipresent was a source of great satisfaction to the theist Plato[38]. However, Plato was clearly interpreting this statement of Thales in his own way. We can only surmise what Thales really intended by this statement[39].

Thales' interest in magnets as a basis for explaining a living force of some kind may suggest a general enquiry into the nature of the inorganic world. He may even have suggested that everything – both organic and inorganic – has a soul. And therefore everything, even magnetism, is alive in some way. Whatever his premise actually was, the significant fact remains that Thales suggested that in some way there is a common force or 'soul' which exists in all things, and this suggestion in itself demonstrates a shift in attitude from the prevalent conception of the gods[40]. Instead of referring to Zeus, there began to be reference to the "great mind". Cicero wrote:

> Thales of Miletus, who was the first person to investigate these matters, said that water was the first principle of things, but that god was the mind that moulded all things out of water[41].

This idea of a universal "great mind" also appeared in Roman thought, in Virgil:

> First, know that heaven and earth and the watery plains, the moon's bright sphere and Titan's star, a spirit within sustains; in all the limbs mind moves the mass and mingles with the mighty frame[42].

In the opinion of Henry Fielding (1775), Diogenes Laertius (in 1.35) affirmed that Thales posed "the independent pre-existence of God from all eternity", stating "that God was the oldest of all beings, for he existed without a previous cause even in the way of generation; that the world was the most beautiful of all things; for it was created by God"[43].

The actual words written by Diogenes Laertius, concerning Thales, were:

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[38] Plato, *Laws* 967a, (trans. R.G. Bury).

[39] Jaeger, W., *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* – the Gifford Lectures 1936, (1967), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 20-21.

[40] Ibid, 21.

[41] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Book 1 X 25-27, (trans. H. Rackham).

[42] Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, 724-727, (trans. H. R. Fairclough).

[43] Fielding, Henry, *Works of Henry Fielding, Volume 12,* Fragment of a Comment on Lord Bolingbroke's Essays, (1775), Retrieved from: https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=C2RVAAAAcAAJ&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false

> Here too are certain current apophthegms assigned to him:
>
> Of all things that are, the most ancient is God, for he is uncreated.
>
> The most beautiful is the universe, for it is God's workmanship.
>
> The greatest is space, for it holds all things.
>
> The swiftest is mind, for it speeds everywhere.
>
> The strongest, necessity, for it masters all.
>
> The wisest, time, for it brings everything to light[44].

We have retrieved no record of Thales suffering any punishment or persecution for these views, despite his enquiries into the natural world. Is it possible that he was actually an atheist, and that he stated that everything was full of gods simply to appease the more traditionalist members of his society? If, for example, a person in a modern country where only one religion was recognized as true had reasons to doubt that religion's belief system, would he or she state this publicly? Or would he or she cloak it in terms which might be acceptable to all? It is another possibility that this was the motive behind Thales' statement that "all things are full of gods".

Was Thales partially excluded from society because of his unconventional beliefs? We do not know the precise answer to this, but according to Diogenes Laertius, Thales did not get involved in the heart of political matters:

> Heraclides makes Thales himself say that he had always lived in solitude as a private individual and kept aloof from State affairs[45].

While no definite conclusion can be drawn from this statement, a person who suggests that the gods were not entirely responsible for all actions occurring in the universe may have deliberately chosen to remain aloof from the Milesian political milieu. The inextricable intertwining of religion and politics (as we have seen) would have made it very difficult for Thales to express any doubts which were different from the traditional belief system. An attack on religious belief was an attack on the political and social foundations of society as a whole. As we have also seen previously, the gods were perceived by most citizens as being an integral part of the natural world, and indivisible from it. Ancient religion was civic religion, and it was a more or less overt extension of the social and political order[46]. The elite class was socially bound

[44] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.35., (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[45] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.27, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[46] Hedrick Jr, C. W., *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Daniel Ogdon (Ed.), (2007), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 285.

to abide by religious norms as well as by social norms, so it would be unsurprising if Thales chose to remain somewhat aloof from them. The following section however further explains why he may have operated with impunity.

The Political Situation in Miletus

The political situation in Miletus is significant. Thales lived from the late 7th century to the mid-6th century BCE. During his lifetime, the independence of Miletus was preserved by the tyrant Thrasybulus during a 12-year war fought against the Lydian Empire[47]. At the end of his life, Miletus fell under Persian rule when Cyrus of Persia defeated Croesus of Lydia. The political situation was such that the political leadership was naturally concentrating on the war with Lydia, and later on, with the threat from Persia. Why would one profound thinker, already highly respected for his mathematics and astronomy, and bringing great credit to the city of Miletus, pose a danger to the political leadership of the city? This is especially likely when we read that Thales chose to remain aloof from State affairs (per Diogenes Laertius, above). When later philosophers came under Persian rule, it is doubtful whether the Persian rulers would be unduly concerned about a person who suggested a different interpretation of Greek theology. In fact, according to Herodotus[48], some Persian rulers were remarkably broad-minded about the different religious beliefs of their various subject peoples.

We now turn to later philosophers, who further challenged traditional concepts of Greek religious thought.

Anaximander's Concept of A*peiron*

Anaximander (c.610 – c.546 BCE) was a younger colleague (and possibly a pupil) of Thales, and after Thales' death he became the second master of the Milesian school. Significant in any discussion of Anaximander's teachings and his personal theology is his belief in *apeiron* – meaning 'infinite', 'limitless' or 'boundless'– which he identified as the source of all things. In this sense he differed from Thales' proposition that one item (water) was the source of everything. His notion was that the ultimate source was in fact a concept rather than a physical item. His theories concerning *apeiron* allowed for the existence of gods as still being the creative force. This was prudent, should the political leadership have become unduly perturbed

[47] Gorman, V.B., *Miletos, the Ornament of Ionia: History of the City to 400 B.C.E*, (2001), University of Michigan Press, 123.

[48] Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 3.38, (trans. A.D. Godley).

by his postulations. His concept did not deny the gods' existence - although it did not openly affirm it either.

The main sources of information concerning Anaximander come from Aristotle and the Aristotelian school (the Peripatetics), but there are many other primary sources also. Diogenes Laertius tells us the following about Anaximander, including his remarkable scientific advances for that era:

> He laid down as his principle and element that which is unlimited without defining it as air or water or anything else….He was the first inventor of the gnomon and set it for a sundial in Lacedaemon, as is stated by Favorinus in his *Miscellaneous History*, in order to mark the solstices and equinoxes; he also constructed clocks to tell the time. He was the first to draw on a map the outline of land and sea, and he constructed a globe as well[49].

This request by the Spartans to Anaximander for a sundial demonstrates the Spartans' desire to arrange the calendar more efficiently, and in the best possible order[50]. This may have been primarily to get conformity in their religious festivals' dates, so we cannot assume that it was acceptance in any way of natural laws which were outside their conventional religious belief systems. However, the Spartans may have been aware of the philosophy of Anaximander, because Wilbur and Allen suggest that Anaximander was the first Greek to produce his views on nature in written form, which had the obvious benefit of being able to ultimately reach a wider audience than any public oration could; also, he was the first to attempt to give a complete account of the 'totality of man's experiences of the world'. Wilbur and Allen also postulate that he was the first map-maker, although no map of his hand survives[51]. Anaximander, like Thales, never openly denied the existence of the gods.

Simplicius of Cilicia (6th Century CE) wrote:

> Anaximander, son of Praxiades, a Milesian, the successor and pupil of Thales, said that the principle and element of existing things was the *apeiron*, being the first to introduce this name of the material principle. He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other *apeiron* nature, from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them[52].

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[49] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent of Philosophers*, 2. 1-2 (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[50] Richer, N., *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Daniel Ogden (Ed), (2007), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 247.

[51] Wilbur and Allen, 36-37.

[52] Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics,* 24.13 (Anaximander A9), as quoted by Jaeger, 199.

Aristotle deduced the chief properties of the *apeiron* from the concept of an absolute beginning:

> And further, being a principle, it can have no beginning or end of existence; for whatever comes into being must come to an end, and there must be a term to any process of perishing. So the 'unlimited' cannot be derived from any other principle, but is itself regarded as the principle of the other things, 'embracing and governing all,' as it is said to do by such as accept it, unless indeed they accept other principles alongside of it, such as 'Intelligence' or 'Amity.' This unlimited, then, would be the divinity itself, being 'immortal and indestructible,' as Anaximander and most of the physicists declare it to be[53].

According to Jaeger, the concept of 'the Divine' does not appear before the writings of Anaximander. Later, in the time of Herodotus, it becomes a frequent substitute for the phrase 'the gods'; it will also become in that period 'the god' or simply 'god'. Hesiod's theology conceives of many gods, but he does not delve deeply into their nature. Anaximander however investigates the nature of 'the Divine', and in doing so he proposes that *apeiron* – 'the Boundless' - is the *arche*[54] of all things, which satisfies the highest demands of religious thought up to that time. He suggests that *apeiron* is the bearer of ultimate power and dominion[55]. The words of Anaximander himself are relevant here, concerning this primary element. There is one passage from Simplicius which may preserve some of Anaximander's own words:

> He says this is not water, nor any of the other so-called elements, but some other unlimited nature, from which are generated all the heavens and the *cosmoi* in them. The source of generation for extant things is that into which destruction occurs…..[56].

The concept of *apeiron* suggests a concept rather than a single material item as being the source of all things. It was a further move away from the theology of Homer and Hesiod.

<u>Anaximander – Social and Political Implications</u>

Anaximander, like Thales, never denied the existence of the gods. Whatever each of their own individual views were, these were arguably pragmatic courses to take. They both may have still believed in the gods, but sought to interpret their existence in different ways. While Anaximander presented notions which were clearly contrary to the religious beliefs of Homer

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[53] Aristotle, *Physics*, III, IV, 203b, (trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F.M. Cornford).

[54] The first principle, something which was there in the beginning.

[55] Jaeger, 30,31.

[56] Gregory, A., *Anaximander, A Reassessment*, commenting on Simplicus' *Commentary on Aristotles' Physics 24. 13,* (2016). Bloomsbury Academic, 68.

and Hesiod, no known ancient source accuses him of atheism, or even impiety. It is likely that ancient readers regarded him, and Thales before him, as making adjustments to what was already regarded as a flexible concept. There is no record of an explosion of religious wrath by either political leaders or ordinary citizens. Greek religion at that time appeared to be capacious enough to accommodate such ideas. The ideas of Anaximander can be startling to the modern eye, when one considers that they were presented in a world where the gods were believed to have created and were controlling everything. Examples include his notion that thunder was the action of wind colliding with clouds (rather than Zeus throwing down thunderbolts)[57]; his belief that the Earth is surrounded by a ring of fire, which is partly veiled from our sight, and that stars are gaps in the veil[58]; and also, his claim that primeval life had its origin in water – the original sea creatures emerging on to land from the sea (a concept which is relevant to modern evolutionary theory). There is no indication that Anaximander involved himself in political activity. As in the case of Thales he appears (and with no record to contradict this) to have held himself aloof from such areas. The previous section concerning the political situation in Miletus is relevant to Anaximander also. The Milesians were of course situated in Ionia between the Persian and the Greek worlds. It is not unreasonable to infer that religious tolerance was more prevalent at that time than it would become on the Greek mainland in the succeeding centuries.

Anaximenes – Innovation or Regression?

Anaximenes (c.586 – c.526 BCE) - who was junior to Anaximander by some twenty-five years - continued the Milesian school. His explanation of the source of "stuff' was not water (as in Thales' postulation), nor in Anaximander's *apeiron* concept that all things came from unspecified boundless stuff. Rather, he concluded that air was the source of all things. We can only speculate about the religious beliefs of Thales. However Anaximenes, like Anaximander, clearly held views about the natural world and its origin which were non-theological in origin, even though they did not explicitly and publicly deny the gods' existence. They instead postulated material explanations for the world around them. Anaximenes explained the changes in the seasons by the differing positions of the sun in the sky. He explained rainbows as being the result of the effects of sunlight on clouds; also, earthquakes as being caused because of drying of the land after rainfall[59] - concepts which all exclude direct divine causes of such

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[57] Anaximander, Fragments 30,31, from Graham, D.W., (ed.), *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy; The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Pre-Socratics*, (2010), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[58] Ibid., Fragment 20.

[59] Whitmarsh, 57.

phenomena. They supersede beliefs such as the gods Horae being the cause of the seasons; Iris for the rainbow; and Poseidon 'the Earth-Shaker' for earthquakes.

With regard to Anaximenes' concept of air as the *apeiron,* he clearly wished to enhance Anaximander's idea of boundless unspecified stuff into a form which had, as he saw it, a more rational or evidence-based foundation. Instead, he proposed air. However, to take this position Anaximenes must have believed that air was a substance which, by rarefaction and condensation, could manifest itself into other forms. He suggested that when rarefied, it became fire; when condensed, it became wind, clouds, water, earth, and finally stones. Anaximenes therefore modified Thales' proposition that water was the original substance, and he contradicted Anaximander's theory of unchanging substance, while still remaining within the Milesian monist tradition. A single quote from Anaximenes survives: "Just as our soul….being the air binds us together, pneuma and air envelop (and protect) the whole world". This is the first extant source which uses this word "pneuma" (literally "breath" or "air in motion")[60].

Anaximenes did not see a problem in identifying air as the single source because of this explanation of change. He considered this in relation to his notion of condensation and rarefaction of air, in which the opposites of hot and cold play a significant part.

The cosmology of Anaximenes involved applying the condensation-rarefaction principle to every kind of natural phenomenon. Aetius wrote:

> Anaximenes said the same as he (Anaximander) adding what happens in the case of sea, which flashes when cleft by oars. Anaximenes said that clouds occur when the air is further thickened; when it is compressed further rain is squeezed out, and hail occurs where the descending water coalesces, snow when some windy portion is included together with the moisture[61].

Aetius also wrote, concerning the views of Anaximenes:

> Just as our soul, being air, holds us together, so do breath and air encompass the whole world[62].

Anaximenes' explanation of rainbows was that of the sun's rays falling on a thick cloud, which they cannot penetrate. This 'scientific' analysis is a long way from Homer's explanation that the

[60] Academic Accelerator, American University, Washington DC, Retrieved on 24 October 2023 from: https://academic-accelerator.com/encyclopedia/anaximenes-of-miletus

[61] Aetius, Fragment 3.3.2 [K & R 157-8].

[62] Aximenes, Frag 2, as quoted in Copleston, 26.

gods were the cause of rainbows.[63]. Anaximenes had taken the ideas of his predecessors even further along the path of finding explanations for phenomena in the natural world – phenomena which were natural rather than divine in their origin.

Anaximenes – Social and Political Implications

The tendency towards this view of the world did not in itself signal atheism. Anaximenes still retained Anaximander's idea that there were 'innumerable gods', but they emerged in his way of thinking from the air[64]. Both he and Anaximander spoke of this first principle, the *arche*, as being divine. The end of the Milesian school (some thirty years after the death of Anaximenes) seems to have come about with the fall of Miletus itself in 494 BCE, but these early philosopher-scientists had been the first to raise questions about the ultimate nature of things. They all assumed that matter is eternal – they did not question the absolute origin of the material world, but they did analyze from which basic element or elements the world may have developed. We can conclude that they were not atheists in the modern sense, but significantly, they did start to question the theology of Homer and Hesiod, paving the way for later philosophical treatises on the nature of the world and of the gods themselves. They suffered no known consequences for their questioning, for the reasons given in the previous section "The Political Situation in Miletus"; and also, as we saw previously, because of the location of Miletus between the Persian and Greek worlds, in which varying views of mainstream religious belief were apparently acceptable to the political body of ordinary citizens. Each of these philosophers, who had followed after Thales, had advanced theories which were tending slightly closer to a form of atheism.

The Scepticism of Xenophanes of Colophon

Later philosophers enhanced these initial theories. The writings of Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570 – 475 BCE) demonstrate 'the first philosophical articulations of scepticism toward traditional religion'[65]. Xenophanes suggested that human beings, with all their moral failings, had projected these types of behaviour onto the gods[66]: and Plato in a later century condemned

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[63] Zeller, E., *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, (1931), Kegan Paul, 31. Also, in Homer's *Iliad* 11.27-28 there is a reference to "the rainbow that Zeus fixes on a cloud as a portent to mankind below", (trans. E. V. Rieu, revised Peter Jones with D. C. H. Rieu).

[64] Jaeger, 36.37.

[65] Whitmarsh, 7.

[66] Xenophanes of Colophon, Fragment 19 in D. W. Graham (ed.), *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy; The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Pre-Socratics*, (2010), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

the conception of the gods of Homer and Hesiod even more strongly. To Plato, gods had to be perfect and completely untouched by notions of human decadence[67].

Xenophanes is renowned for such statements as:

> Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all sorts of things that among men are sources of blame and censure:
>
> Thieving, committing adultery, and deceiving each other.[68].

He also questioned the form in which the Greek gods are imagined, when he wrote:

> But if oxen or lions had hands
>
> or could draw with their hands and create works like men,
>
> Then horses would draw the shapes of gods like horses, and oxen like oxen,
>
> And they would make the same kind of bodies
>
> And each one possessed of its own body frame.
>
> ...
>
> Ethiopians say that their gods are snub–nosed and dark-skinned,
>
> And the Thracians that they have blue eyes and red hair[69].

Taken collectively, these writings demonstrate a complete rebuke of the anthropomorphic conception of the gods as portrayed by Homer and Hesiod. In modern times, cognitive theorists have even replicated Xenophanes' early thinking, when they have tried to explain the origins of religious thought, by showing the inexplicable as being explained by an entity in the form of a human-like immortal being[70].

Xenophanes was the first to suggest that religious universalism was an essential element in the concept of God, and which was indispensable to any true religion[71]. His ideas were not an isolated example of new religious thought – it was an extension of the Ionian development of thought going back to Thales. Was he a monotheist? One fragment would suggest that he was not, but that he envisaged one god who was supreme over all other gods:

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[67] Plato, *Republic*, 377d – 378e, 379c – 380c, (ed. and trans. C. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy), Harvard University Press, (2013).

[68] Xenophanes, Fragment B11, (trans. Andre Laks, Glenn W. Most).

[69] Xenophanes, Fragments B15, B16, (trans. Andre Laks, Glenn W.Most).

[70] Guthrie, S., *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, (1993), Oxford University Press, New York, 3-5.

[71] Jaeger, 48.

> One god, among both gods and humans the greatest,
>
> Neither in bodily frame similar to mortals nor in thought[72].

And who:

….always stays in the same place, not moving at all,

And it is not fitting that he travels now to one place, now to another[73].

Aristotle wrote that Xenophanes, “referring to the whole world, said the One was god”[74]. This however does not confirm that he was a monotheist, as he recognized other gods also. The term henotheism would be more appropriate to describe his beliefs. Clearly his interpretation of the gods moved him further away from the interpretations of Homer and Hesiod.

Xenophanes spent much of his life travelling. He was expelled from his native city of Colophon after its conquest by the Medes - an ancient Iranian people - but he carried with him always the Ionian philosophy of nature. His verses were concerned with *Weltanschauung* – a world view. In his case this included an enquiry into the nature of the gods, and of natural phenomena; also, the origin of all things; also the question “what is truth?”; and also the question “what was the correct authority within the world of humans?”.

Diogenes Laertius wrote that Xenophanes had recorded (in Xenophanes B8) that he was still writing at the age of ninety-two:

> Seven and sixty are now the years that have been tossing my cares up and down the land of Greece; and there were then twenty and five years more from my birth up, if I know how to speak truly about these things[75].

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[72] Xenophanes, Fragment 23, (trans. Andre Laks, Glenn W.Most).

[73] Xenophanes, Fragment 26, (trans. Andre Laks, Glenn W.Most).

[74] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, A5, 986 b 18. (trans. Hugh Tredennick), Harvard University Press, (1933).

[75] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9 18, (trans. R.D. Hicks). Jaeger (p.39) also made mention of this, while referring to the report of Diogenes Laertius above, when, in an alternative translation, he noted that “even as an old man of ninety-two he is still wandering through the Greek lands, and that he has been leading this irregular life for sixty-seven years”.

The ideas of Xenophanes were summarized variously as monolatrous[76] and pantheistic[77] in the doxographies of Aristotle, Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus, and Plutarch. More particularly, the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle considered that for him "the All is God"[78]. His theological beliefs still contained room for the gods, but with a further refinement to their nature, and a more pronounced scepticism, compared to the philosophers of the Milesian school.

Xenophanes – Social and Political Implications

Xenophanes did not deny the existence of the gods, instead he queried the conventional conception of them. The word "nature" could arguably be interchanged with his notion of one God who is supreme above all other gods. He was not an atheist in the strictest sense, but he demonstrated "impiety" in questioning the established Homeric ideas concerning the gods. Drachmann observes that Xenophanes took the existence of the gods for granted, and his criticism of the popular conception of the gods is closely connected with his own philosophical interpretation of the existence and nature of one overriding God[79].

We can conclude that while Xenophanes did not deny the existence of the gods, he was however critical of the images which his contemporaries had formed of the gods. The effects of his impiety are unknown, but there is the question as to why he was 'wandering through the Greek lands' for much of his long life. Citizenship of a *polis* required active participation in its collective religious activities. As a type of religious sceptic, he may have found it pragmatic to remain unattached to any particular city. Whether his life-long wandering was because of public distaste towards his religious pronouncements, or fear of political hostility from a *polis*, or for other reasons must remain unknown, but as in the case of Thales, he may have considered it prudent to avoid arousing conflict with the *polis* in any of the cities that he visited by questioning their religious doctrines. His views on religion had led him further away from the traditional beliefs about the gods than those of his philosophical predecessors had done.

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[76] Belief in the existence of many gods, but with the consistent worship of only one deity.

[77] Belief that reality, the universe and the cosmos are identical with divinity and a supreme supernatural being or entity.

[78] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, DK 21A30, (trans. Hugh Tredennick), Harvard University Press, (1933).

[79] Drachmann, A.B., *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, (1922), Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 17.

Hippo of Samos – First to be known as an Atheist (*atheos*)

As time passed, political influences began to have more of an effect on unorthodox religious views, as we see in the case of Hippo of Samos:

Hippo of Samos (5th century BCE), also known as Hippon, and designated as possibly coming from Reggio, Metapontum, or Crotona, was very much an heir to the earlier sixth-century philosophies of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes from nearby Miletus. Like Thales, he argued that moisture is the origin *(arche)* of all life. According to Simplicius, Hippo's postulation was that fire originated from water, and then developed from that point to generate the whole universe[80]. Hippo believed that the soul arose from both mind and water According to Hippolytus:

> Hippo [. . .] said that the principles are cold, viz. water, and hot, viz. fire. The fire generated by water overcame the power of what generated it and constituted the world order. Sometimes he says that the soul is the brain, sometimes water; for semen, which manifests itself to us, comes from moisture, and it is from this [i.e. the seed] that, he says, the soul is produced[81].

The idea of a living human being possessing a soul was not a new concept to the Greeks, but beliefs about what happened to the soul after death varied widely. Some Greeks denied the possibility of any afterlife at all. Plato on the other hand believed that the soul was immortal. Some believed that the soul survived death but as a mere shell of its former self, but lacking understanding or intelligence. In the *Odyssey*, ghosts exist in Hades but have little or no knowledge of the world of living people, while Pythagoras and his followers in contrast believed that the soul is reincarnated into other humans or even animals[82]. So, the idea that the soul was associated with the brain was a contradiction of some of these varied beliefs. To the Greek mind this was not classed as atheism, and belief in the gods was anyway not openly denied by Hippo. The Greeks saw little or no connection between belief in the gods (which they took for granted) and belief in the immortality of the human soul.

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[80] Simplicius of Cilicia, *On Aristotle, Physics*, IK 23. 21-29, quoted in Duran, 33.

[81] Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Frag. A3, (trans. André Laks, Glenn W. Most).

[82] Felton, D., *The Dead*, in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Daniel Ogden (Ed), (2007), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 86.

Hippo is notable however in any discussion of Greek atheism, as he may have been the first person in Greek history to have been designated as an atheist [83]. Related to this nomenclature is general academic discussion, which places different interpretations on his epitaph, which he wrote himself:

> This is the tomb of Hippon, whom by death Fate made
>
> equal with the Immortal Gods[84].

A straight reading of this suggests that he has achieved immortality after death. But another interpretation has been suggested by Hendry[85], who argues that Hippo is hinting that the gods, like him, are dead. In this regard, he gives an alternative translation: This is the tomb of Hippon, whom Fate made just as dead as the immortal gods.

Hippon's place as a serious scientist has been somewhat underrated, largely because of the dismissal by Aristotle[86]:

> No one would think it proper to include Hippon among these thinkers, because of the second rate-ness of his thought.

Despite this, there is evidence that his works were in the Lyceum in the 4th century, because Theophrastus quotes him in the *Historia Plantarum*, and also in an Aristotelean doxography on the causes of disease by the so-called Anonymus Londiniensis, who quotes two books by Hippon[87].

Hippo – social and political implications

He was known in Athens around 430 BCE as 'Hippo the Atheist'. This label may have arisen because he was satirized, according to a scholium to Aristophanes' *Clouds* (94ff.), both in this play, and also by Cratinus in his play *Panoptai* (38 A 2 DK = Dram. T15-16 LM). No further

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[83] Shapiro, S., *Hippon the Atheist: The Surprisingly Intelligent Views of Hippon of Samos*, Journal of Ancient Civilisations 14, (1999), 111-23.

[84] Page, D. L., *Further Greek Epigrams*, (1981), Cambridge, 157.

[85] Hendry, Michael, *Hippon's Epitaph*, (2000), taken from http://www.curculio.org/Ioci/november.pdf (retrieved March 2022).

[86] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A3, 948a, (trans. Hugh Tredennick).

[87] Manetti, D., taken from the journal *Trends in Classics*, retrieved from www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/tc-2020-18/html?lang=en#:~:text=But%20Hippon%20of%20Croton%20thinks,animal%20lacks%20perception%20and%20dies (March 2022).

persecution was known to have been suffered by him, but public ridicule in the play of a popular playwright such as Cratinus must have adversely affected his reputation (as Socrates was later to discover, being also at the mercy of Aristophanes).

The label 'atheist' was applied to Hippo by Asclepius of Tralles, who also accused him of having simplicity of thought:

> Thales, in effect, says that water is shown as the first cause of what exists. Hippo cannot be equated exactly with these [ideas], although he also says that water is the principle, due to the shoddiness of his thought: in fact, he is an atheist[88].

The question arises as to why Hippo was labelled an atheist, and Thales was not, when both believed that water was the *arche*? Hippo presented his theories in a later era, when ideas in contravention of the thinking of the Athenian *polis* could be considered dangerous to the established order. Thales lived in Ionia and in a previous time, and he was surrounded by thinkers from both East and West, who may have more easily tolerated unorthodox or alternative religious views; Hippo in contrast left Samos and travelled to Athens, where the *polis* had different views on unconventional or "liberal" thinking in the 5th century BCE, in contrast to Ionia. The democratic Athenian citizen body at this time was already politically powerful, and able to decide on many religious and civil matters. This contrasted with the situation in Ionia, where the rule of law was often administered by tyrants or by foreign invaders (e.g., Persians or Medes). The implications of some of these unconventional views (or "liberal thinking") will be explored later, and especially around the time of Socrates and his trial. In the century prior to the birth of Hippo, Samos had been the home of Pythagoras (died c.522 BCE), so enquiry into the structure of the natural world was not novel in that Ionic part of the Greek world.

Hippo insisted on recognizing the material nature of the soul, and when this was coupled with some astronomical research the label "atheist" was applied to him. In addition, by defining water as the principle of motion, Hippo gave water a character which arguably resembled the concept of the *nous* of Anaxagoras (which is discussed in the next section). Hippo's theories about the natural world were clearly a step further towards scepticism about the traditional view of the gods, compared to the ideas which had been proffered by the Milesian school of philosophers.

However, the political influence on religious thought and practice was strengthening, as we shall now see:

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[88] Asclepius of Tralles, *Commentary on Books A-Z of Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 25, quoted in Duran, 34.

Anaxagoras, and the strengthening of the political influence on religion

Anaxagoras of Clazomenae in Ionia (c.500 – 428 BCE) was born when Asia Minor was under the control of the Persian Empire. He came to Athens in the 430's. His main achievement was to reconcile the materialism of Ionia with the distinction made by Parmenides, viz. between the sensory (and physical) world and the rational world of the intellect[89]. He provided explanations of natural events – thunder, comets, hail, floods (among others) – in physical terms. He proposed that something called 'mind' (*nous*) existed, which was separate from the physical world, but which was responsible for many things in the universe e.g., the revolution of the stars. He believed that every living entity is a part of this cosmic entity[90].

The *nous* (or cosmic 'mind') that he proposed is similar to the 'one god' concept of Xenophanes, but Anaxagoras did not equate this with divinity, and he did not state explicitly that *nous* was a reference to an all-powerful god. However, the Athenian law which was enacted in the 430's BCE, The Decree of Diopeithes, outlawed 'not recognizing divine beings' (*ta theia me nomizein*). Whereas *nous* may have been regarded by some as similar to a "one god" concept, it was nevertheless an unconventional way to perceive the gods. Anaxagoras was exposed to the possibility of being charged with 'not recognizing divine beings'. Eventually, a charge was brought against him under this decree, for stating that the sun is not a divinity but just a red-hot stone. Anaxagoras however appears to have been simply carrying on the enquiry of all philosophers from Thales through to (later) Socrates in the 4th century BCE, according to which the divinities had been misconceived by Homer into anthropomorphic forms, and they were in his opinion being reinterpreted correctly as great cosmic forces (but still divine).

Anaxagoras' concept of *nous* was considered by him to be something which permeated everything. He himself described it thus:

> And *nous* discerned them all: the things that are being mixed together, the things that are being separated off, and the things that are being dissociated. And whatever sorts of things were going to be, and whatever sorts were and now are not, and as many as are now and whatever sorts will be, all these *nous* set in order[91].

According to Irenaeus, Anaxagoras was referred to as 'the atheist':

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[89] Whitmarsh, 64.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Anaxagoras, Diels-Kranz 59 B 12 (part), quoted in *Anaxagoras*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (August 22, 2007, revised November 11, 2019).

> Anaxagoras, on the other hand, who was also considered an atheist, maintained that animals are born from seeds that fall from the sky above the earth[92].

Anaxagoras explained the universe in terms of a naturalistic cosmogony. He reportedly believed that in the beginning the stars were formed – and among those stars was the Earth. Also, that the stars are made of solid material and are smaller than the Earth. The sun itself is smaller than the Peloponnese[93].

Anaxagoras –Social and Political Implications

Political trouble festered and he was brought to trial in Athens, being accused of impiety, and condemned for stating that 'the sun is a type of incandescent stone'[94]. To the Greeks the heavenly bodies were divine and the sun was a god. Josephus tells us that he was condemned to death:

> Anaxagoras was from Clazomenae, but since the Athenians considered the sun to be a god, [.....] by a few votes he was condemned to death[95].

The testimony of Anaxagoras was used later by Socrates in his own trial, where he argued that he did not believe, like Anaxagoras, that "the sun is a stone and the moon is a clod"[96], which he believed that the judges needed to know.

The accusations against Anaxagoras covered three areas of concern: Firstly, his explanation of astronomy and physics was too innovative and contrary to the accepted versions. Secondly, his theories were entirely naturalistic or materialistic and contained no divine element at all. And thirdly, it is likely that his concept of *nous* replaced the deity altogether[97]. Taken all together, he could therefore be considered to be an atheist. The collective force of these accusations would have placed the views of Anaxagoras clearly in contravention of the Decree of Diopeithes which was discussed above, which outlawed "not recognizing divine beings".

The outcome of the charges against Anaxagoras is not clear, as different versions are recorded in primary sources. According to Diogenes Laertius, Sotion claimed that Anaxagoras was accused of impiety by Cleon. However, Diogenes Laertius also says, referring to Satyrus, that

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[92] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* Book II, 14, 2 (D.171), quoted in Duran, 28.

[93] Diogenes Laertius, Book 2, B 8. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[94] Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book II, 265, (trans. H. St. J. Thackeray).

[95] Ibid.

[96] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 26 B-28 B, (trans. C. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy).

[97] Quoted in Duran, 30.

the accusations came from Thucydides, son of Melesias, who was an old enemy of Anaxagoras' pupil (and close ally) Pericles. According to Satyrus, a death sentence was issued but it was in absentia[98]. Differing outcomes were also recorded: Plutarch said that Pericles sent him away from Athens[99]. Sotion however said that he was fined five talents and expelled from the city[100]. A quite contrary report from Hieronymus of Rhodes says that Anaxagoras was ill during the trial, and Pericles' speech to the jury moved them so much that he was acquitted[101]. Hermippus stated that he was imprisoned prior to execution, but Pericles obtained absolution for him with a speech to the jury[102]. In addition, Libanius states that he was imprisoned[103].

What then can we conclude as being the correct outcome of the trial? Dover suggests that the proliferation of these reports indicates that all are untrue, unless one just happens to be correct by chance; and that a lot of the information about the members of Pericles' circle was later invented with a partisan purpose[104]. However, it is possible that these reports relate to two quite separate trials. According to Plutarch, Thucydides prosecuted Anaxagoras in c.444 BCE[105], and in a separate trial, Cleon prosecuted him in c. 430 BCE[106]. The death sentence may relate to the former trial, with an acquittal arising from Pericles' speech. The exile in the latter trial may have arisen quite separately from Cleon's accusations.

Regardless of the actual situation, the political climate in democratic Athens within the *polis* was now not conducive to accepting complete denial of the gods, particularly when this related to matters of the natural world. Anaxagoras' close association with Pericles may have been part of the reason for the charges against him; in other words, attacking Anaxagoras was indirectly an attack on Pericles. The influence of Athenian politics had spread its tentacles further into the sphere of theology. But was the purpose of the specific charges laid really concerned solely with theological belief? Or was its purpose an attempt to establish a pre-determined political outcome? The answer must lie in the attitude of the citizen body towards unbelievers. Those

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[98] Diogenes Laertius, Book II, 12 – 14, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[99] Plutarch*, Lives. Pericles,* (trans. B. Perrin).

[100] Diogenes Laertius, Book II, 12 -14, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[101] Ibid.

[102] FHG (Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum), Book III 43, Fragment 31, quoted in Duran, 31.

[103] Libanius, *Apology of Socrates*, 154, quoted in Duran, 31.

[104] Dover, K.J., *The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society*, (1976), Talanta Journal, Vol. VII, 23 – 56.

[105] Plutarch, Lives. *Pericles*, XIV, (trans. B. Perrin).

[106] Plutarch, Lives. *Pericles*, XXXV, (trans. B. Perrin).

who brought these charges must have had some certainty that the citizen body continued to have traditional religious belief, and that they were sufficiently hostile towards unbelief to achieve the outcome that they required. Unlike most city-states, Athens was now controlled in many respects by the democratic vote of the *polis*. Would the outcome of any decision have been different under, say, an oligarchy? Did the personal biases of the electors influence the outcome of any vote? We do not know the answer to these questions. However, it should be kept in mind that the difference in the level of education between the ordinary citizen and the political elite was significant. The socio-political elite enjoyed exposure to more sceptical, rationalist, and philosophical ideas than the majority of citizens did. Accordingly, the majority of citizens may have never seriously considered that alternative religious views could possibly be acceptable. Even after the trial of Socrates which will follow later, we will still not, unfortunately, be able to determine a definitive answer to these questions.

The outcome of this trial must almost certainly have affected the public pronouncements of later philosophers. Whatever the punishment was that was actually meted out to Anaxagoras, all the reported possible outcomes, other than absolution, were abhorrent to consider. This would have had a chilling effect on future generations, ensuring that self-censorship occurred where any doubt about the existence or control of the gods may have been seen as unacceptable by the citizen body. Anaxagoras had taken scepticism about the anthropomorphic nature of the gods further than any previous philosopher of which we have knowledge, even though he did not explicitly deny the existence of the gods. The implications of his holding these beliefs were more extreme than had previously been recorded among religious doubters.

Democritus

Democritus (c.460 – c.370 BCE) went even further than his predecessors in denying that the gods are responsible for the occurrence of events in the physical world. Democritus was thought to have been born in Abdera in Thrace, an Ionian colony, and therefore may have come under the same cosmopolitan influences as the other Ionian philosophers that we have considered. In fact, it is believed that he spent little time in the politically charged atmosphere of Athens. He wrote ‘I came to Athens, and no one knew me’[107]. His prolific output of writing has not all been retrieved, much of it is in fragments only. Worse still, the fragments which concern his natural philosophy are only a small proportion of the total retrieved, and are often just the

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[107] Democritus, cited in Diogenes Laertius, IX, 36. Fragment D1, from *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments*, (as cited and trans. by C.C.W. Taylor).

titles of his works[108]. He is thought to have carried on the work of the atomist Leucippus, and also the work of the early Milesian philosophers.

Democritus was, like his contemporary Leucippus, an atomist. He believed that the universe was composed of solely atoms and void – nothing else. He believed that atoms were tiny particles of matter, indestructible and indivisible. He was a materialist, and he searched for a rational explanation for everything. He believed that questions concerning the physical aspects of any entity should be answered using a purely mechanistic approach. He saw atoms as always moving in a predictable manner, which he believed explained the orderliness of the cosmos. But why then, without an intelligent design, is everything so well organized, so that it admirably supports organic life? Democritus' answer to this was that there are an infinite number of worlds in existence, and only some of these worlds are inhabited. Therefore, the situation in our own world is not a matter of design, but of chance[109]. This philosophy is remarkably close to today's understanding of the universe – many possible 'worlds' but uncertainty as to life existing anywhere else.

Did Democritus have room for the soul, and for the gods, in his philosophy? He did speak of souls, and also he spoke of the gods. He believed that the soul was the same as the mind (cf. the *nous* of Anaxagoras), and that it was also composed of atoms – that it was made up of spherical atoms which were capable of permeating everywhere, and through their own movement causing other things to move also. He also believed that the composition of the atoms contained within souls is similar to atoms of fire, which are the same shape. Breathing is essential to life because it is the only method by which soul atoms can be retained in the body, otherwise there is a tendency for those atoms to be dispersed by natural environmental forces[110]. When a person dies, he believed, both the body and the soul are destroyed[111]. Aristotle wrote:

> Some say that what originates movement is both pre-eminently and primarily soul; believing that what is not itself moved cannot originate movement in another, they arrived at the view that soul belongs to the class of things in movement. This is what led Democritus to say that soul is a sort of fire or hot substance; his forms or atoms are infinite in number; those which are spherical he calls fire and soul…. Democritus roundly identifies soul and mind, for he identifies what appears with what is true – that is why

[108] Wilbur and Allen, 184.

[109] Whitmarsh, 66.

[110] Wilbur and Allen, 198-9.

[111] Aetius, 4.7.4, from Nahm, M.C., *Selections from Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed., (1964), Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York.

> he commends Homer for the phrase ‘Hector lay with thought distraught’; he does not employ mind as a special faculty dealing with truth, but identifies soul and mind[112].

Thus to Democritus, soul was the same as mind. He also held that the senses – the sensations of sweet and sour, hot and cold, wet and dry, etc. - were caused by atoms. While our sensations are purely subjective, they are caused by something objective, and quite external to us, namely atoms[113]. Democritus himself wrote:

> In fact we know nothing firm, but what changes according to condition of the body and of the things that enter it and come up against it[114].

As to the gods: If Democritus believed that all things were made of atoms, did he also believe that this included the gods? In fact, he certainly did recognize in some way the existence of the gods, but his conception of them was unconventional for his era. Broadie says (quite correctly) that giving the label of ‘god’ to every one of the millions of atoms in the cosmos would be absurd[115]. But in the world view of Democritus, which was scientific in nature, there did not appear to be any room for gods in the conventional sense (for that time). There would appear to be at least four options for Democritus’ conception of God (or the gods)[116]: Firstly, to proclaim that there is no god; secondly, to conceive that God exists but is outside nature and has no relationship with nature; thirdly, that God is in the world but is not fundamental to the world’s operation; and fourthly that the origins of nature are divine, but nature operates quite separately from God, and therefore without God’s influence. Broadie says that Democritus appeared to opt for the third possibility – that God exists but is not a fundamental part of the world, and that this is clearly an indication of atheism[117]. It could be argued that this is a moot point, because atheism as we know it today would be restricted exclusively to the first option. However, in the Greek world the third option, which saw the gods as not being fundamental to the operation of the world, may have been regarded by many as being atheistic[118]. The gods were regarded by many Greeks as not merely just existing, but also having complete control over the functioning of the world.

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[112] Aristotle, *De Anima*, 403b 29, 404c16, (trans. Walter Stanley Hett),

[113] Copleston, 125.

[114] Democritus, cited in Sextus, *Against the Mathematicians*, VII, 136. Fragment D17, from *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments*, (as cited and trans. by C. C. W. Taylor), University of Toronto Press, (1999).

[115] Broadie, Sarah, *Rational Theology* in Long, A.A., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, (1999), Cambridge University Press, 221.

[116] Duran, 38.

[117] Broadie, 221.

[118] Ibid, 221-2.

Nevertheless, some primary sources suggest that to regard Democritus as being an atheist was not entirely correct. The fragments from Philodemus' treatise *On Piety* indicate that meteorological processes such as the four seasons, in connection with Democritus, were named by him as coming from the gods; and that the knowledge of these processes had previously caused men to honour merely the perceived causes of these processes[119]. There is a similarity between this and the beliefs of Epicurus, whose beliefs were faithfully expounded and championed in verse by the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (born c.99 BCE). Lucretius described the evolution of the world with no reference being made to the gods as being responsible for, or concerned about, human beings, nor for the earth itself. Specifically, he wrote that animals and humans came from Mother earth herself, rather than from the gods:

> ….we are all sprung from celestial seed; The heaven is our father, the earth our mother. All have that same father, from whom our fostering mother earth receives liquid drops of water, and then teeming brings forth bright corn and luxuriant trees and the race of mankind, brings forth all the generations of wild beasts, providing food with which all nourish their bodies and lead a sweet life and beget their offspring; therefore she has with reason obtained the name of mother[120].

Two texts by Stobaeus indicate that Democritus accepted that the gods exist as beings that provide men with all good things, and who detest injustice[121]. Pliny believed that Democritus accepted only two gods: Punishment and Benefit[122]. Duran suggested that Democritus could have tolerated certain beliefs, especially traditional ones which were spread among some members of the citizen body, because for many, publicly acknowledging their belief provided them with more social harmony than publicly stating their non-belief[123].

A fragment of Democritus' suggests that some men had conflict in their lives, and in their own beliefs. It reads:

> Some men who know nothing of the dissolution of mortal nature, but are well aware of the badness of their own ways of life, wear themselves out all their lifetime with troubles and anxieties, while they invent lying myths about the time which comes after death[124].

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[119] Philodemus, *On Piety*, 5 a, from Gomperz, Theodor., *Greek Thinkers*, (1906), London, 69.

[120] Lucretius*, On the Nature of Things* II 991, (trans. W.H.D. Rouse, Revised Martin F. Smith).

[121] Strobaeus, Johannes, *Anthology* II 9, 4 and *Anthology* III 9, 30, as quoted in Duran, 38.

[122] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* II 14, (trans. H. Rackham).

[123] Duran, 38.

[124] From Strobaeus II 4.52.40, as quoted in Duran, 38.

Lucretius indicated some of his atheistic views when he observed, in a similar passage, that retribution does not come in the hereafter, but in man's own internal life, which constitutes his actual Hell[125].

Democritus – Social and Political Implications

Democritus was nevertheless unquestionably primarily atheistic in outlook. It appears that his idea of 'gods' was superficial at best, and possibly he acknowledged them just to be acceptable within society. He himself wrote that the idea of the gods arose in former times because people needed explanations for natural phenomena, such as thunder and eclipses; and they naively saw these natural events as manifestations of divine power[126]. Diogenes Laertius wrote:

> Aristoxenus in his Historical Notes affirms that Plato wished to burn all the writings of Democritus that he could collect[127].

Democritus travelled widely, and, to emphasise what was stated previously, he spent little time in the political hot-bed of Athens ('I went to Athens, and no one knew me')[128]. He travelled widely during his lifetime, using his father's inheritance. His travels were said to have taken him to Asia, India, and Ethiopia, also Egypt (where he spent five years)[129], and he also travelled throughout Greece to better understand its culture. He supposedly lived to about ninety years of age. This does not give the impression of a persecuted individual, but it does suggest an individual who was not prepared to enmesh himself in any particular city-state, where he would have been obliged to participate in civic religious practices. By this action he avoided the power of a hostile *polis* of which he would have been a citizen. He perhaps particularly avoided social and political negativity by wisely avoiding cities such as Athens – (Protagoras, who is discussed later, was not to be so fortunate, when he published his work within the heart of the Athenian *polis*). Democritus was also protected from the hostility of the *polis* by travelling widely to countries in which Greek theology was of little importance; and also, by writing widely on many topics, other than solely those which directly challenged the traditional Greek theology.

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[125] Jaeger, 181, based on Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book III 978 ff.

[126] Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, 9, 24, as quoted by Whitmarsh, 256.

[127] Diogenes Laertius 9.40, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[128] As previously recorded, from Democritus, cited in Diogenes Laertius, IX, 36. Fragment D1, from *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments*, (as cited and trans. by C. C. W. Taylor), University of Toronto Press, (1999).

[129] Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, Book I, 98, (trans. C. H. Oldfather).

However, with the rise of Sophism, traditional religious views faced a new and influential challenge.

CHAPTER 3: THE PRE-SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS – PART II

Sophism – a Challenge to the Gods

The timid reforms of Cleisthenes in 507 BCE led to the gradual introduction of democracy into Athens. This in turn led to the rise to power of Pericles. Athenian democracy was not however on a representative basis, as we know it today; it was instead on a direct basis. Therefore, it was extremely important that oratory was done well by a speaker to convince his fellow citizens about his arguments. The sophists arose from this need. They began to teach political virtue (*arete*), and they brought with them a revolution. They charged for their teachings (previously unknown). They believed that *arete* could be learned. *Arete* had previously been thought of as being a possession of the nobility only, as it was an innate gift given by the gods. However, as a consequence of the teaching of the sophists, any citizen could be successful if he possessed the arts of eloquence and persuasion. To achieve this, proponents needed to acquire wide knowledge – scientific, literary, mathematical, geographic, etc. The sophists abandoned the great philosophical areas of enquiry of the past, and devoted their attention to education. Their objectives therefore became very practical. They became skeptical of past theories on nature (*physis)*, and they distrusted the notion that human beings' reasoning was sufficient to fully comprehend the external world.[130]

Of the most prominent sophists, the most skeptical was surely Gorgias, who propounded three essential theses: nothing actually exists; even if something exists, nothing can be known about it; and even if something is able to be known about it, knowledge about it is unable to be communicated to others[131]. These views were significant in the sophists' attitudes to religion. To comprehend this, it should be firstly kept in mind that the sophists' views were all relativistic: many people in Athens were not born in the city, therefore their values and traditions were not

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[130] Copleston, 81-82. Also Duran, 39.

[131] Wardy, R., *Who was Gorgias?,* from the book *The Birth of Rhetoric*, (1996), Routledge, 15.

necessarily similar. These values and traditions would have been relative to each separate society from whence they came. This concept of relativism was stated by Protagoras:

> Of all things the measure is man: of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not[132].

The usual interpretation of this statement is that the individual human being, rather than a god or a moral law, is the ultimate source of value. Thus, if values are established by societies, it does not make much sense to seek any religiously-based reason, because laws are made by convention, not by divinely ordained nature (*physis*). Gorgias also said that laws were created by a weak minority to domesticate a strong majority; but that eventually the strong ones will realise this, and abolish the minority, and ultimately have dominance over them.

As a result, the sophists had a skeptical and relativistic view of religion and the gods. They did not in most cases entirely deny the existence of the gods, but conversely, they were not prepared to openly place their confidence in the gods' existence. They were agnostics, but arguably with thinly veiled atheism. They were the real initiators in the fifth century BCE of the idea of the rationality of mankind. They believed that all education involved three basic elements: *physis, mathesis* and *askesis* (essentially, the fields of nature, science, and self-discipline)[133]. They attempted to reveal the teleological[134] basis for religion from the time of the earliest societies. But this inevitably led to the question of how the existence of gods, and divine beings generally, first entered the mind of man. Were the gods real, or were they "invented" for pragmatic purposes by people who had political objectives? The sophist Prodicus of Ceos theorized and taught that the things in nature which are wholesome and nutritious for mankind have been regarded as gods by the earliest of men, and they have been worshipped accordingly. Sextus Empiricus tells us that Prodicus believed that the sun, moon, rivers, springs, and everything else which was useful for men were regarded as gods. This is similar to the worship of the Nile's annual flood by the Egyptians. As a result of this analysis, it follows that in the Greek religion, bread was envisaged as Demeter, wine as Dionysus, water as Poseidon, fire as Hephaestus, and so on, all being items which were useful to man[135]. Prodicus also later includes meadows and lakes in this group, and teaches that belief in a number of deities arose

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[132] Protagoras, D9, (trans. Andre Laks and Glenn W. Most).

[133] Jaeger, 175.

[134] The Oxford Dictionary defines teleology as "the theory that events and developments are meant to achieve a purpose and happen because of that".

[135] Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists, 1.17,18.,* (trans. R.G. Bury).

from the same root cause[136]. Prodicus' approach, to explain the deification of natural forces and of things which are useful to mankind, produced a very broad theory to explain the general evolution of religious belief. As Jaeger wrote, "To trace the idea of God back to those things in nature which serve men's purposes was all the easier for him because the teleological motif had more effective demonstrative force in the philosophical thought of his time than any other"[137].

We now turn to particular sophists who are relevant to our discussion:

The Sophist Protagoras

Protagoras was arguably the most prominent among the earlier sophists, living in the latter half of the fifth century BCE. Diogenes Laertius tells us[138]:

> Protagoras, son of Artemon….. was born in Abdera…..He and Prodicus of Ceos gave public readings for which fees were charged…..Protagoras studied under Democritus….was the first to maintain that there are two sides to every question, opposed to each other, and he even argued in this fashion, being the first to do so…..
>
> He used to say that soul was nothing apart from the senses….and that everything is true. In another work he began thus: "As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life".
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> ….. He too first introduced the method of discussion which is called Socratic. Again, as we learn from Plato in the Euthydemus, he was the first to use in discussion the argument of Antisthenes which strives to prove that contradiction is impossible, and the first to point out how to attack and refute any proposition laid down…..

Protagoras' quote above concerning the gods, …."I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist…", has been interpreted in ancient sources in different ways. Cicero regarded Protagoras as being uncertain of the gods' existence:

> As regards the present subject, for example, most thinkers have affirmed that the gods exist, and this is the most probable view and the one to which we are all led by nature's guidance; but Protagoras declared himself uncertain…[139]

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[136] Ibid., 1.52.

[137] Jaeger, 180.

[138] Diogenes Laertius, 9. 50 -56, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[139] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, Vol.1 1-2., (trans. H. Rackham).

He was accused of being an atheist by several authors, including Sextus Empiricus[140]. To comprehend what Protagoras actually intended, it is necessary to review his philosophical principles, which included the notion that if the gods cannot be known, they have no real existence. He wrote:

> When things are real, their being is equivalent to their appearance[141].

If one looks at this in the original Greek language, the interpretation is that if something 'appears' then it is perceived by someone. As an extension of this, a person can only be certain that a thing exists when he or she perceives it to exist. This is part of a wider argument about relativism, the theory which states that there are no absolute truths. The theory states that every person, and every society, has a different perception of what the real truth is concerning different situations and experiences. Protagoras immediately follows this passage, in which he promulgates the idea that being is equivalent to appearing, by indicating three situations where the truth is 'non-evident'. Firstly, if a person is sitting down, this can only be determined by someone else if they are in the same room. Only those who witness it can say that it is 'evident'. Secondly, in the case of the moon, it is only evident to a person if they can actually see it (this being in a time before telescopes). Thirdly, in the case of honey, what may be extremely sweet to one person may not be so sweet to another (if that person has a fever, perhaps). The same properties of honey are therefore not always evident to every person[142].

The relevance of these arguments was to attempt to provide answers to the questions of whether the gods exist or not, and what forms these gods take. The first two situations – concerning a person sitting, and the case of the moon – suggest that if you cannot see them, you have no evidence that they exist, (although, conversely, neither do you have evidence that they do not exist). If you cannot see the gods, they are 'non-evident' to you. And in the case of the sweetness of honey the suggestion is that, according to the same reasoning, how you yourself perceive the gods may be quite different from how another person perceives them. We have already considered Xenophanes' observation that 'Africans say their gods are snub-nosed and black, Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired'. In whatever manner Protagoras was later treated for these writings, the implication is that if the gods exist at all, the depiction of

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[140] Sextus Empiricus*, Against the Physicists,* 55-56. (trans. R.G. Bury).

[141] Protagoras, Fragment 21 in Graham (ed.), *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy.*

[142] Whitmarsh, 88-89.

them is not uniform in all religions and societies. Both their existence, and their nature, can be non-evident to some people[143].

Further indications of his attitude towards belief in the gods is evidenced by the writing of Philostratus (c.170 – c.250 CE), a Greek sophist of the Roman Imperial period. He suggested that Protagoras' attitude was one of *aporia* – the impossibility of knowing if the gods exist - which he had absorbed from the teaching of Persian magicians. Philostratus relates that the Persian magi did not accept the gods in public, but they did accept them in private. He queried whether Protagoras had the same attitude, and if so, this suggested that he also did not accept the gods in public, and therefore he presented himself publicly as an atheist, but that he accepted the gods in his private life. The reason for this unusual situation, as suggested by Philostratus, was that Protagoras, from his Persian education, had observed that the Persian magi do indeed invoke the gods in their secret rites, but avoid any public profession of belief in a deity. They do so because they do not wish it to be thought that their own powers are derived from any supernatural source. They wish to be seen as being powerful in their own right.[144]

Protagoras – Social and Political Implications

Protagoras was brought to trial and convicted – this much is known[145]. The *polis* would not accept his pronouncements casting doubt on the existence of the gods. What is unknown however is the exact punishment which he endured. While the general assumption is that he was either condemned to death or exiled from Athens, and his books were burnt, this is not all entirely certain. He was convicted of impiety – that much is established. Other texts however

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[143] Ibid., 89-90.

[144] Specifically, from Philostratus, *The Lives of the Sophists* 1 26 10 (trans. Graeme Miles and Han Baltussen): "The Persian magi do not educate those who are not Persian, unless the king should command it. It seems to me that Protagoras took from his Persian education his unlawful assertion of doubt as to whether there are gods or whether there are not, since although the magi call upon the gods in their secret rites, they oppose a public belief in divinity, because they do not wish to seem to draw their power from it. It was for this reason that he was driven from the whole land by the Athenians, either having been judged guilty, as some believe, or else when a vote had been taken against him, without him being judged. He travelled from the mainland to the islands, watching for the Athenian triremes that were scattered through every sea, and drowned sailing in a small boat".

[145] For example, Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I, XXIII, 62 – 64, (trans. H. Rackham): "… he was sentenced by a decree of the Athenian assembly to be banished from the city and from the country, and to have his books burnt in the market-place: an example that I can well believe has discouraged many people since from professing atheism, since the mere expression of doubt did not succeed in escaping punishment. What are we to say about the men guilty of sacrilege or impiety or perjury?".

state that he died in a shipwreck[146]. Plutarch mentions his flight from Athens[147]. According to Diogenes Laertius[148], his accuser was Pythodorus, son of Polizelos (one of the four hundred). Filonik[149] suggests that the original version is a later invention, because generally only the Romans burnt books publicly and on behalf of the state; the practice of burning books was unknown in Athens at that time. Filonik compares this to a text by Plato, in which there is a reference to Protagoras' quiet life and good reputation[150]. A slightly contrary opinion is given by Dover, who suggests that the burning of books was possible in Athens at that time, citing an epigraphic testimony[151]. Dover interprets the reference to one of the accusers of Protagoras as essentially meaning "Would that all his accursed writings could be gathered in and burnt, that he might corrupt no others!". He maintains that this was a wish of the accuser, rather than an action which was actually carried out.

This view, however, is in contrast to Plato's reference to Protagoras as having a good reputation. A closer look at Plato's actual statements is warranted. In *Protagoras* 317b-c, Plato indicates that Protagoras says that he is not ashamed to be a sophist. Plato expands on this in *Meno*, in an exchange between Socrates and Anytus[152]. Anytus distrusts the sophists, and Socrates replies that it is necessary always to look to the corresponding expert for an explanation. Socrates cites an example of faulty footwear – we would always seek out a shoemaker for a solution. Similarly, to learn virtue, we would seek out a sophist. Plato then draws the conclusion that in the case of Protagoras, during his forty years of service he had never ceased to have a good reputation. Bearing in mind that Plato is often considered to have had an idealised view of Protagoras, there is no mention of Protagoras *not* having a good reputation. The goodness or otherwise of Protagoras' reputation is therefore of limited significance in determining the fate he experienced after his trial, but it does perhaps indicate that he certainly wasn't detested by Plato for having such views on religion.

The reasonable conclusion to be drawn from these varied and sometimes contradictory accounts, which have been taken mainly from primary sources, is that Protagoras certainly stood trial; and that the main charge against him was one of impiety; and that he was sentenced to either death, or exile from Athens (or, he fled before he was executed); and it is

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[146] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.8.55-56, (trans. Andre Laks and Glenn W. Most).

[147] Plutarch, *Nicias* XXIII 539. "Even Protagoras had to go into exile". (trans. B. Perrin).

[148] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.8.54, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[149] Filonik, J., *Athenian Impiety Trials: A Reappraisal*, (2016), Dike, 36-39.

[150] Plato, *Protagoras* 317b-c, (trans. W. R. M. Lamb).

[151] Dover, K.J., *The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society*, (1976), Talanta 7: 23-56. Retrieved on 13 April 2022 from: http://www.talanta.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Dover-24-54.pdf

[152] Plato, *Meno* 91d-e, (trans. W.R.M. Lamb).

also possible (though also unproven) that his writings in books and documents were confiscated or eliminated in some manner. Also, that the reason for his conviction was his affirmations concerning the gods. Nevertheless, there is one difference between Protagoras and other, earlier philosophers, namely, that his sentence was much more severe – remembering that many earlier philosophers, going right back to Thales, had written relatively impious statements with absolute impunity. The difference could be that these earlier philosophers wrote at various places which had fewer political restrictions, or else they simply travelled around Greece and other surrounding countries, avoiding long periods in any one *polis*; whereas Protagoras in contrast spread his ideas within the centre of the Athenian *polis*. This placed him in a dangerous situation politically with his own *polis*. A person's publicly stated personal belief in the gods was again demonstrated to be intricately intertwined with political power.

The Sophist Prodicus of Ceos

Prodicus of Ceos made statements which are generally interpreted as atheistic. Arguably, his major contribution to philosophical discussion is his analysis of the origins of religion. His theory (mentioned above already, but expanded here) is essentially that man has looked at the things which are useful to him, such as the sun, the moon, meadows, lakes, the food produced by the Earth et al., and deified them. Therefore, religion was derived from gratitude for all these things, or else from fear of these natural phenomena. This view was subsequently recorded by Cicero in *De Natura Deordum*[153]. This view of Prodicus' may have influenced Euripides in *The Bacchae*[154], where it is postulated that there are two divine gifts which are of special importance to mankind: bread and wine. Their adoration was personified in the forms of Demeter and Dionysus respectively as an act of gratitude. This was a perfect example of Prodicus' theory of the origins of religion[155]. Although Cicero himself strongly supported Roman religion, he nevertheless reflected on some of the different religious points of view, including Prodicus', in *De Natura Deorum*[156]:

> Take again those who have asserted that the entire notion of the immortal gods is a fiction invented by wise men in the interest of the state, to the end that those whom reason was powerless to control might be led in the path of duty by religion; surely this view was absolutely and entirely destructive of religion. Or Prodicus of Cos, who said that the gods were personifications of things beneficial to the life of man—pray what religion was left by his theory?

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[153] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I 117-118, (trans. H. Rackham).

[154] Euripides, *The Bacchae* 272 – 285, (trans. David Kovacs).

[155] Jaegar, 249.

[156] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I. 118-119, (trans. H. Rackham).

The fragment of Philodemus recovered from Herculaneum contains a quote which is generally assumed to refer to Prodicus:

> [….] says that the gods of popular belief do not exist, nor do they have knowledge, and that the ancients in admiration [….] the fruits of the earth, and absolutely everything that is useful for life[157].

What this fragment indicates is that Prodicus (assuming that it did in fact refer to him) certainly had atheistic belief.

An alternative translation[158] reads as follows:

> [Prodicus] considers that the gods in which people believe do not exist and that they have no knowledge, but that primitive man, [by admiration deified] the fruits of the earth and everything that contributed to their substance.

The atheism of Prodicus is however not universally accepted. Corey argues that Prodicus did not necessarily demonstrate an atheistic attitude. He suggests that there were four options available to him: (1). He could have retained his belief in the gods, while demonstrating that humans became aware of them from concrete events in our struggle for survival. (2). He could have believed that the gods of popular belief were entirely fictitious, nevertheless other gods were in fact real. (3). He could have disbelieved in the existence of all gods, but still seen the worship of them as significant and culturally important. (4). He could have disbelieved in the existence of all gods, and also disbelieved in the cultural importance of any type of religious worship. None of these four options can be asserted with absolute certainty in the case of Prodicus. With no substantial evidence to the contrary, we cannot accurately determine whether Prodicus was an atheist or not[159]. Despite this doubt, Prodicus appears in a catalogue of atheists[160] from the end of the Hellenistic period, in what is possibly a work by Cleitomachus of

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[157] *Herculaneum Papyrus* 1428, Fragment 19, as quoted in Whitmarsh, 256.

[158] Henrichs, A., *The Atheism of Prodicus*, (1976), *Cronache ercolanesi* 6, pp 15 – 21.

[159] Corey, D., *Prodicus: Diplomat, Sophist and Teacher of Socrates*, from *The Journal History of Political Thought*, Vol.29, Number 1 (2008) ps 12-13. Retrieved on 14 April 2022 from: https://www-ingentaconnect-com.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/content/imp/hpt/2008/00000029/00000001/art00001;jsessionid=f6ttk999j4bg5.x-iclive-02#

[160] Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* VII 7, 41, as quoted in Duran, 46.

Carthage. Henrichs[161] points out however that, significantly, Prodicus is not considered to be an atheist by the classical authors (such as Plato and Xenophon). He is considered by them to be more of a moralist. Aristophanes, who was a contemporary of Prodicus, presents him as a cosmologist, whose materialistic worldview is opposed to traditional stories about the origins of the gods and their place in the universe[162]. Although presented in a comical context, Aristophanes even sees Prodicus as a protector of the Clouds, once they have been recognized as new gods[163]. A similar argument for Prodicus' theism is made by Guthrie[164], who considered that the parliament of Tiresias, as mentioned in *The Bacchae*, accurately reflects Prodicus' doctrine:

> Two things are chief among mortals, young man: the goddess Demeter—she is Earth but call her either name you like—nourishes mortals with dry food. But he who came next, the son of Semele, discovered as its counterpart the drink that flows from the grape cluster and introduced it to mortals[165].

This is not understood by Guthrie to be an atheistic doctrine, because Demeter and Dionysus are included within it. He suggests that while Prodicus believed in the evolution of humankind, and that religion was just one of the fruits of human civilization, which was essential for the preservation of societies, the inclusion of Demeter and Dionysus within his doctrine indicated theistic belief. This was comparable (according to Guthrie) to the construction of cities, the establishment of laws, and the advancement of knowledge. However, a converse opinion to that of Guthrie would be that Prodicus believed that religion had a purely human origin, but that it was nevertheless a necessary part of the development and preservation of societies. If Prodicus' belief was that religion actually had an origin which was purely human, this could then certainly be construed as a form of atheism. The precise belief system of Prodicus must, however, remain indeterminate.

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[161] Henrichs, A., *Two Doxographical Notes: Democritus and Prodicus on Religion*, (1975), *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology,* 79.

[162] Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 692f, "…once you hear from us an accurate account of all celestial phenomena….thenceforth you'll be able to tell Prodicus from me to go to hell", (trans. Jeffery Henderson).

[163] Aristophanes*, The Clouds* 360f, "…for we would pay no attention to any other contemporary sophist of celestial studies except for Prodicus, for his wisdom and intelligence". (trans. Jeffrey Henderson).

[164] Guthrie, W.K.C., *Rationalist Theories of Religion: Agnosticism and Atheism*, (1971), in *The Sophists*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 226 – 249.

[165] Euripides, *The Bacchae*, Verses 269-280, (trans. David Kovacs).

Prodicus - Social and Political Implications

During much of his career as a sophist, Prodicus taught and orated with impunity. Plato and Xenophon both mention that he amassed a great deal of money. Plato wrote:

> …in his private capacity, by giving exhibitions and associating with the young,
>
> he received a marvellous sum of money[166].

Xenophon also mentioned this when he wrote:

> …because you paid a lot of money to…Prodicus[167].

Regardless of his accumulated wealth, criticism and additional controversy eventually came to Prodicus, both during and after his lifetime. Clement of Alexandria noted[168] that Prodicus did not believe that it was necessary to pray, or (presumably also) to perform acts of worship, and that he showed contempt for the ceremonies which the *polis* had organized. Cicero[169] asked the question: Can we consider religion in the way that Prodicus regarded it, viz. as a vehicle in which gods are seen as merely forces and elements which are necessary for the continuation of society? Is such a theory not detrimental to all religious belief *per se*?

While Prodicus was (arguably) thinking primarily of the religion of Athens, it is difficult to imagine that he was not also speaking generally about all religions. This would indicate that Prodicus was atheistic in his beliefs. It is arguably difficult to reach any contrary conclusion, despite his inclusion of Demeter and Dionysus into his analogous reasoning. Whatever the veracity of this analysis, the *polis* was not pleased with him. He is shown in a slightly humiliating way by Aristophanes in *Tagenistae*[170]:

> …either a book has been the ruin of this man here or else Prodicus or one of those idle chatterers.

Prodicus however demonstrated little political ideology, but his pronouncements on religion may have angered the *polis* to an extreme point. Kerferd[171] acknowledges that there may have been confusion by later writers between the demises of Prodicus and Socrates; however, there

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166 Plato, *Hippias Major*, 282d, (trans. Harold North Fowler).

167 Xenophon, *Symposium*, i, 5. (trans. E.C. Marchant, O.J. Todd, Revised Jefferey Henderson).

168 Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* VII 7, 41, as quoted by Duran, 48.

169 Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I 117-118.

170 Aristophanes, *Tagenistae,* from *Attirbuted Fragments*, Fragment 506, (trans. Jeffrey Henderson).

171 Kerferd, G.B., *The Sophistic Movement*, (1981), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 46.

was a story which was preserved in the Pseudo-Platonic *Eryxias* (398e11 – 399b1), that Prodicus was expelled from a gymnasium for “speaking unsuitably in front of young men”. If correct, this instance, together with Prodicus’ heterodox views generally, would almost certainly have affected the attitude of the *polis*. Again, the members of the *polis* were seen to be unsettled because of doubts being advanced by Prodicus concerning the validity of the gods, and they acted accordingly. This can only strengthen the argument that religion and politics were not seen by the *polis* as being separable entities. An attack on religion at that time was an attack on the social cohesion of the populace.

Critias

The tendency towards open expression of atheistic belief continued with the philosopher and politician Critias, (born in Athens c.460 – 403 BCE). He was the son of Callaeschrus, and he was a first cousin of Plato’s mother Perictione. He was known for his tragedies and for his prose work, although the only play he wrote of which we have a complete record is *Peirithous.* In addition, we also have eight short quotations from unidentified plays which have also been recovered. Politically, he was a leading and violent member of the Thirty Tyrants. In 404 BCE, Athens had fallen to the Spartans after twenty-seven years of brutal warfare - democracy was suspended for thirteen months and the pro-Spartan oligarchy known as the Thirty Tyrants was installed. The leaders were Critias and Theramenes, both notorious for their brutality. They identified a faction which was loyal to the old democracy, and the members of this group were arrested and executed. A power struggle between Critias and Theramenes ensued, and Theramenes was taken away and also executed. The rule of the tyrants ended in 403 BCE, when rebellious forces led by the determined democrat Thrasybulus fought near Piraeus, and eventually democracy was restored[172]. Critias was also an associate of Socrates, which did not assist in the endearment of Socrates to the public of Athens. However, for our purposes Critias’ philosophical bent is of more importance. He is primarily known in theological terms for his alleged authorship of the Sisyphus fragment. The excerpt comes from the play *Sisyphus*, and the passage is unfortunately only a mere fragment, so that the wider context of the play is unavailable to us. The authorship is contested, some claiming Critias was the author, others citing it as being a work of Euripides. Critias is the more likely one, as there are many references to him as an atheist. For example[173]:

> For while the majority declare that gods exist, some deny their existence, like Diagoras of Melos, and Theodorus, and Critias the Athenian.

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[172] Whitmarsh, 125.

[173] For example Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* III 218, (trans. R.G. Bury).

As Jaeger says "Presumably Critias, with his enlightened radicalism, was still dissatisfied with arguments of the kind put forward by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*"[174]. (This work was written long after the death of Critias; Jaeger is referring to the type of argument used by Plato). In this dialogue, the character of Socrates suggests that "For I say, Polus, that the orators and the despots alike have the least power in their cities"[175]. Socrates said that when either orators or tyrants cause people to be banished or killed, they think that they are doing what is in their own best interests, but they are actually to be pitied. The character Callicles talks with Socrates, and Socrates recounts the myths concerning Cronos, and the division of men into the righteous – who go in death to the Isles of the Blessed – and godless, unrighteous men – who go to the prison of vengeance and punishment called Tartarus[176].

In opposition to these religiously based sentiments, Critias puts the following into the mouth of his character Sisyphus, concerning the origin and significance of religion, and it reads thus:

A time there was when disorder ruled
Human lives, which were then, like lives of beasts,
Enslaved to force; nor was there then reward
For the good, nor for the wicked punishment.
Next, it seems to me, humans established laws
For punishment, that justice might rule
Over the tribe of mortals, and wanton injury be subdued;
And whosoever did wrong was penalized.
Next, as the laws held [mortals] back from deeds

Of open violence, but still such deeds
Were done in secret,—then, I think,
Some shrewd man first, a man in judgment wise,
Found for mortals the fear of gods,
Thereby to frighten the wicked should they
Even act or speak or scheme in secret.
Hence it was that he introduced the divine
Telling how the divinity enjoys endless life,
Hears and sees, and takes thought
And attends to things, and his nature is divine,
So that everything which mortals say is heard
And everything done is visible.

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[174] Jaeger, 186.

[175] Plato, *Gorgias*, 466d, (trans. W.R.M. Lamb).

[176] Ibid., 523a.

Even if you plan in silence some evil deed
It will not be hidden from the gods: for discernment
Lies in them. So, speaking words like these,
The sweetest teaching did he introduce,
Concealing truth under untrue speech.
The place he spoke of as the gods' abode
Was that by which he might awe humans most,—
The place from which, he knew, terrors came to mortals
And things advantageous in their wearisome life—
The revolving heaven above, in which dwell
The lightnings, and awesome claps
Of thunder, and the starry face of heaven,
Beautiful and intricate by that wise craftsman Time,—
From which, too, the meteor's glowing mass speeds
And wet thunderstorm pours forth upon the earth.
Such were the fears with which he surrounded mortals,
And to the divinity he gave a fitting home,
By this his speech, and in a fitting place,
And [thus] extinguished lawlessness by laws

And, after proceeding a little farther, he adds—

Thus first did some man, as I deem, persuade

Men to suppose a race of Gods exists[177].

The crux of the message is clearly that religion is an invention by the rulers, or by the intelligentsia, for purely political purposes. Guthrie stated that the fragment was “the first occurrence in history of the theory of religion as a political invention to ensure good behaviour”[178]. He noted that this approach was subsequently adopted by the Hellenistic historian Polybius in his 40 volumed history of Rome’s emergence as an empire (of which only five volumes are now extant). Popper[179] noted the striking similarity between this passage of Critias’, and the views that Plato developed in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, regarding the Noble

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[177] Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, 1.54,55, (trans. Bury, R.G., revised by J.Garrett, 2009).

[178] Guthrie, W.K.C., *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 3, (1969), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 244.

[179] Popper, K., *The Open Society and its Enemies: The Spell of Plato*, Vol. 1, 5th edition, (1966) [First published 1945], Routledge.

Lie[180]. There are also similarities between this passage and the theories of Democritus (the theory of fear) and Prodicus (the gifts of nature) concerning the origin of the human belief in gods[181]. Critias however does not follow these ideas absolutely – he does not suggest that the idea of the gods springs entirely from fear, nor from a sense of gratitude for the things of nature. Instead, he looks at the heavens from where both the benefits and terrors of nature originate, and concludes that the best place to have an ideal witness of Man's behaviour is in an all-knowing God. So, to Sisyphus, God is an invention, to serve as a witness when men cannot be observed by the authorities themselves[182]. Sextus Empiricus said that Critias himself denied that the gods existed[183], so this passage is possibly, and arguably, partly autobiographical from Critias' point of view. The validity of that notion, however, must remain unknown.

Critias – Social and Political Implications

The fate of Critias differs from the previously mentioned impious or atheistic philosophers. In political terms he was one of the Thirty Tyrants, and until his death in battle he carried out brutal executions of his fellow-Athenian citizens. From a social point of view, those in the *polis* (and the general citizenry too for that matter) who were outside his favoured circle would almost certainly have lived in fear of his power, regardless of his religious beliefs. And who would have publicly criticised his personal theology anyway? The Thirty Tyrants ruled for one year only, so his death may well have been greeted with relief by many – not so much on religious grounds, but simply for the sake of their own well-being.

There can be little doubt about the atheism of Critias, and his death in battle averted any possible future trial for impiety when democracy was eventually restored to Athens. In addition, it is possible that the example of Critias would have made it much more difficult and dangerous for anyone in Athens to publicly express any notions of atheism (or any form of religious heterodoxy) following Critias' death. His political activities would have made him not only a controversial figure, but to many, an abhorrent one. Few would have wished to have been seen to be associated with his tarnished reputation.

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[180] Plato, *Republic* 3.414 b-c. A Noble Lie: a myth or untruth, typically of religious nature, knowingly propagated by an elite to maintain social harmony or advance an agenda. The concept was originated by Plato, and described in this section of *Republic*.

[181] Jaeger, 251.

[182] Ibid., 188.

[183] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book III Section 218, (trans. R.G. Bury).

The changing correlation between religion and the influence of the *polis*

Based on our current knowledge, the philosophers of the School of Miletus were apparently not challenged unduly by the *polis*. They moved throughout the Greek world and beyond, but we do not know if this was to avoid being tied to a particular *polis* as a citizen and therefore being obliged to take part in religious rituals, or simply to be able to investigate their own theories more thoroughly by travelling widely. We have seen that as time passed, however, there was an increasing influence asserted by the *polis* – particularly the Athenian *demos* - concerning the statements made by later philosophers who would question the gods' powers, or in some cases, question the gods' very existence. These reactions by members of various *poleis* have demonstrated to some degree the inextricable link between religious belief and its practice on one hand, and political action and retaliation on the other. But there were many more supposedly atheistic pronouncements by subsequent philosophers who were also accused of impiety and atheism, many of whom suffered negative repercussions for their work, as we shall see.

Diagoras of Melos

Diagoras of Melos was born c.465 BCE and died, (probably in Corinth and in exile) c.410 BCE. Arguably, he was the most prominent atheist of the fifth century. He was neither a pure philosopher, nor a theoretician, but more perhaps a philosopher who tended to practice primarily as a poet. His atheism however is known only through anecdotes[184]. A well-known example occurred in Samothrace. When faced with the many expensive votive gifts set up to the gods for salvation from the sea, Diagoras commented: "There would have been far more, if those who were not saved had set up offerings"[185]. This anecdote was also related by Cicero, who also added this other anecdote: Diagoras was on a boat in the middle of a storm, and the crew thought that the treacherous conditions were because Diagoras was on board. Diagoras asked them if the other ships in the storm also carried him on board[186]. This anecdote (quite obviously) suggests that because Diagoras was widely regarded as an atheist, it was believed that his presence could attract the wrath of the gods. However, Diagoras maintained his

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[184] Burkert, W., *Greek Religion*, (1985), Basil Blackwell, Harvard, 316.

[185] Diogenes Laertius 6.59, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[186] Cicero*, On the Nature of the Gods,* III 89, Specifically: "He pointed out to them a number of other vessels making heavy weather on the same course, and inquired whether they supposed that those ships also had a Diagoras on board". Cicero also wrote in the same work at I.3: "Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene held that there are no gods at all". (trans. H. Rackham).

position firmly, and with some wit, and is associated with the label "atheist" from the oldest available texts[187].

His most notable composition was a work entitled "*Apopyrgizontes logoi"*. The translation and intent of this title is open to debate. A possible translation is "*Arguments That Knock Down Towers".* The supposition is that this refers to an assault on the "towers of religion" which are metaphorically installed on Mt Olympus, in other words, an attack on the validity of the Olympian gods themselves. The publication of this scandalous work reinforced Diagoras' already somewhat notorious reputation, and gave him the nickname "the atheist".

Diagoras – Social and political Implications, and the political hardening of attitude towards impiety

Diagoras was known as "the atheist" for different reasons. The social and political implications for him arose as a result of the perception by the *polis* that the accusations against him were founded on truth. The anecdotes cited above are only some examples of this perception. Perhaps the major reason that Diagoras was despised in many quarters was his public revelation of the sacred mysteries of Eleusis and those of the Cabyrians. The exact timing of these shocking revelations is unknown, but it is likely that it was originally published in *Apopyrgizontes logoi*[188]. It could be argued then that Diagoras, as well as being a poet, was also a philosopher, who was attempting to defend atheism with intellectual reasoning.

After the publication of this book, Aristophanes in *The Birds*[189] picked up on the theme of atheism as being an assault on the heavens. In the play, in which two Athenians convince the birds of the world to build a city in the sky, but end up besieging the gods by starving them of all sacrifices, there is a specific reference to Diagoras, and the actions taken against him by the Athenians. Starving the gods of sacrifices is referred to as the "Melian starvation". In the ten years following publication of Diagoras' atheistic book, several fantasies arose depicting assaults on Olympus with a view to displacing the gods[190].

There are other stories about the impiety of Diagoras[191]. The Christian writer Athenagoras of Athens (2nd century AD) writes about Diagoras:

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[187] For example: Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods,* I 63: "Again, did not Diagoras, called the Atheist, and later Theodorus openly deny the divine existence?". (trans. H. Rackham).

[188] Jacoby, *Diagoras the Atheist*, (1959), Akademie Verlag, Berlin 125.

[189] Aristophanes, *The Birds*, Lines 1072-78, (trans. Jeffery Henderson).

[190] Romer, F.E., "Atheism, Impiety and the *Limos Melios* in Aristophanes' *Birds*", American Journal of Philology 115, (1994), 351-65.

[191] Ibid, 351-65.

> With reason did the Athenians adjudge Diagoras guilty of atheism, in that he not only divulged the Orphic doctrine, and published the mysteries of Eleusis and of the Cabiri and chopped up the wooden statue of Hercules to boil his turnips, but openly declared that there was no God at all[192].

In another source, there is a report of a book which was associated with Diagoras (and written in Phrygian) which had a highly atheistic content, and which is quoted by Tatian (a Christian writer, living c. 120 – c. 180 CE)[193]:

> And if you adhere to *their* teaching, why do you fight against me for choosing such views of doctrine as I approve?....yet we are to be assailed with abuse on a judgment formed without examination? Diagoras was an Athenian, but you punished him for divulging the Athenian mysteries; yet you who read his Phrygian discourses hate us.

Generally, Diagoras was shown little sympathy by later Christian writers, despite his open denial of the Greek gods, because he was accused by them of also denying divine providence[194].

> But in those later times in which philosophy had now lost its vigour there lived a certain Diagoras of Melos, who altogether denied the existence of God, and on account of this sentiment was called atheist; also Theodorus of Cyrene……These are they who attacked providence, which had been asserted and defended through so many ages by so many intellects.

However, much of what we know of Diagoras was written long afterward. More certainty is to be found in the writings of Diodorus, who related that around 415 BCE, (which is the same year that Melos was destroyed by Athens, as reported by Thucydides), Diagoras was accused of impiety and atheism by a member of the democratic party in Athens. This is recorded by Craterus (in FGrHist 342 F 16).

However, some accusations concerning Diagoras' atheism may have lacked credibility, and were more likely fabricated for political purposes, presumably more to draw attention to his atheistic stance than to delve into his intellectual output and prowess. A significant commentary comes from Robertson[195]:

> It was about that time [415 BCE] that the poet Diagoras of Melos was proscribed for atheism, as having declared that the non-punishment of a certain act of iniquity proved

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[192] Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, Chapter 4, retrieved on 25 October 2023 from: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0205.htm

[193] Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, Chapter 27, (trans. J.E. Ryland).

[194] Lactantius, *On the Wrath of God*, Chapter IX, (trans. William Fletcher).

[195] Robertson, J.M., *A History of Freethought, Ancient and Modern, to the Period of the French Revolution*, vol. 1 (1936), Watts Publishing Group, London, 173 – 174.

> that there were no gods. It has been surmised…..that the iniquity in question was the slaughter of the Melians by the Athenians in 416 BCE, and the Athenian resentment was personal and political rather than religious. For some time after 415 the Athenian courts made strenuous efforts to punish every discoverable act of impiety….Diagoras, who was further charged with divulging the Eleusinian mysteries, and with making firewood with an image of Herakles, telling the god thus to perform his thirteenth labour by cooking turnips, became henceforth one of the proverbial atheists of the ancient world, and a reward of a silver talent was offered for killing him, and of two talents for his capture alive; despite which he seems to have escaped.

Diagoras fled from Athens, and was sentenced in absentia to death. A search was made for him throughout the Athenian empire[196]. While the validity of some of the events involving Diagoras are questionable, there is at the same time however a clear demonstration that the *demos* of Athens was now punishing impiety, either through the courts or from within the *polis* as a whole. The case of Diagoras was not an isolated instance of the hardening of attitude by the *polis* towards impiety. What accounted for this change in attitude? Scepticism about religion had begun to undermine the foundations of the traditional religiosity[197] – and as we have seen, the intertwining of religion and politics was an inseparable part of Greek society. An attack on religion was an attack on society. The demolition of the Herms and the subsequent trial of those accused, and the desecration of the mysteries, are an indication that the more conservative element within the *polis* in Athens had begun to sense a very dangerous trend emerging through a widening lack of faith.

In the case of Diagoras there were other political reasons for his persecution. He was from Melos and therefore was not Athenian, but belonged to the Dorian subgroup. Also, he was a friend of the Dorian city of Mantinea, and this city had just broken its alliance with Athens and was hated by the Athenians. Further, the Melians were massacred by the Athenians in 416 BCE. Consequently, the Athenian *demos* was more sensitive to any criticism, and was ready to lash out against detractors of Athenian culture[198].

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[196] Burkert, 316.

[197] Duran, 58.

[198] Ibid., 59.

CHAPTER 4: THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

Socrates

A great amount of material has been written about Socrates (c. 470 – 399 BCE). While the more notable authors on the topic of Socrates include the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the playwright Aristophanes, and the historian Xenophon, there are innumerable writers and scholars over many centuries who have also written detailed analyses concerning this renowned philosopher. Significantly, the influence of Socrates' life and philosophy is such that all earlier Greek philosophers are usually referred to as 'Pre-Socratic'. The weight of writing about Socrates is so great that only the aspects more relevant to this discussion will be covered here. There is of course no extant writing by Socrates himself, and there is doubt that he ever wrote down anything at all. But the words that he spoke and the teaching that he gave were sufficient to strongly influence many people, including his pupil Plato. In addition, Plato's pupil Aristotle was also influenced by Plato's teaching on Socrates; and Aristotle himself counted Alexander ('the Great') of Macedon among his own pupils. There is no doubt that the influence of Socrates was both extensive and intergenerational.

Differing accounts of the religious views of Socrates

Aristophanes:

Socrates was not however admired by all Athenian citizens. Aristophanes in *The Clouds* launched a virulent attack on the sophists, and included Socrates among them. With regard to Socrates, Aristophanes suggests that Socrates charged for his teaching, (which does not however correspond with the other information that we have). He is presented as a trickster, skilled in rhetoric but whose teachings were sterile and disturbing. Aristophanes[199] suggests that Socrates worshiped only three things: The Void, the Clouds, and the Language. The Language refers to the charlatanism which is linked to Socrates. The followers of Socrates are referred to (by Aristophanes) as 'sons of the earth'. This term can mean 'louts' but it could also refer to the fight of the Titans, children of the earth, against the gods. From this, the implication is that Socrates and his followers are enemies of the gods (*theomachoi*)[200].

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[199] Aristophanes, *The Clouds* 423 – 426, (trans. Jeffery Henderson).

[200] Duran, 61.

We learn from Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates' about his interest in astronomy[201], mathematics[202] and geometry[203]. We learn that his school taught grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and also the genres of words[204] all of which were necessary for a sophist. Socrates is also depicted as considering issues concerning theology and the gods, and their link to astronomy. References or indirect allusions are made in the play to major influences on Socrates. These include Hippo of Rhegium[205], Anaximenes[206], Prodicus[207], and Diagoras of Melos[208]. All of these had either denied the reality of the gods or interpreted natural phenomena as being outside
the direct influence of the gods. Aristophanes paints an image of Socrates as one who believes that all natural phenomena can be explained rationally. From this rational interpretation comes the conclusion that the gods have no meaning. In *The Clouds* it is stated 'Zeus does not exist'[209]. The implication is that Socrates does not admit to the traditional gods. And if this is the case, then he does not offer prayers to the traditional gods either. In *The Clouds* 263 – 268 he prays to the Air.

Although Aristophanes was a comic playwright, and his depiction of Socrates was created to amuse audiences, the influence this had on the mind of the public may have been very significant. Who in the audience would know what was based on fact, and what was comic invention? Sourvinou-Inwood said that in her opinion, with respect to Euripides, one must be very careful about how to interpret what Aristophanes says, because this author does not offer a true representation of the characters that he is depicting. His arguments are derived from the person's works but are taken out of context. In the case of Socrates, there were no known written works from which to extract passages, therefore much of his description of Socrates' beliefs could be open to critical scepticism[210].

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201 Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, 225-234 (trans. Jeffrey Henderson).

202 Ibid., 145 - 150.

203 Ibid., 203, 204.

204 Ibid., 655 – 699.

205 Ibid., 94-97.

206 Ibid., 225 – 234.

207 Ibid., 358 – 363.

208 Ibid., 816 – 831.

209 Ibid., 365 – 367.

210 Sourvinou-Inkwood, C., "*Euripidean Tragedy and Religious Exploration"* in *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*, (2003), Lexington Books, 291 – 411.

Plato:

Almost all of Plato's philosophical treatises are in the form of dialogues between Socrates and one or more other people. Plato offers a clue to the religious views of Socrates in *Euthyphro*. In a dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro (a self-proclaimed religious expert), Euthyphro expresses his amazement that Socrates of all people should be tried for impiety. This is set in the time just before Socrates' trial. There then follows a discussion about the nature of piety and holiness. Euthyphro reveals that he himself is being accused of impiety by his own family, because he wishes to prosecute his own father for murder. Socrates asks him to define what piety and holiness are and Euthyphro is unable to, despite several attempts to do so. Eventually Euthyphro has to rush away, and the matter is left unresolved. The point of this discussion is that Socrates demonstrates that "piety" is a complex field. Later, at his subsequent trial, he develops the opinion that it is a far more complicated matter than many of his accusers have realised.

The approach of asking questions by Socrates, which is typical of the "Socratic Method", is significant to us in this instance because it is an indication of Socrates' questioning of traditional religion. Firstly, Socrates challenges Euthyphro concerning the stories told about the gods. Socrates believes that it is absurd to pay credence to the hostility and struggles among the gods which are related about them by the poets[211]. Secondly, Socrates believes that we cannot define "pious actions" as ones that appeal to the gods, because the gods very often have enmities and struggles among themselves, and therefore what may be a pious act to one god will be an impious act to another god, with both occurring at the same time. Thirdly, Socrates questions the relationship which was traditionally assumed to exist between people and the gods. When we deal with an item with devotion, we assume that devotion will improve that item. But Socrates thinks that it is absurd to suggest that an act of devotion can improve any god[212]. Furthermore, Socrates suggests that the sacrifices and prayers that are offered to the gods are motivated by pure selfishness. Euthyphro said that piety is to do and say things which are pleasing to the gods[213]; but Socrates points out that the gods do not profit from these things which are offered to them. Therefore, the transaction is entirely to benefit the person making the prayer or sacrifice, which Socrates sees as an act of selfishness.

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[211] Plato, *Euthyphro* 6 a-d, (trans. C. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy).

[212] Ibid., 13 e – 14 a.

[213] Ibid., 14 a-15 b.

Xenophon

Much of Xenophon's writings about Socrates were obtained from other writers[214]. Accordingly, there is doubt about the complete accuracy of some of Xenophon's pronouncements concerning Socrates. Nevertheless, a broad picture is painted which can be accepted in the main as a true representation of Socrates' religious practices. In his *Apology*, Xenophon states that Socrates did in fact make sacrifices to the gods[215]. Xenophon also believed that the divine voice (*daimonion)* which guided Socrates was an omen, and in that regard it was similar to the different cries or flights of birds, regarded by many as also being omens[216]. Socrates also defends himself by stating that he has not caused any young people to become impious[217]. These points are reiterated by Xenophon in *Memorabilia*. Further reports of Socrates' religious practices are recorded by other authors, for example Plato asserted that Socrates had some niches in his house for the worship of gods of the *polis*, such as Apollo Patroos[218]. He also asserted that Socrates pronounced civic oaths and prayers throughout his life. McPherran[219] said that there was no doubt that Socrates undertook acts of worship which were acceptable to the *polis*. Accordingly, Socrates did not in general terms constitute a threat to the *polis*. However, he insisted that the internal motivation of any offeror of sacrifices should be to purify the soul, rather than merely a concentration on the ritualistic aspects of the ceremony. As a result, he became an uncomfortable presence to those who made sacrifices without believing in them. He had a similar effect on those who held the attitude that they may be rewarded by the gods for their actions of worship (*do ut des*[220]). Socrates believed that the intention of sacrifices should be for self-examination[221].

The contradictions in these analyses of Socrates' religious views

Aristophanes asserted that Socrates did not make sacrifices, whereas Plato and Xenophon both say that he did. But Aristophanes as a comic playwright had more reasons to distort the truth for professional reasons, while Plato and Xenophon were clearly admirers of Socrates. Conversely however, that could have meant that Plato's and Xenophon's observations were

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[214] Translation taken from Zaragoza, J., *Introduccion, traduccion y notes a Jenofonte. Recuerdos de Socrates. Economico. Banquete. Apologia de Socrates*, (199h3), Gredos, Madrid, 9-13, 362-363.

[215] Xenophon, *Apology of Socrates* 10 – 12, (trans. E.C. March, O.J. Todd, revised J. Henderson 2013).

[216] Ibid., 12.

[217] Ibid., 19.

[218] Plato, *Euthydemus* 302b-d, (trans. W.R.M. Lamb).

[219] McPherran, M.L., *The Religion of Socrates*, (1996), Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 140.

[220] *Do ut des*: "I give so that you may give".

[221] McPherran, 149.

equally exaggerated, but in favour of Socrates instead of against him. Duran suggested that Socrates took part in some religious acts of the *polis* but without believing in them; Socrates possibly chose to do this because it was easier to comply than to dissent. As a philosopher who was respectful of the law, he considered it to be obligatory to comply with that which was sanctioned by customs. This however does not imply that Socrates himself had personal belief in these religious acts; on the contrary, it seems likely that he openly questioned the attitudes of his fellow citizens concerning religious ceremonies[222]. In his defence of Socrates, Xenophon claimed that:

> First, then, for his attitude toward the gods; his deeds and words were clearly consistent with the answer given by the Priestess at Delphi to those who inquire about their duty regarding sacrifice or the cult of ancestors or any other such matters, for the answer of the Priestess is that those who follow the custom of the state would act piously, and that was how Socrates acted himself and counselled others to act[223].

To put this into context, and providing that the belief-system as declared by that oracle was duly and diligently acted upon, then if individuals were pious and wished to win the favour (*charis*) of the gods, it was necessary that they follow the traditional customs of their own city-state. These customs determined which gods were to be worshipped, how and at what times, and what offerings were to be made, and for what purposes[224]. These traditional customs were not held to have been 'revealed' by the gods, but were practices established by the ancestors of the people within each city-state,[225] and carried on for many generations. The picture of Socrates then is one who complied with religious rituals because it was expected of him as a citizen, but who questioned the motivations of some of his fellow citizens who took part. His interest appears to have been in ethical and philosophical aspects of worship rather than merely in ritualistic prayer, so he may possibly have been even more earnestly religious than many of his contemporaries. Plato undoubtedly represents him as such.

The Trial and Death of Socrates

Before Socrates was brought to trial, he had already demonstrated his moral courage in the political field, and on more than one occasion. In 406 BCE he refused to agree to the demand that eight commanders, who were going to be impeached for their alleged negligence at Arginusae, should all be tried together, because this was contrary to the law and was calculated to provide a hasty sentence. Socrates was at that time a member of the Committee of the

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[222] Duran, 66.

[223] Xenophon, Memorabilia, 1.3.1, (trans. E.C. Marchant, O. J. Todd).

[224] Mikalson, J.D., *Ancient Greek Religion*, (2005), Blackwell, Oxford, 182.

[225] One exception being the rituals of the Mysteries at Eleusis, which were supposedly taught to the Eleusinians by Demeter.

Senate. His moral courage was again shown when, in 404/3 BCE, he refused the demand of the Thirty Tyrants to take part in the arrest of Leon of Salamis, whom the oligarchs intended to murder with the intention of confiscating his property. The Tyrants wished to implicate as many prominent Athenians as possible in their own corrupt practices, possibly with an eye to the future and their own eventual downfall. Socrates refused to be involved in these crimes, and if the Thirty Tyrants had not been overthrown, he would probably have been executed for failing to comply with their unlawful wishes[226].

In the year 400/399 BCE Socrates was brought to trial. The leaders of the restored democracy were the instigators, particularly Anytus, who remained in the background but arranged for Meletus to bring the charges against Socrates. The indictment was made before the court of the King Archon, and it is recorded as follows:

> "This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, the son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus of Alopece: Socrates is guilty of refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death."[227].

The jury of 501 men were tasked with deciding Socrates' guilt or innocence. Socrates used his customary maieutic method when answering the charges brought by Meletus: he asked Meletus questions. However, this method was not useful and he was condemned by 280 jurors, a narrow majority. When the question of sentencing was addressed, Socrates angered the jury. Meletus demanded the death penalty but this was treated with disdain by Socrates, who jokingly suggested that he should receive free meals in the Prytaneion (an honour reserved for city benefactors and Olympic Games victors). He then instead offered to pay a relatively small fine. Eventually, 320 of the jury of citizens voted for the death penalty. Encouraged by his friends to flee, he refused on principle. To maintain consistency with his own philosophy of being obedient to laws, he carried out his own execution by drinking hemlock, from which he died[228].

Socrates was the first philosopher who was actually executed for any form of 'atheism'. Some philosophers had previously been condemned to exile on charges of atheism, notably Protagoras, Diagoras and Anaxagoras (although in the case of Anaxagoras the record is somewhat unclear). Four years later Prodicus was also condemned to drink hemlock; however, Socrates was the first 'atheistic' philosopher to meet this fate. His condemnation occurred for a variety of reasons, not all of which related to Socrates' own beliefs, words, or actions. McPherran indicates that there was a powerful conservative reaction during the fifth century

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[226] Copleston, 113-114.

[227] Diogenes Laertius, 2, 40, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[228] Duran, 73,74.

BCE against the arguable decline of popular religion. This led to greater attention being paid to possible heretical views being expressed in the religious sphere[229]. In addition, as stated previously, this occurred just after the pro-Spartan rule of the Thirty Tyrants in 404 BCE. In the context of that time, anyone not fully supporting democracy was liable to be regarded as dangerous and could be open to persecution. It is possible that the philosophy of Socrates with its elitist character was considered undemocratic.

Another possible factor (as noted by Wilson) is Socrates' arrogant attitude during his trial, which infuriated much of the jury. This attitude was in addition to his own extravagant appearance and sometimes eccentric behaviour which he had often demonstrated throughout his life. His appearance was regarded as slovenly[230], and was closer to that of a Spartan than that of a refined Athenian. The danger for Socrates in this regard was the fear of him being seen as demonstrating philolaconism, remembering that it was only four years since the pro-Spartan Tyrants were overthrown[231]. Further, Socrates' disciples included some men who were detested by many Athenian citizens. These included Critias, the brutal pro-Spartan tyrant. Aeschines believed that Socrates was convicted for the reason that he educated Critias[232]. Also included as one of Socrates' disciples was Alcibiades, profaner of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and author of pro-Spartan and even pro-Persian policies.

Apart from the diverse political influences which contributed to Socrates' fate, there is also the aspect of Socrates' ethical teaching. He was the first philosopher, as far as we know, to extend his criticism of traditional religious belief into a specific type of ethical behaviour. Anaxagoras, as an example, was able to support his criticism of religious belief with theories about natural principles. Socrates, on the other hand, considered that the *daemon* guides us all, and that this is nothing more than a universal intelligence which is to be found in all human beings, and which is quite separate from the influence of the traditional gods. Some would call this *daemon* no more than 'common sense' or 'human conscience'. Socrates believed that these concepts concerning human behaviour are innate. As far as this is related to ethics, he believed that the idea of correct behaviour comes from within each individual, guided by their own *daemon,* and that this guidance is quite separate from any influences asserted by the gods. By speaking and teaching these ideas, Socrates had become a potential danger to the cohesiveness of the *polis*[233].

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[229] McPherran, 171.

[230] Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, 102 – 103, (trans. Jeffery Henderson).

[231] Wilson, E., *The Death of Socrates: Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint*, (2007), Profile Books, Cambridge MA, 68,69,75.

[232] Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*, 173, (trans. C.D. Adams).

[233] Duran, 76.

Both Plato and Xenophon wrote apologies[234] concerning the trial of Socrates. However, Xenophon was responding to Plato, he was not at the trial in person. Xenophon's account was arguably partly a copy of Plato's work, and partly an account by one Hermogenes (now lost), together with a reasonable amount of his own invention[235]. The problem is to find what the real essence of Socrates' teachings was. The character of Socrates presented in Aristophanes' *Clouds* is quite different from the character presented by Plato and Xenophon. In both Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of the trial, none of the characteristics suggested by Aristophanes are shown. On the contrary, in Plato's version Socrates identifies his public perception (namely, being a sceptic of religion) as the image portrayed of him by Aristophanes, and Plato holds Aristophanes responsible for this misrepresentation[236].

The trial of Socrates and his eventual demise are, among other things, a reflection of the general change in the political attitude of the *polis* towards religious impiety, certainly as far as Athens is concerned. Following the Spartan victory over Athens and the subsequent rule of the Thirty Tyrants, few Athenian citizens were prepared to let religiously unorthodox or anti-democratic elements influence the population. Because religious practice and political influence were so closely interconnected, it could be argued that Socrates paid the ultimate price by openly questioning the accepted religious ritualistic practices, of not just each individual person, but of the entire *polis*. However, he was by no means the last suspected atheist to suffer the political consequences of religious dissent.

The Effect of the Decree of Diopeithes and the Resulting Political Influence on Religion

From both a political and a religious point of view, it is important to understand the significance of the Decree of Diopeithes. The effect that it had was far reaching, and may have influenced the decisions in several cases of impiety and atheism, including that of Socrates. Anaxagoras, however, remains the only person of whom there seems to be strong evidence that the decree was used directly against him, however the influence of the decree may have stayed much longer with some of the citizenry. Diopeithes was described as a seer, and a diviner who was dedicated to the interpretation of oracles (*chresmologos*)[237], and his decree was undoubtedly instrumental in making atheism a crime in Athens. The decree was created in the 430's BCE, and it was reported in this manner:

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[234] "Apologies" is used in the ancient Greek sense of "defence speech".

[235] Whitmarsh, 129.

[236] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 19b-d, (trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones, William Preddy).

[237] Flower, M.A., *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, (2008), University of California Press, Berkeley, 124-125.

> And Diopeithes brought in a bill providing for the public impeachment of such as did not believe in gods, or who taught doctrines regarding the heavens, directing suspicion against Pericles by means of Anaxagoras[238].

This decree had important consequences as it influenced, and reflected to some degree, the changing and strengthening political mood in democratic Athens, not only against religious impiety, but also against any divergent views of religious belief which excluded the traditional gods of the city. Diopeithes and his decree had a significant influence on the ordinary citizen, and he was a well known (and often feared) figure. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles is thought to have created characters who represented Diopeithes, as well as Pericles, and also Pericles' colleague Anaxagoras. Ancient audiences would surely have recognized the implied link between and among these characters[239]. He was not always highly respected in Athens. At that time, he was being mocked by comic poets for his eccentric behaviour, which demonstrated a very conservative religious bent. He was mocked as a "madman"[240] and pictured as performing ecstatic dances to drumbeats[241]. Aristophanes implied that he invented oracles to suit his own needs[242].

In Athens at that time there is evidence of increasing doubt about the real influence of the gods, or even doubt about their very existence. An example of this occurs in *Oedipus the King*, when Sophocles has the wife of Oedipus (and later, it transpired, also his mother) Jocasta making extraordinary statements about religious faith. She believes that Oedipus has proven Apollo wrong with certain of his actions by escaping the implications of the oracle. She says:

> …so that after that I would look neither this way nor that on account of a prophecy[243].

She is not denying the existence of the gods, but she is however expressing an extremely heretical position for that time: that prophecy simply does not work. The chorus then sings a passage which must have been shocking to ancient audiences:

> No longer shall I go in reverence to the inviolate navel of the earth, nor to the temple at Abae, nor to that of Olympia, if these oracles do not accord with truth, so that all mortals may point to them. But O Ruler, if you are rightly thus called,

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[238] Plutarch, *Pericles*, 32.1, (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

[239] Whitmarsh, 103 – 104.

[240] Ameipsias, Fragment F10, (trans. Ian C. Storey).

[241] Phrynichus, Fragment F9, (trans. Ian C. Storey).

[242] Aristophanes, *The Knights*, 1086, (trans. Jeffrey Henderson).

[243] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 857-58, (trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones).

> Zeus, lord of all, may this not escape you and your ever deathless power! For already the oracles of Laius are fading and are being expunged, and nowhere is Apollo manifest in honour; but the power of the gods is perishing[244].

This passage casts doubt not only on the power of Zeus, but on the power of all the gods. If prophecy is to be ignored, how can Zeus be truly "mighty"? And if the gods generally have lost control of prophecy about the future, how can they be omniscient? There is sophist reasoning demonstrated here[245]. If divine prophecy does not come to fruition, then the gods do not control the universe. And if they do not control the universe, what need is there for people to worship them? Sophocles does show later in this particular play that divine prophecy, in this instance, does come to fruition (and catastrophically in the case of Oedipus). But the suggestion that divine prophecies are fallible was, to some Greeks, an unacceptable concept to put forward at that time.

Suggestions like these would surely have been also been responsible in part for Diopeithes' decision to issue his decree. But there were also surely political purposes behind this decree, beyond the concern about religious belief alone. Plutarch believed that the real purpose of the decree was to attack Pericles, the most powerful man in Athens, by using it to accuse his friend Anaxagoras of impiety or atheism (as we have seen previously). The legal process that Plutarch mentioned was an *eisangelia* - impeachment – the most severe form of indictment , which effectively accused a person of subverting the democratic process, or threatening the security of the State. This type of impeachment was heard in front of high political bodies such as the Council or the Assembly, rather than being tried before a jury. If the accused was found guilty, the majority of these cases ended with the death penalty. Some scholars have doubted the validity of this: why should disbelief in the gods be treated with such severity? However Plutarch, although writing well after the events occurred, worked with documents from the actual time. Among these were transcriptions of Athenian legal decrees, and commentaries on them also, which were compiled by Craterus of Macedon in the early third century BCE. Craterus probably established the details of this decree from the records in Athens' official archive[246].

The Suda[247] depicted Diopeithes as an orator, undoubtedly because of his political affiliations. Traditionally it has been considered that he was a member of the oligarchy or a person holding

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[244] Ibid., 906-910.

[245] Whitmarsh, 105.

[246] Stadter, P.A., *A Commentary on Plutarch's Pericles*, (1989), University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, LXIX – LXX.

[247] The Suda, Epsilon 2681, retrieved 12 July 2023 from: https://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol-html/

politically conservative views[248]. However, he has also been viewed as a political opportunist from outside the oligarchic circles. Connor believes that the decree of Diopeithes was merely an example of populism, which attempted to capitalize on the intensified religious belief which arose in Athens after recent events, including the decimation of part of the population by the plague[249]. It is also possible that the decree was intended to cover not only the gods, but all heavenly bodies including the stars. This decree therefore included denying the divinity of the stars. Hansen believes that this was done intentionally to include "atheist astronomers", among whom Anaxagoras could be classed[250].

There is the question of whether the decree of Diopeithes was used in the indictment of Socrates. Because the decree prescribed that the accusation was to be heard before either the Assembly or the Council, and the trial was actually held in front of jurors, it is unlikely that the decree was still effective. Hansen believes that the decree was abolished in the year 403 BCE. In that year, there was a revision of the Athenian code of laws, with the result that laws not included in the code were no longer valid[251]. The decree was established specifically for the trial of Anaxagoras, so it is not likely that it would have been included in the new code, and therefore it would not have been utilised for the trial of Socrates. Andocides mentions an abolition of many of the decrees which were made prior to 403 BCE[252]. However, the abolition of such a decree does not mean that jurors, being ordinary citizens, would necessarily have immediately disregarded it. In some cases, they would certainly have continued to have been influenced by it.

The changing situation from the Classical to the Hellenistic periods

Laws such as the Decree of Diopeithes were losing some of their effect, but they did not immediately disappear. There were a series of trials for impiety and/or atheism in this transitional period. There were several cases recorded concerning this time, the more significant of which include the following:

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[248] Jacoby, 21.

[249] Connor, W.R., *Two Notes on Diopeithes the Seer*, (1963), Classical Philology Magazine 58.2, 115-118.

[250] Hansen, M.H., (trans.), *El juicio de Socrates desde el punto de vista ateniense*, (2016), Universitas Philosophica 67, and 33, 40.

[251] Ibid., 40.

[252] Andocides, *On Mysteries* 89, (trans. K.J. Maidment).

- A woman called Nino[253] was condemned to death for carrying out initiations into the cult of new gods, which included the use of magic potions[254]. She was also condemned to death for making fun of the mysteries[255].
- The courtesan Phryne[256], (from c.350-335 BCE) was accused of impiety, for varying reasons according to the original sources, but they included introducing a new god. She was able to convince the judges of the Areopagus that she was innocent by having all or part of her clothes removed, with her defender Hypereides stating that the world should not be deprived of such beauty. Filonik however says that there is no proof that she was tried in that particular court[257]. There is also doubt about the historical accuracy of her (novel) means of obtaining acquittal.
- Demades[258] (c.380-318 BCE) was accused of impiety and fined, for having tried to establish Alexander as the thirteenth god, in 324 BCE.
- Demetrius of Phaleron[259] (c. 350-283 BCE) was accused of impiety for offering sacrifices to the ghost of his brother.

These four cases are of significance because, although not atheistic in nature, they reflect a change in the attitude of some people at the time concerning the gods. These examples all have a common thread – they were all cases where individuals tried to introduce new gods, or in the case of Demetrius, of trying to recognize his brother's ghost as being worthy of sacrifice. All these cases tried to add to the commonly accepted pantheon of Olympic gods, and some of those introduced were of human origin. While not remarkable individually, they were indicative of a changing attitude, tending in some cases towards the possible deification of humans. This is a change which was expanded in the Hellenistic period.

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[253] Scholion to Demosthenes' *On the False Embassy* (XIX281), 495a-b., Retrieved on 12 July 2023 from: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Dem.+19+281&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0072

[254] Demosthenes, *Against Boeotus* 39.1-2, 40.9, (trans. A.T. Murray).

[255] Scholion to Demosthenes' *On the False Embassy* 495a-b, (as above).

[256] Plutarch, *Lives of the Ten Orators* (Hypereides) 849e, (trans. H.N. Fowler). Retrieved from: https://www.attalus.org/translate/orators2.html#Demosthenes

[257] Filonik, 63-66.

[258] Dinarchus, Speeches 1.94, (trans. J.O. Burtt).

[259] Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, XII, 542e, (trans. S. Douglas Olsen).

The Hellenistic Period – Were Kings seen as Gods?

The divinity or near-divinity of kings emerged during the course of the Hellenistic age. A most notable example of this occurrence, up until his death in 323 BCE, was Alexander of Macedon ("The Great"). He was from the royal house of Macedon, a house which claimed descent from Heracles and Perseus. Alexander himself did little to discourage the idea of this divine ancestry[260]. He slept with the *Iliad* under his pillow[261]. In Anatolia he visited Troy and sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles[262]. He became ruler by conquest of many peoples, who were from many diverse cultures and who spoke a variety of different languages. He desired to project an image of power which could be understood by all these diverse populations. To achieve this, one of the methods which he adopted involved the act of *proskynesis* (prostration) before himself. In addition, he introduced Persian-style clothing into his court[263]. These moves were extremely unpopular with his fellow Macedonians, but others saw it as an astute political move to show his Near Eastern subjects that he was a ruler of at least equal status to their previous ruler, Darius III. Plutarch[264] suggested that this was a strategy to win over "the barbarians". However, the view of people towards the divinity or otherwise of Alexander was more difficult to accurately determine. As an example, Homer often described human figures in his epics as "divine" or "godlike" – but were they really regarded as being completely divine? The answer must be that this was certainly not the case – humans could (and did) die. Immortality remained a key distinguishing marker of the gods. Greek tradition however often suggested a divine component within mortal kings[265]. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, first performed around 428 BCE, the chorus pray to their ruler as "saviour"[266] – which is a term previously reserved for deities – while also insisting that they do not want to equate him with a god. In *The Birds* by Aristophanes[267], Peisetairus is sung a hymn by the chorus of birds which equates to an acknowledgement of divinity:

> He wields the thunderbolt, Zeus' winged weapon!

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[260] In Greek mythology, Zeus was the father of both Heracles and Perseus. After his death, Heracles ascended to Olympus as a god.

[261] Plutarch*, Alexander* 8.2 (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

[262] Arrian, *Anabasis*, 1.11-12, (trans. P.A. Brunt). Alexander wanted to emphasise the half-divine parentage of Achilles (whose mother was the sea nymph Thetis, and his father was Peleus, King of Phthia), to suggest an affinity or link with his own family (who claimed descent from Heracles and Perseus, as stated above).

[263] Arrian, *Anabasis*, 4.11, (trans. P.A. Brunt).

[264] Plutarch, *Alexander*, 45, (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

[265] Whitmarsh, 146.

[266] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 48, 31, (trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones).

[267] Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 1706-19, (trans. Jeffrey Henderson).

But before Alexander, a further step along the path to the deification of kings occurred with the kingship of Lysander, the Spartan general who defeated Athens in 404 BCE. He accumulated great wealth from the Athenian conquest, and according to the historian Duris[268], altars were built for him; and on these altars, he was honoured "as a god", and he was given paeans. Plutarch[269] wrote:

> Out of the spoils, he set up at Delphi bronze statues of himself and each of his admirals, as well as golden stars of the Dioscuri. Lysander was at this time more powerful than any Greek before him had been, and seemed to cultivate an arrogance and ostentatiousness than was greater even than his power. For he was the first Greek, as Duris writes, to whom the cities set up altars and made sacrifices as to a god, and the first to whom songs of triumph were sung.

Subsequently, divine cults were also given to other Hellenistic kings, including Philip II, Alexander, and Demetrius Poliorcetes. In Olympia a sanctuary was created for Philip I and his family members[270]; and when his daughter Cleopatra was married, he was divinized as the thirteenth Olympian god[271]. According to Badian,[272] Alexander made it clear to the Athenians that he wished to receive divine honours. His cult was to last longer than any other cult of kings during the Hellenistic period. Demetrius Poliorcetes and his father Antigonus ensured that the Athenians decreed Demetrius many honours, including poetic contests of paeans[273]. In addition, sanctuaries were erected to honour members of the Antigonus court: Buricus, Adimanthus and Oxithemis[274]. The profusion of these cults to divinized mortal kings coincided with the decline of the cult of the traditional Olympian gods. Hypereides[275] wrote:

> We ourselves are forced to honour as heroes the servants of these people. If reverence for the gods has been removed by Macedonian insolence, what fate must we conclude would have befallen the rules of conduct towards man?

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[268] FGH 76F71. (trans. K.W.L. Mueller).

[269] Plutarch, *Lysander* 18, (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

[270] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, V 20, (trans. W. H. S. Jones).

[271] Diodorus Siculus XVI 92, 5: XVI 95, 1, (trans. C.H. Oldfather).

[272] Badian, E., *Studies in Greek and Roman History*, (2012), Oxford Basil Blackwell, 262-267.

[273] Diodorus Siculus XX 46, 1-4, (trans. C.H. Oldfather).

[274] Democares, FGH 75 F 1.

[275] Hypereides, (Speeches) VI 21-22, (trans. J.O. Burtt).

All these cases indicate that the cult of mortal kings was not merely developing but had actually taken place, and in some instances at the expense of the worship of the traditional gods. The men who were being worshipped as "god-kings" were clearly mortal beings. It is difficult to believe that the worship of living mortal men as gods would not have had a negative impact on the overall belief in the traditional gods. If mortals could be regarded as being gods, then how were the traditional gods very different from, and superior to, the mortal "gods"? Despite this, the days of being punished for atheism or even impiety towards the traditional gods had by no means suddenly ceased – but neither had criticism of the practice of actually worshipping the traditional gods ceased either.

Theodorus of Cyrene "The Atheist"

During his lifetime, the philosopher Theodorus of Cyrene was given the epithet "the atheist" (*atheos*). He appeared to be content with this title, and it has been suggested that he actually encouraged it because it put him in the same category as Socrates, Diagoras and Anaxagoras[276]. Living (possibly) from 340 to 250 BCE, he was a disciple primarily of Aristippus, and he was also known to be a disciple at other times of Aniceride and Dionysius the Dialectic[277]. For reasons that we do not know he was banished from Cyrene, and according to Diogenes Laertius[278] he stated:

> You act correctly, oh men of Cyrene, banishing me from Africa to Europe.

After his exile he fled to Athens, where he was eventually due to face trial before the tribunal of the Areopagus, but he managed to avoid it thanks to the help of Demetrius of Phaleron[279]. He was however banished from Athens and went into the service of Ptolemy, where he participated in an embassy to King Lysimachus, whom he offended with the freedom of his comments. Lysimachus threatened to crucify him, to which Theodorus reportedly responded with indifference[280]. Cicero reported Theodorus as saying[281]:

> Make, I beg, your abominable threats to those courtiers of yours in the scarlet liveries: it makes no difference to Theodorus whether he rots on the ground or in the air.

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[276] Whitmarsh, 123.

[277] Diogenes Laertius II 97-104, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[278] Diogenes Laertius II 103, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[279] Diogenes Laertius II 101-102, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[280] Valerius Maximus, *Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings* VI 2 ext.3, (trans. D.R. Shackleton).

[281] Cicero, *Tusculanae Quaestiones*, I 43, (trans. J.E. King).

He later founded a philosophical school, which after his death was referred to as the Theodorian school (or they were simply known as "Theodorians"). His philosophy included teachings that the goal of human life was to seek pleasure and to avoid pain; and that pleasure comes from knowledge, and pain comes from ignorance. He defined 'good' as things containing prudence and justice, and he defined 'evil' as things containing the opposite. He also taught that the virtuous man should not expose himself to death by defending his country, because he should not spoil his good judgement to save fools. Further, he taught that there is nothing shameful in stealing or committing adultery or sacrilege, if one ignores the public opinion that has been formed by the consent of fools[282].

Theodorus was attacked for his atheism[283]. Unusually for the time, there was apparently no attempt to be found within his philosophy, to either discuss or to investigate the gods[284]. Several ancient writers refer to Theodorus as an atheist. An exception to this is Clement of Alexandria, who argued that Theodorus simply denied the existence of the gods of popular belief[285]. There is doubt however about the impartiality of this interpretation, as Clement of Alexandria wrote from a Christian perspective, and as such, he may have been eager to point to a Greek who was prepared to deny the existence of the "pagan" gods. Theodorus wrote a book entitled *On the Gods* (*Peri theon*), and although it does not survive, it was described in a passage by Diogenes Laertius[286] in which he says that it "entirely did away with belief about the gods". Diogenes Laertius added that this book was the source of many statements and arguments on which Epicurus' philosophies were based. The book may have been the root cause of many of the accusations against Theodorus of being atheistic (with the exception of Clement of Alexandria).
Theodorus of Cyrene "The Atheist" – Social and Political Implications

Theodorus was brought to trial in Athens. This trial was the last one that we know of to be brought under the (long-lasting) influence of the decree of Diopeithes[287]. The decree was used politically, as we saw, to manipulate public opinion towards public outrage, should anyone question religious orthodoxy. The concept that the promoters of this decree spread among the citizenry was that heretical religious belief was sufficient to threaten the very foundations of the state. Theodorus must have fitted perfectly into the mould which their political ambitions

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[282] Duran 129.

[283] Philo of Alexandria, *Every Good Man is Free*, 127-130, (trans. F.H. Colson).

[284] Diogenes Laertius, II 97, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[285] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* II 24, 2, (trans. and Ed. G.W. Butterworth).

[286] Diogenes Laertius II 97, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[287] Whitmarsh 123.

required for such a charge – an openly atheistic philosopher, and one who was apparently proud to bear the epithet "the atheist".

After the trial, we are told by Diogenes Laertius[288] that, according to Amphicrates[289] (in his work *On illustrious Men*), Theodorus was condemned to death by drinking hemlock. There is however doubt about the validity of this report by Amphicrates. Then, with a further similarity to the trial of Socrates, we are told by Philo of Alexandria[290]

that Theodorus was expelled from Athens "for atheism and for corrupting the youth". However other reports suggest that Theodorus returned to Cyrene and lived out the rest of his days there. Overall, he is reported as being a person who resorted to riddles and jokes to question the world, and often in a scandalous and provocative manner. Diogenes Laertius, as we have seen, tells us that he was able to mock King Lysimachus[291]. He also mocked aspects of traditional religion, including the mysteries and belief in the traditional gods[292]. Filonik suggests that the trial of Theodorus was reconstructed later, using elements of the trial of Socrates[293]. Comment was also made later by Epiphanius of Salamis, Bishop of Salamis in the fourth century CE[294], when he used the case of Theodorus to argue that without the control of religion, society becomes anarchic and without effective values. The overall conclusion is that whatever the true fate of Theodorus really was, his atheistic attitude and writings were responsible for a campaign against him.

The hostile attitudes towards religious beliefs which were reinterpreting the traditional conception of the gods continued.

Euhemerus of Messene, and the implications of his work

A further philosopher who is relevant to this discussion is Euhemerus (born 4th century, died 3rd century BCE), who wrote an account entitled *The Sacred Inscription*, concerning an alleged journey that he undertook to the Arabian Sea, on the order of his friend King Cassander of Macedon (who ruled 305 – 297 BCE). He also apparently visited Egypt. While this latter trip is usually regarded as being factual, there is however doubt about the validity of his visit to Arabia. Winiarczyk considers this particular journey to be a literary fiction, to give credibility to

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[288] Diogenes Laertius II 101-102, (trans. R. D. Hicks).

[289] Amphicrates was an Athenian orator, who fled Athens circa 86 BCE.

[290] Philo of Alexandria, *Every Good Man is Free*, 127-130, (trans. F. H. Colson).

[291] Diogenes Laertius II 101-102, (trans. R. D. Hicks).

[292] Ibid., II 101-102.

[293] Filonik, J., *Athenian Impiety Trials: A Reappraisal*, (2016), Dike Publishers, 16: 11-96.

[294] Epiphanius, *De Fide* IX 28, (trans. Frank Williams).

the geographical references which appear within this work[295]. The work suggested that the gods had a human origin. Winiarczyk writes:

> The fact that he had written a novel rather than a philosophical treatise was quite ignored and there was no reflection on whether the author actually supported the theory that religion was of human origin. Indeed, doxographers may have never actually read Euhemerus' book and simply included him in their atheist catalogues on the basis of other catalogues[296].

The question remains, however, as to why Euhemerus was included in the first such catalogue at all. This currently remains unknown. Winiarczyk believed that doxographers were interested only in the fact that Euhemerus depicted the gods as being deified humans[297]. Nevertheless, this work became one of the most notable of all ancient texts which expressed disbelief about commonly accepted religious tenets. The work does not survive, but a detailed summary of it was produced by Diodorus of Sicily in the 1st century BCE. Euhemerus stated that he visited an island called Panchaea, where a utopian society was enjoyed by the residents. Of the three classes of social order, priests, farmers and soldiers, the priests had the ultimate authority. Diodorus describes a society which is subject to a benign theocracy, but which accepts it willingly. He wrote:

> The priests are the rulers of all the others, and they adjudicate when there are disputes, and have authority over all public matters.

On the acropolis on this island stands a temple to Zeus Triphylois ("of the three tribes"), with a golden pillar dedicated to, and with a record of the deeds, of the gods Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus. The inscription stated that the gods were originally humans who were once rulers of Panchaea. Zeus himself travelled far and wide in the world, and created his own cult[298]. Thus, Euhemerus suggested that the Olympian gods were actually humans, and no more deities than any other human being.

Many scholars today would regard this work as fictional, however it was still a provocative suggestion for the time that the gods were merely human in origin, and this contributed to Euhemerus' inclusion in early lists of atheists. It is possible that Euhemerus was communicating (what he took to be) the true doctrine concerning the origin of the gods, but he was conveying

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[295] Winiarczyk, M., *The Sacred History of Euhemerus of Messene*, (2013), (trans. W. Zbirohowski-Koscia).

[296] Ibid., 10.

[297] Ibid., 9.

[298] All information re Diodorus of Sicily is from *Library* 5.41-46, 6.1

these thoughts in the guise of a fictional work[299]. He was impressed by the theory of Prodicus, that divinities were named after human innovators, (Demeter was the inventor of bread, Dionysus was the inventor of wine, et al.), and each eventually came to be regarded as a god[300]. Was Euhemerus reacting to a trend at the time, that royal figures were being treated as divine? There is the possibility that this was the case – Alexander of Macedon and the Ptolemies of Egypt had been made divine, so it could therefore be argued that all gods could be regarded as deified humans. Hellenistic monarchs had established their own ruler cults, so it was a possibility that Euhemerus' suggestion, that Zeus had really founded his own ruler cult, was correct.

We do not know what effect the account of Euhemerus had on the wider society, but one account suggests that he lived to an old age. In a scathing reference, Callimachus, a poet of Hellenistic Alexandria, describes a temple outside the city, and writes[301]:

> Come all together to the temple before the wall where the man who invented ancient Panchaian Zeus, the old babbler, scratches out his impious books.

This may indicate that Euhemerus wrote the *Sacred Inscription* in Alexandria, where early Hellenistic ruler cult was most intensely practiced.

Callimachus was not alone in his criticism of Euhemerus. He (Euhemerus) was accused of atheism by several authors, among them being Clement of Alexandria[302], Cicero[303] and Plutarch[304]. The Christian authors were not however all scathing in their criticism of him – after all, Euhemerus was advocating a position in which many Christians themselves believed. As in the case of the Christians, Euhemerus denied the divinity of the pre-Christian pagan gods, even if he didn't acknowledge the divinity of the Jewish or Christian God.[305]. Cicero was particularly scathing, stating that Euhemerus not only denied the gods but also talked of their deaths and graves[366]. However, based on the reference from the poet Callimachus, Euhemerus lived to an old age, which suggests that the penalties for doubting the divinity of the Olympian gods had become much less severe than in the time of the politically-charged Decree of Diopeithes.

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[299] An analogy is the way in which Mark Twain was able to express his thoughts about the condition of slaves in the American South, by expounding them in the fictional work *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[300] Whitmarsh, 153-4.

[301] Callimachus, *Iambus* 1.9-11, (trans. D. L. Clayman).

[302] Scholium to Clement of Alexandria's *Protrepticus* II 24, 2, (trans. and Ed. G. W. Butterworth).

[303] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I 118-119, (trans. H. Rackham).

[304] Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 360, 23, (trans. Frank Cole Babbitt).

[305] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* II 24, 2, (trans. and Ed. G. W. Butterworth).

[366] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I 118-119, (trans. H. Rackham).

Hermocles of Cyzicus

Some other writers in antiquity also suggested that the gods were no more than divinized humans. Some of the later writers were Christians, who had their own faith in mind when they questioned the origins of the Greek gods.

However a notable example from the pre-Christian era was Hermocles of Cyzicus (late 4th and early 3rd century BCE), who wrote a hymn to Demetrius “the Besieger”. Demetrius had, along with his father Antigonus, liberated Athens in 308 BCE and was then acclaimed as king, and also given divine honours. The hymn of Hermocles reads as follows:

> Oh, the greatest and dearest of the gods are present for the city!
>
> For the situation has brought among us
>
> Both Demeter and Demetrius.
>
> Demeter has come to perform
>
> The most holy mysteries of Persephone; But
>
> he (serene, as a god should be), handsome
>
> And smiling: he is here.
>
> It seems a solemn thing: his friends surround
>
> him,
>
> And he himself is in the centre,
>
> As if his friends were the stars
>
> And he the sun.
>
> Welcome, son of a god, mighty Poseidon,
>
> And of Aphrodite!
>
> The other gods are either far away
>
> Or they have no ears,
>
> Or they do not exist, or they pay no attention at all to us;
>
> But you we see present:
>
> You are made of neither wood nor stone. You are real.

> We pray to you…. (a prayer then follows)[306]

This hymn not only asserts the divinity of the king, but places the efficacy of his divinity as being higher than the majority of the Olympian gods. There were no known negative implications for Hermocles – although this may not be surprising when one considers that his praises were made directly towards the virtually deified ruler of Athens.

Plato's *Laws*

The *Laws* of Plato are significant in this discussion for the reason that Plato's work indicates the contrast between his own theistic views, and the changing beliefs which were manifesting themselves at that time in the Greek mind. *Laws* was the last work produced by Plato. He died c.348 BCE, which was before the major philosophical schools (discussed in the following chapter) were started. These schools, as will be seen, considered quite varying concepts of the divine (or lack of divinity) in the world. Plato's views were strongly against atheism. He perceived the strong link between religion and politics as being broken if belief in the conventional gods was weakened or denied[307]. His main speaker in the *Laws* suggests a very strong link between atheism and lawlessness:

> No one believing in the existence of the gods according to the laws has ever deliberately done an unholy deed or uttered lawless words, but only someone of whom one of the following three things is true: either, as I have said, not believing in them, or, second, thinking that they exist but do not concern themselves with mankind, or, third, thinking that they are easily appeased by being bought off with sacrifices and prayers[308].

Plato's main speaker proposes severe penalties for any form of impiety, which includes atheism. He concedes that there may be atheists of good temperament and just behaviour. But even these atheists are a danger to society, as they may mock religious rituals, and thus undermine the faith which their fellow-citizens have in them[309]. Plato's attitude towards the conventional gods, and the need for these to remain in place for purposes of social and political harmony, are in contrast to the following philosophical schools, which arose towards the end of his life and thereafter.

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[306] Hermocles of Cyzicus, in Powell, J.U., *Collectanea Alexandrina*, (1925, reprint 1970), Clarence Press, Oxford, 173-174.

[307] *From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Bullivant, Stephen and Ruse, Michael (eds), (2013), retrieved on 1 November 2022 from: https://doiorg.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199644650.013.002

[308] Plato, *Laws*, 885b, (trans. R. G. Bury).

[309] Ibid., 908b–909d.

CHAPTER 5: THE PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR TEACHING

The development of the major philosophical schools

Philosophical schools were created or were at least developed further during the Hellenistic age. They were rivals of each other, and vied for dominance in Greek and Roman society [310]. Their views of religion and the gods varied, but in every case these views were not the orthodox perception of the Olympian gods. Influential schools included the following:

Epicurus and Epicureanism

Epicurus (342/1 – 270 BCE), who was later to become the founder of the Epicurean School, was born and educated at Samos, and of poor parents. At Samos he absorbed the teaching of Pamphilus, a Platonist[311], and then at the age of fourteen he moved to the island of Teos where he also heard the teaching of Nausiphanes, a follower of Democritus. Nausiphanes seems to have had a considerable influence on him, despite his later contention to the contrary[312]. In 323 BCE he moved to Athens to perform military service, and when this was completed, and after studying philosophy for ten years, he began teaching in Mytilene, from which he was possibly expelled in 310 BCE[313]. Ultimately Epicurus moved to Athens and purchased a plot of land just outside the city walls. It was known as the "garden", and it was symbolic of the aim of the philosophy of Epicureanism, which was to remove all psychic disturbance and find tranquillity. Epicureans were not seekers of hedonistic indulgence (a modern misconception) but rather they were people who sought to avoid activities which necessarily led to stress and conflict. Their motto was "live unnoticed", and they attempted to change their attitudes so that they could remove from their psyches all anxiety and fear[314].

Epicurus developed the work of the fifth-century atomists Leucippus and Democritus, and he perceived the universe as consisting entirely of indestructible particles – atoms – which are continually in motion. In between them there is only void. His philosophical theory envisaged that the human soul also consists of atoms, and when we die our souls immediately dissolve, as

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[310] Whitmarsh, 158.

[311] Diogenes Laertius, 10,14, (Trans. R.D. Hicks).

[312] Ibid., 10,8.

[313] Duran, 132.

[314] Clay, D., *The Athenian Garden*, in Warren, J., *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, (2009), Cambridge University Press, 9-28.

the body also dissolves in time. Accordingly, there is no afterlife[315]. This theory is also related to the Epicurean search for tranquillity, because misunderstandings about the nature of death account for one of the greatest causes of people's anxiety. Epicurus wrote[316]:

> Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.

There is however the question of where belief in the gods could be positioned in this philosophy. It would appear that there was no room for belief in divinity, in what was a supposedly naturalistic view of the world and beyond. However despite this, Epicurus insisted that the gods do in fact exist, and are indeed part of the "naturalistic" fabric of the cosmos. He wrote[317]:

> First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, thou shalt not affirm of him aught that is foreign to his immortality or that agrees not with blessedness. For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe….

Epicurus continues by explaining that he believes that the gods are not as they are perceived to be by most people; and that it is more impious to believe in the gods as they are traditionally regarded than to deny their existence altogether. He also believes that it is a misapprehension that the gods intervene in the world of human beings. People need to take responsibility for their own choices and actions, rather than hiding behind the excuse that they were forced to perform a task by the gods. The gods live quite remotely from human beings, and take no interest in human affairs[318].

Concerning the form that the gods take, Epicurus believed that it was correct that they are in anthropomorphic form. They too are composed of atoms, but extremely fine ones. They have ethereal bodies and are divided sexually. They breathe and eat as humans do[319]. He observed that this is a perception of the gods which is common to all cultures. Because people see the gods in their dreams, he reasoned that they must exist[320]. He postulated that innumerable worlds were created within the universe by a collision of atoms, of which the Earth is one such

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[315] Whitmarsh, 173-4.

[316] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, as translated by R. D. Hicks in *Stoic and Epicurean* (1910), 139.2

[317] Ibid., 123.

[318] Long, A.A. and Sedley, D.N., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol.1, *Translations of the Principle Sources with Philosophical Commentary*, (1987), Cambridge University Press, 139-149.

[319] Copleston, 406.

[320] Ibid., 78-86.

world. The empty spaces in between the worlds were known as ***intermundia***[321], which is where the gods reside. He noted that since human life is afflicted with evil, this evil is not reconcilable with any notion of divine guidance. The purpose in life, he surmised, is to find pleasure, for this is where happiness is to be found. Epicurus believed:

> …we affirm that pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily; for we have recognized this as the first good, being connate with us; and it is with reference to it that we begin every choice and avoidance; and to this we come as if we judged of all good by passion as the standard….[322]

But what did he understand "pleasure" to mean? It was not the instant pleasure of the moment, but the pleasure which endures throughout a person's life. Also, that pleasure consisted primarily in the absence of pain rather than in any more positive satisfaction[323]. He desired that human beings might be freed from their fears. Copleston wrote: "Epicurean hedonism would not then result in libertinism and excess, but in a calm and tranquil life". By following the Epicurean philosophy, serenity of the soul could be obtained[324].

The attitude of Epicurus concerning the nature and power of the gods is clearly of significance in any discourse on atheism. Was Epicurus atheistic or, as he claimed, a true believer? He claimed that he believed in the gods, but in a different form from that which was traditional, as previously mentioned. However, in Euripides' play *Bellerophon,* Bellerophon is portrayed as a *theomakhos,* a "battler of the gods", leading a military assault on the common and more usual tenets of religion[325]. This trope was later applied to Epicurus: Euripides' image of theomachy was prevalent in the great poem by Lucretius *De Rerum Natura*. This epic poem was written in Rome in the first century BCE, and it very much embodied Epicurean doctrine. Its influence has been far reaching. Greenblatt has argued that the recovery of this poem was responsible for European secularism and the Renaissance[326]. Lucretius introduces Epicurus into his poem, and leaves little doubt about Epicurus' attitude to conventional religion:

> When human life lay on the ground, foully oppressed
>
> For all to see under the weight of Religion,
>
> Who showed forth her head from the regions of heaven,

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321 Ibid., 405.

322 Diogenes Laertius, 10, 129, (trans. R. D. Hicks).

323 Copleston, 407-8.

324 Ibid., 408.

325 Whitmarsh, 179-180.

326 Greenblatt, S., *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, (2011), Norton, New York, 14.

Standing over mortals with terrifying aspect,

Then first a Grecian man dared to raise

His mortal eyes to meet hers – the first to dare to confront her.

For neither the stories of the gods nor thunder nor heaven

With its threatening growl deterred him; no, all the more keenly

Did they arouse his soul's virtue, so that he, first of all,

Should desire to shatter the narrow confines of nature's gates.

And so the vivid vigour of his soul was victorious, and far

Beyond the flaming walls of the world did he march.

He ranged the expanse of the universe in his mind and soul,

Whence he returns victorious, bringing us report of what can come to be

And what cannot; in sum, by what reason each thing has its power

Defined, and its deeply fixed boundary marker.

And so Religion now in turn lies beneath our feet,

Trampled, and his victory raises us to heaven[327].

The Social and Political Implications for Epicurus and Epicureans

Epicurus himself appeared to escape political persecution despite his statements on religion. However, there is the possibility that he did not deny the existence of the gods for a very good reason. He was eventually based in Athens, and he would have been well aware of the fate to which Socrates was sentenced, for "not recognizing the gods". There were also the outcomes to consider of Theodorus of Cyrene and Diagoras of Melos, who dared to openly question the existence of the gods[328]. Epicurus instead confirmed that the gods exist, but in a different form. Anthropomorphic in shape, yes, and also composed of atoms as are humans; but living outside of our world, and quite unconcerned with human affairs. This was perhaps as close to atheism as it was possible to be without a public admission of complete disbelief. Epicurus would therefore have been aware of the social upheaval a declaration of atheism would have caused, and the political consequences which would soon follow. In fact, Epicurus not only permitted his followers, but even exhorted them, to diligently perform all the religious rituals expected within their wider society, even though he had no belief in the efficacy of these rituals.

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[327] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, *(On the Nature of Things),* 1.62-79, (trans. W. H. D. Rouse).

[328] O'Sullivan, L-L., *Athenian Impiety Trials in the Late Fourth Century BC*, (1997), *Classical Quarterly* 47, 136-52.

Philodemus (*On Piety* 126 Gomperz) quotes Epicurus as saying "Let us sacrifice to the gods piously and well, as is appropriate, and let us do everything well according to the laws". Epicurus clearly did not wish to be seen to be undermining or challenging the external framework and apparatus of traditional religion. The performance of religious rituals was regarded by the wider public as being extremely important in maintaining good relationships with the gods.

An alternative interpretation of Epicurus' views on divinity has been offered by Sedley. This interpretation suggests that Epicurus believed in gods that were not real deities, but abstractions which symbolized the happiness to which we should all aspire. Divinity was regarded as being nothing more than a mental image of serenity and tranquillity[329]. Epicurus' later followers did not understand it in this way, they believed that the gods exist, but that they lived in the *intermundia.*

The implications for Epicureanism extended well beyond the life of its founder. For example, the championing of the philosophy by the influential writer Lucretius, who lived some two hundred years after Epicurus, had consequences in Rome also. Lucretius wrote:

> Again and again our foe, religion, has given birth to deeds sinful and unholy[330].

Lucretius cleverly uses the word "unholy" to describe the very religion that he is criticizing. He uses as an example the myth of Agamemnon when he sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia[331] to Artemis, in return for favourable winds to go to battle against Troy. The alleged cause of his troubles was because Agamemnon had killed a deer in a grove which was sacred to her. Lucretius wrote[332]:

> *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.*
>
> Such is the terrible evil that religion was able to urge.
>
> Or an alternative translation reads:
>
> So potent was Superstition in persuading to evil deeds[333].

In these statements Lucretius is espousing an aspect of the philosophy of Epicureanism. It is folly, he suggests, to condone destructive acts in the name of religion, where these acts would

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[329] Sedley, D., *Epicurus' Theological Innatism* in Fish and Saunders (eds), *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, (2011), Cambridge University Press, 29-52.

[330] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.82,83, (trans. W. H. D. Rouse).

[331] Mentioned by Homer in *Iliad*, ix.145,287.

[332] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.101, (trans. W. H. D. Rouse).

[333] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.101 (trans. W. H. D. Rouse, revised M. F. Smith).

be completely unacceptable in other areas of life. Or, to put it in an alternative manner, when we substitute religious explanation for a scientific understanding of any situation, and we fail to understand the truth about nature, then there can be terrible consequences as a result of this lack of understanding[334].

Lucretius knew that, in using Epicurean philosophy to question the existence of the gods in the traditional sense, and also to criticize the detrimental effects which religion can sometimes have on people, he was placing himself in a vulnerable situation. He lived in Rome at a time when an established hierarchy of priests was in existence, in contrast to the Greek world which essentially had little or no established hierarchy. The influence of the priests in both cultures, however, could be significant, and detrimental to opponents. He foresaw this when he wrote[335]:

> There will come the day when you will seek to withdraw
>
> From our community, overcome by the terrifying utterances of the priests.
>
> Yes indeed, for how many dreams can they concoct for you
>
> Even now, dreams that can turn on their head the principles of existence
>
> And by terrifying you throw all your fortunes into chaos!
>
> And with good reason: for if people saw that there is a set limit
>
> To our sufferings, they would by some means find the strength
>
> To stand against the threatening pieties of the priests.

Lucretius was attacking the organized parameters of state religion, as well as the traditional myths. But he went further than this. He appeared to depict Epicurus not just as a *theomakhos*, one who is battling the gods, but he also depicted him as a god in his own right. This was an irony with which Epicurus himself almost certainly would not have concurred. Lucretius wrote[336]:

> For if we speak of that majesty of nature that we have come to understand
>
> Demands, he was a god – a god, famous Memmius,
>
> Who first uncovered those rational principles underlying life

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[334] Whitmarsh, 181.

[335] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.102-9, (trans. W. H. D. Rouse).

[336] Ibid., 5.7-12.

That we now call "wisdom", and who through his art

Brought life out of the deep currents and dark shadows

And into such tranquillity and such clear light.

Lucretius further explains his reference to Epicurus as a god when he continues:

Only compare with his achievement those ancient discoveries of other mortals

That rank as the work of gods.

Ceres, it is said, taught men to use cereals, and Bacchus the juice of the grape;

Yet without these things we could go on living, as we are told that some tribes live now.

But life could not be well lived till our breasts were swept clean.

Therefore that man has a better claim to be called a god whose gospel,

Broadcast through the length and breadth of empires,

is even now bringing soothing solace to the minds of men[337].

The argument that the gods were originally created by humans because they provided the essentials for life (for example Ceres/Demeter produced crops, Bacchus/Dionysus produced wine, and so on…) was discussed earlier in this thesis in relation to the philosophy of Prodicus. But was the "divinity" of Epicurus actually in the nature of a person who was not really a god, but rather as one who simply achieved superhuman things?

Lucretius also contemplates the attitude of people towards the gods, and their belief that the gods had created the universe and the orderliness of the natural world; and also, their regarding of natural disasters as signs that the gods were displeased. In contradiction of this attitude, he wrote:

Poor humanity, to saddle the gods with such responsibilities

And throw in a vindictive temper!

What griefs they hatched then for themselves, what festering sores for us,

What tears for our posterity! This is not piety,

This oft-repeated show of bowing a veiled head before a graven image;

This bustling to every altar; this kow-towing and prostration on the ground

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[337] Ibid., 5.14-21, (trans. Latham, Ronald), (1951), Penguin Books, Middlesex.

> With palms outspread before the shrines of the gods;
>
> This deluging of altars with the blood of beasts;
>
> This heaping of vow on vow. True piety lies rather
>
> In the power to contemplate the universe with a quiet mind[338].

If Lucretius interpreted Epicureanism in this manner, how then did Epicurus himself regard the gods? And is Epicureanism an atheistic philosophy? As we have seen, Epicurus claimed to have belief in the gods, but in a different form from the traditional visualization of them, and they resided in a different place (the *Intermundia).* Ancient authors generally regarded Epicurus as being blasphemous, and included him alongside other atheists[339]. Epicurus believed that the gods were unconcerned with human affairs, and that they have neither power nor holiness[340]. Also, that they are made up of no more than mere aggregates of atoms[341](like everything and everyone else in the universe). Eusebius (a Christian writer) believed that when Epicureans took part in religious ceremonies, they seemed to be doing it in such a way that they were merely keeping up appearances, rather than possessing a firm conviction about what they were doing[342]. However contrary views about the atheism of Epicurus have been put forward. Garcia Gual for example wrote: "Epicureanism was a new kind of religiosity that its adversaries confused with lack of faith…..It is, moreover, a complex matter, which faces two different positions: traditional popular piety, allied with myths and superstitions, and the religious theories of other philosophical sects, with their astral religion, as supported by Platonism"[343]. He believed that the religiosity of Epicurus was a kind of pietism, a contemplation of the deity which frees us of any fear, hope or benefit from the belief in it[344].

Stoicism

Another of the first of these schools was Stoicism. This school of philosophical thinking was devised by Zeno of Citium, on Cyprus (c.336 – 264 BCE) in the 3rd century BCE. He came to

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338 Ibid., 5.1161-1240.

339 Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, XII 6, t. IV. "The sun makes the seasons of the year and perfects the fruits without paying any heed, I suppose, to Diagoras, Anaxagoras, Epicurus, or the others blaspheming against it", (Trans. Margaret Tallmadge May).

340 Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I 121-123, (trans. H. Rackham).

341 Tertullian, *Apologetics*, 47, 6, "Others say He consists of atoms, others of numbers, as do Epicurus and the Pythagoreans", (Trans. Gerald H. Readall).

342 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel*, XIV 26, (pp 379-380), (trans. E. H. Gifford).

343 Garcia Gual, C., (trans.), *Epicuro*, (1981), Alianza, Madrid, 166.

344 Ibid., 175.h

Athens about 315 BCE, where he studied the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon and the *Apology* of Plato. He was filled with admiration for the strength of character which Socrates had possessed. He decided that Crates the Cynic was the man who most resembled Socrates, and so became his disciple. In c.300 BCE he founded his own school, naming it "Stoicism" after the *Stoa Poikile*, the "painted porch" in Athens where he taught[345]. Stoicism continued well into the Roman era. The history of the school is usually divided into three distinct periods: the First Stoa (involving Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus), the Middle Stoa (which included Panaetius of Rhodes and Posidonius), and the Late and Roman Stoa (which included Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius). There are no complete works surviving from the first two periods of Stoicism. Only Roman texts from the Late Stoa have survived[346].

The Stoic philosophy propounded that all of Nature is governed by *Logos* – a divine and provident reason – which wisely directs the destiny of all things and humans. Trying to alter this divine providence is foolish and quite futile. And because we are endowed with the ability to reason, it is our duty to use this reason to live according to nature. A converse definition is to live according to the eternal *Logos* that providentially governs everything. *Arete* – moral virtue – consists of conforming with the *Logos*. According to Stoic philosophy, the wise man (*phronimos*) is one who accepts with a sense of serenity the destiny prescribed by the laws and order of Nature. This acceptance is achieved by self-control – control of one's emotions and passions. By sustained practice of one's self-control, *ataraxia* – serenity and tranquillity of the mind – is achieved, and this represents the only form of happiness to which humans can aspire, in a legitimate or morally acceptable manner[347]. Those who adopted this philosophy were not atheistic. Stoics had a reputation in antiquity of being devout and committed theists. However, they saw the reasons for the workings of the universe in a different manner from those who believed purely in absolute control having been manifested in the Olympian gods. They still believed in a force – Nature – and they believed that it was this force which guided human activity and the actions of all objects.

A recorded exception to the belief of most Stoics was Persaeus of Citium (307-243 BCE), who denied the existence of the gods altogether[348]. According to Erskine, the essence of his argument was similar to the reasoning of Prodicus[349]. Perseus considered that the gods would

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[345] Copleston, 385.

[346] Long, A.A., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, (1986), University of California Press, Berkeley, 115.

[347] Duran, 157-158.

[348] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I 38, (trans. H. Rackham).

[349] Erskine, A. *Between Philosophy and the Court: the Life of Persaios of Kition*, in Erskine, A., and Llewellyn-Jones, Ll, (eds), *Creating a Hellenistic World*, (2011), Classical Press of Wales, Swansea, 180.

have been either humans who were the inventors of useful things, or they were the useful things themselves.

Stoicism was a philosophy which taught people to live in a world in which their own power had often been greatly reduced. The philosophy did not just hold relevance for individuals. Whole communities in the Greek and Hellenistic world were often subjected to being ruled by distant imperialist forces. This presented problems not just on an individual level; whole communities often felt that their own cultural identities were being threatened by the imposed culture of the conquering empire. To counter this, Stoicism generally encouraged obedience to this imposed culture, including that culture's religious practices, as a way of dealing with these situations[350]. Their concept of deity was unorthodox in comparison to those who believed in the Olympian gods. They identified the universe, and God, with Zeus, as the ruler of the entire universe and the law within it. This Stoic God did not stand apart and separate from the world, but was innately immersed in nature itself. Every part of the world contained an element which was divine, they believed, and this determined each part's behaviour[351]. By recognizing only one God, they also recognized a divine element in every object. This included the heavenly bodies and the forces of nature[352]. Prayer was considered by Stoics to be of little assistance in a cosmos which was rationally ordered. The examples of Stoic prayer which survive appear to be more examples of self-meditation than appeals to the divine for intervention[353].

Cynicism

The Cynical school arose in the second half of the fourth century BCE. It was founded by Antisthenes (c.445 - c.365 BCE), and the philosophy reinterpreted the doctrine of Socrates, and considered that the way of life of people within current civilization was evil; and that happiness could be obtained only through a simple life, lived according to the laws of nature. A person, they believed, has all the elements to be happy, and the truly good way of living is to overcome his/her desires and live in a moral manner. Antisthenes himself was the son of an Athenian father and a Thracian slave mother[354], and he taught in the *Kynosarges* gymnasium, which was reserved for those who did not carry pure Athenian blood. He became a devoted follower of Socrates. What he admired most was Socrates' independence of character, which had caused

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[350] Whitmarsh, 158-159.

[351] Frede, D., *Stoic Determinism*, (2003), in Inwood, Brad (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge University Press, 201-202.

[352] Hicks, R.D., *Stoics*, (1911), in Chisolm, Hugh (ed), *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol.25 (11th ed), Cambridge University Press, 947.

[353] Algra, K., *Stoic Theology*, in Inwood, Brad (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, (2003), Cambridge University Press, 175.

[354] Diogenes Laertius, 6, 1, (trans. R. D. Hicks).

him (Socrates) to act in accordance with his personal convictions, regardless of the cost[355]. Antisthenes regarded this independence and self-sufficiency of Socrates to be an ideal, or an end in itself, and he came to regard virtue as being a state of complete independence from all earthly possessions and pleasures. He also considered Socrates' insistence on ethical knowledge, and extended this into a contempt for scientific learning and art. Virtue, he said, is all that is required for happiness; nothing else is needed – and virtue is the absence of desire, freedom from all wants, and complete independence[356]. Antisthenes also renounced traditional Greek religion. He believed that there was only one god; and that the Greek belief in a pantheon of gods was merely a convention. Possessing virtue was the only way to serve God; temples, sacrifices and prayers were all condemned by him[357].

A prominent advocate of Cynicism was Diogenes of Sinope (died c.324 BCE). Not being content with the perceived "indifference" of Antisthenes towards material goods, he instead advocated a positive asceticism to obtain complete freedom. He and other Cynics became famous for their eccentricities, and they composed many satires and diatribes against Greek society, its customs, and the corruption and vices of their time. They practiced an attitude which was sometimes irreverent[358]. Cynicism contained no structured doctrine about the gods, or about any other matter. There are reports of their mockery of sacrifices and dedications[359]; and they apparently held the belief that the gods had no strength or power[360].

An example of the former (of their mockery of sacrifices and dedications) is a report of an exchange which Diogenes of Sinope had with the pharmacist Lysias[361]:

> "When Lysias the druggist asked him if he believed in the gods, 'How can I help believing in them', said he, 'when I see a god-forsaken wretch like you?'. Others give this retort to Theodorus. Seeing someone perform religious purification, he said, 'Unhappy man, don't you know that you can no more get rid of errors of conduct by sprinklings than you can of mistakes in grammar?' He would rebuke men in general with regard to their prayers, declaring that they asked for those things which seemed to them to be good, not for such as are truly good".

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[355] Copleston, 118.

[356] Ibid, 118-119.

[357] Ibid, 120.

[358] Duran, 154.

[359] Diogenes Laertius, VI 63, VI 59, (trans. R.D. Hicks).

[360] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, III 88, (trans. H. Rackham).

[361] Diogenes Laertius, VI 42, (trans. R. D. Hicks).

The Cynics did not appear to be very concerned about the existence (or otherwise) of gods. Gods were not a part of their philosophy, and neither was organized religion. Conversely, they were not concerned with excessive arguments about the non-existence of gods either. Their views were certainly agnostic, and even possibly atheistic. They may have seen any metaphysical reasoning as pretentious[362]. The Cynic poet Cercidas reflected this attitude when, after complaining that the gods do not punish the wicked and reward the good, he wrote[363]:

> Better to leave all these things to those who gaze on the heavens….let our concern, rather, be worldly.

The Peripatetic School

Founded by Aristotle in 335 BCE, the school followed doctrines laid down by him, and subsequently maintained by his followers. Philosophy to Aristotle meant both science and ethics, and the purpose of philosophy was to discover and record the reasons for the natural actions of all things. He identified three types of *ousia* [364]: those which are alternately in motion and at rest, such as animals; those which are in perpetual motion, which would include the sky; and those which are eternally stationary. Among the latter, he believed that there must be one being which is unmoving and unchangeable, and which acts without influence from any of the other objects. This, Aristotle concluded, was the source of perfect intelligence, which was his own conception of God, whom he described as the "Unmoved Mover". By this, he believed there to be two distinct conceptions of the universe: Firstly, that there is a god, who is the supreme being of the universe. He is perfect, and serves as an aspiration for all other beings in the universe. And secondly, He is an unmoved mover, who is responsible for the movement of all the heavenly bodies[365]. This doctrine was far removed from the ubiquitous belief at the time of most Greeks concerning the traditional gods.

After Aristotle's death in 322 BCE, his school was headed by several different followers. One of these was Strato of Lampsacus, who occupied that position c. 287-269 BCE. Strato was heavily influenced by the theories of Democritus, and he took a monistic view of the universe. In this sense he denied the threefold view of Aristotle[366]. According to Cicero[367], Strato affirmed that the gods had not created the world, because everything in existence had occurred naturally. He

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[362] Whitmarsh, 160-161.

[363] Cercidas, Fragment 4.44-48 in J.U. Powell (ed.). *Collectanea Alexandrina*, (1925), Clarendon Press, Oxford.

[364] o*usia*: Variously translated as essence, substance, reality or being. Aristotle's exploration of *ousia* can be found in Book IV of *Metaphysics*.

[365] Easterling, J.H., from the journal *Phronesis*, 1976, Vol.21, No.3, (1976), Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 252-265.

[366] Copleston, 425. Copleston describes this as "dualistic" rather than "threefold".

[367] Cicero, *Academica* 2 121, (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

was a materialist, and believed – like Democritus and Leucippus before him – that the universe was composed solely of matter and energy. The English philosopher Ralph Cudworth (1617 – 1688) characterized Strato's approach as "hylozoism" – the theory that matter is inherently alive – and as a pernicious brand of atheism[368]. The French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647 – 1706) considered that Strato had used a method of reasoning which followed everything in a fixed order, and which did not maintain that there was any principle of good or evil in the universe. As a consequence, Strato must have believed (Bayle reasoned) that the universe was not a living being, possessing its own intelligence or will, and therefore that there was no divine power beyond nature[369]. Israel, however, thinks it is unlikely that Strato would have regarded himself as being an atheist. As in the case of Democritus, Strato may have considered that the presence of a god is not a necessary entity for the functioning of the universe. However, he may have thought that the concept of the existence of the gods, in the minds of the people, could have been justified by an ethical or social order. In other words, it could have been a necessary part of the cultural identity of some people, and therefore, the continuation of belief in it was justified for reasons of social harmony[370].

In the field of religious belief, another significant member of the Peripatetic School is Aetius (1st or 2nd century BCE). He was a doxographer and a philosopher. His work *The Tenets* has been reconstructed by modern scholars from a variety of sources. He was interested in atheism as an intellectual position[371] in its own right, and not merely as an adjunct to a wider philosophy. His account contains no moral judgement; it is a doxographical collection of the arguments propounded by those who did not believe in supernatural beings. In this work, Aetius gives his own views on traditional attitudes towards the existence of the gods. He says that the poets talk "nonsense" when they talk about divine omnipotence. When Plato claimed that a god created the universe in his own image, he states that Plato is full of "archaic, lunatic nonsense", as this would imply that the god is spherical[372]. He criticizes Anaxagoras and Plato on the basis of their claims that God deals with human affairs. He produces three arguments to support his position. Firstly, he suggested that if a god is omnipotent, could he make snow that is black, or fire that is cold? Surely he could not, Aetius argued, so therefore he could not be omnipotent. Secondly, he argued in response to the proposition that the universe was created by a divine force. If the cosmos was created, he argued, what happened before that? Was the god actually in existence before that time? If he did not exist at that time, this would imply that he was not

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[368] Erdmann, J.E., *A History of Philosophy*, (2002), Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 101.

[369] Israel, J. I., *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man*, (2006), Oxford University Press, 451.

[370] Ibid., 454.

[371] Aetius, *Tenets (Placita)* 1.7.1-10, (ed. & trans. Jaap Mansfield and David T. Runia).

[372] Runia, D., *Atheists in Aetius: Text, Translation and Comments on De Placitis 1.7.1.10* in Mansfield and Runia, *Aetiana Volume III*, (2020), Brill Publishing, Leiden, Netherlands, 343-374.

~~eternal. But~~ if he existed, was he asleep during that time? That is also not acceptable, for sleep implied a state of weariness, which is not possible for an omnipotent god. But if he was awake, this implied that he was not fulfilled, as he had not yet completed his plan to create the universe, which meant that his blessedness had not always been complete. The third argument is an extension of the argument in Euripides' *Bellerophon*. If the gods are in charge of punishing and rewarding moral actions, why then is there wrongdoing in the world? Surely the gods would punish wrongdoers and reward good moral behaviour?

Scepticism

Originally developed within Plato's Academy, Scepticism was inspired by the example of Socrates, who debated with people to try to expose the fragility of their arguments. Sceptics challenged peoples' beliefs and attacked dogma, with the purpose of reducing or eliminating reliance on weak argumentation[373]. With so many different views and beliefs prevalent in the field of religion, it was considered by the Sceptics to be impossible to state that any one belief system was valid. Any belief system or dogma, Sceptics believed, was always built on unstable grounds. The division of Sceptics known as the Pyrrhonists believed that the way to happiness was *epokhe* "suspension of judgement" – a philosophy which followed the doctrines of Pyrrho of Elis (365-275 BCE). The primary aim of Pyrrho's doctrine was to attain a state of *ataraxia*, a freedom from mental perturbation, and he believed that this state could be obtained by abstaining from all dogmatic beliefs which were concerned with thoughts and perceptions[374]. In all the areas of religion, there were multiple competing views about gods – their form, their powers, their nature – and this was to be found in every society, both within and beyond the Greek world. The conclusion drawn by Pyyrho was that it is impossible to state securely which belief system is true and which is not true.

One Sceptic in particular who promoted arguments against conventional theology was Carneades (c.214-129 BCE). He was head of the Academy, and known as an impressive orator. As a part of an Athenian delegation to Rome in 155 BCE, he was one of the first to expose Rome to Greek philosophy. His arrival in Rome was described by Plutarch[375] in this manner:

> The charm of Carneades especially, which had boundless power, and a fame not inferior to its power, won large and sympathetic audiences, and filled the city, like a rushing mighty wind, with the noise of his praises.

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[373] Whitmarsh, 161.

[374] Bett, R.A.H., *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy*, (2000), Oxford Scholarship Online, Ch.1, Retrieved on 4 August 2023 from: https://academic.oup.com/book/27000/chapter/196214894

[375] Plutarch, *Life of Marcus Cato*, 22.2, 23.2, (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

Plutarch continues, recording that Carneades made two speeches on alternate days. In the first he eloquently argued in favour of the virtue of Roman justice. However, on the second day he refuted all these arguments and persuasively attempted to demonstrate that justice was inevitably problematic, and that it was not necessarily true that it was always correct when it came to virtue. He saw it instead as merely a device which was necessary for the maintenance of order within society.

Barnes[376] described it in this manner:

> He was a celebrated figure; and in 155 BC he was sent by Athens to Rome as a political ambassador where he astounded the youth by his rhetorical powers and outraged their elders by his arguments against justice.

This enraged Cato. Fearing that the youth of the city would be corrupted by this speech, he spoke strongly against Carneades' rhetoric, and against the delegation itself, with the result that the Senate expelled two Epicurean philosophers from Rome. This expulsion was described by Athenaeus[377]:

> The Romans – the best people there are in all regards – were therefore right to expel the Epicureans Alcius and Philiscus from the city during the consulship of Lucius Postumius on account of the pleasures they were attempting to introduce.

To our knowledge Carneades, like Socrates, wrote nothing down, which only added to the curiosity surrounding him. He reportedly held contentious views on many subjects, but his most controversial views appear to have been in the field of religion. He argued that belief in gods is illogical, and to do this, he offered some examples. Firstly, he suggested that if the gods are superior to humans, then they would be able to sense things, at least to the same degree as humans, or even to a greater degree. But sensation is a form of vulnerability: if they can taste both sweet things and bitter things, then they are able to experience respectively pleasure and distress as a result of this experience. But this indicates that they are vulnerable, because outside forces can cause them to feel pain. And if they are vulnerable, then in principle they are subject to decay[378].

Another argument of Carneades discussed the notion that gods can be morally rational. The gods cannot be both moral and also entirely good (he argued), because to be moral there must also be the possibility of doing wrong. If a god is good he cannot also be prudent, because being prudent means that the god has the ability to choose between different courses of action. But if

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[376] Barnes, J., *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2000), Routledge, New York, 124.

[377] Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*,12.547a, (trans. S. Douglas Olson).

[378] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3, 2-4, (trans. R. G. Bury).

a god is good, then choosing the wrong (immoral) course will never occur to him. Therefore, he lacks the capacity to make moral choices which are wholly rational. The same applies where either justice or bravery are concerned: a perfect god would never be presented with the choice of taking the unjust or cowardly course[379].

The most famous argument of Carneades attempted to show that the gods cannot exist at all. This involved the use of the "heaping" argument. Also known as the "sorites paradox", it is attributed to Eubulides of Miletus[380]. Using this argument, Carneades debated how many grains of wheat constitute a heap. If the question is asked "How many grains are required to qualify as a heap?", and it is decided that the answer is 300, then does this mean that 299 grains are not a heap? So, any claim that 300 grains qualify as a heap is neither true nor false, because the concept of what is a heap is unable to be determined. In the field of religion, Carneades asked parallel questions: if we believe that the Olympian gods are in fact gods, then how do we regard nymphs? Are they also gods? And if we decide that they are, then what about Pan? And the Satyrs? Surely nobody would regard the Satyrs as gods. So, what is the demarcation line between one kind of immortal and another? And if there is therefore no sharp demarcation line between the divine and the nondivine, then there is no clear-cut definition of "god" which is possible[381].

The successor to Carneades as head of the Academy was his protégé Clitomachus. Although the prolific writings of Clitomachus have mainly been lost, he was extremely interested in atheism, and he compiled a list of philosophical atheists. These included Protagoras, Prodicus, Diagoras, Critias, Theodorus, Euhemerus, and Epicurus[382]. Within his book *On Atheism* (also no longer extant) it is possible (from later reports) that he invented the concept of atheism as being a separate movement, with its own long history. He regarded atheism as a distinct philosophical position, and he described the different varieties of atheism within this philosophy[383].

Any attempted reconstruction of the aspects of ancient scepticism in Greece, however, is limited by a lack of extant sources actually written at the time. Some of the most prominent Greek sceptics, such as Pyrrho and Carneades, adopted the stance of Socrates in that they wrote nothing down. Others, like Timon and Clitomachus, did write down their philosophies, but these are mainly no longer extant. We must rely, apart from a few fragments, on later

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[379] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.38, (trans. H. Rackham).

[380] Barnes, J., *Medicine, Experience and Logic*, in Barnes, J., Brunschwig, J., Burnyeat, M.F., Schofield, M. (eds.), in *Science and Speculation*, (1982) Cambridge University Press, Ch. 2.

[381] Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 9.182-84, (trans. R. G. Bury); Also Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 463.

[382] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 4.67, (trans. R. D. Hicks).

[383] Whitmarsh, 165.

accounts by Roman writers. The most prominent testimonies come to us from the first century BCE Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero, the second/third century CE Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus, and the third century CE biographer and doxographer Diogenes Laertius[384].

Of these, our main source of information about the Sceptics is undoubtedly Sextus Empiricus, doctor and philosopher of the second century CE. As an exponent of the Sceptic movement, he promoted the branch of Pyrrhonism (the other being the Academic branch). Scepticism is not in itself an atheistic movement, but conversely it is not necessarily a theistic movement either. Sextus in Book IX of *Against the Professors* gives a series of arguments in favour of the existence of the gods, but then immediately gives a series of counter-arguments. He does not profess that either view is stronger than the other; his objective is to refute the dogmatic position taken by some believers (and presumably also by some non-believers). He believes that the matter of the existence of the gods cannot be decided one way or another. In another work *Against the Mathematicians,* he writes 180 chapters which argue against the existence of the gods[385]. He wrote:

> The Sceptics have declared that, because the arguments on either side are equally strong, the gods exist no more than they do not[386].

Sextus does not favour the religious view, but neither does he favour the atheistic view. His catalogue covers both sides of the arguments, but we are left however with the conclusion that overall, this is a significant sustained attack on the existence of the gods. Sextus also compares the views of atheists with the views of philosophers who believe in the existence of the gods. He does this by proffering four different arguments.

Firstly, if most cultures have a belief in gods, is this evidence of their existence?[387] The atheists argue that there are widespread misconceptions about the world. For example, when considering the concept of eternal punishment, they asked "how can a person's body be damaged for all eternity? And is this damage progressive?". Just because many people believe in something does not make it true. Sextus rejects this theistic line of thinking[388].

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[384] Castagnoli, L., *Skepticism*, in M.Gagarin (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, (2009), Oxford University Press, New York, 2, retrieved on 9/11/2022 from https://www.academia.edu/363578/_Skepticism_in_M_Gagarin_ed_Encyclopedia_of_Ancient_Greece_and_Rome _New_York_Oxford_University_Press_2009?email_work_card=thumbnail

[385] Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians 9.14–194, (trans. R. G. Bury).*

[386] Ibid., 9.59.b

[387] Ibid., 9.49-59.

[388] Ibid., 9.60-74.

Secondly, he addresses the theist argument about the orderly design of the universe: because the heavenly bodies within the universe orbit with such incredible precision, there must be a supernatural creator behind it. An extension of this argument is the notion that the order of the universe is similar to the rationality that we possess as humans, therefore a rational order pervades the universe. The reasoning capacity of each person is a tiny fraction of that rational totality. So this force which rules the universe must be a cosmic god.[389]

The third argument in favour of the gods is that without a sense of divinity, we cannot have moral values, such as piety, justice, or holiness – all of which are actions carried out specifically towards the gods. Ethical behaviour would be impossible without the moral yardstick of belief in the gods. And without the gods there would be no prophecy, in which many people believe. Atheism would weaken the moral fabric of society[390].

The final argument involved a three-step syllogism. The founder of Stoicism, Zeno, had used this method to argue "It would be reasonable for someone to honour the gods. It is not reasonable to honour beings that do not exist. Therefore, gods exist". Sextus countered this argument by stating that the syllogism contained an assumption that the gods exist, when in fact that was entirely unproven. He had previously pointed out that the Stoics find it quite acceptable to honour the gods in public without believing that they actually exist[391].

Sextus turns next to further arguments, all of which are against the existence of the gods. These include[392]:

Firstly, is a divinity finite or infinite? An infinite god cannot move, because it fills all the space within which it could possibly move. And it must lack intelligence, because intelligence is a form of motion from the mind of the organism to the other parts of it. But a god who is unable to move or think is not a possibility. But if a god is finite, then it is lesser than the cosmos in which it resides.

Also, does the god have a body? Only bodies have souls, and as a result, the ability to reason. So, it must have a body. And if so then it is subject to decay, because all bodies are ultimately subject to decay.

In addition, is it correct to say that if the gods are perfect, they must be moral? Arguably, morality depends by definition on the suppression of nonmoral impulses. For example, you cannot suppress sexual desires unless you are tempted. Similarly, you cannot show bravery unless you are threatened. So, for the gods to be moral they must be morally fallible. Also, if

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[389] Ibid., 9.75-122.

[390] Ibid., 9.123-32.

[391] Ibid., 9.133-36.

[392] All these countering arguments are to be found in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, 9.136-75.

the gods make good decisions, they must also be capable of making bad decisions, because it is necessary for them, in that case, to select the best course of action from the possibilities which are available. Furthermore, the gods cannot be virtuous if they are truly omnipotent, because virtue depends on laboriously developing virtuous habits (Sextus argued), and an omnipotent being does not need to work on achieving anything. But if a god lacks virtue, then that god is morally deficient and cannot therefore be a god.

Sextus produces a further argument: If it is agreed that the gods possess moral virtue, is it true that virtue is separate from them? Virtue is an abstract form, and similar to courage or beauty. But, as an example, nobody can possess courage which is as courageous as courage itself. An abstract form is always greater than that which the possessor of it can attain. So, similarly, nobody can possess virtue which is as virtuous as virtue itself. So, the gods must be deficient in this regard[393].

The final argument concerns the ability of the gods to speak. If they can speak, they must possess lungs, windpipes, tongues etc., or they would be unable to speak. And furthermore, what languages do they speak? And what are their bodies made of? If their bodies are made of compounds then they are subject to decay. But if, alternatively, they are made of a single substance such as earth, fire, air, or water, then the gods cannot have souls, nor rational faculties. But any god not possessing reason is an inconceivable notion[394].

The implications of the teaching of the philosophical schools

In conclusion, (and concerning the philosophical schools only): The effect of the philosophies of these schools would have been clearly different from the reaction that such philosophies would have provoked in the Classical era of Socrates and, as we have seen, under the Decree of Diopeithes. The Hellenistic era was a time when it was possible for kings to be able to be regarded as living gods, or at least divinely inspired, and this practice occurred to a greater degree after the death of Alexander the Great. This would indicate that the definition of “god” may have been keenly discussed by each state. Some Greeks would have agreed that it was possible that a living king was a god, but others would have disagreed. However, the notion may well have been discussed that if a living human being was really a god, then how far removed were that person’s powers from the powers of an actual god? Would this not imply that the powers of an actual god could not have been considerably greater than the human being in question? Either the powers of the actual god were vastly greater – in which case the human could not possibly be anything close to a god; or else the powers of an actual god were not that much greater than a human being (albeit an outstanding human being). Therefore, was there good reason to question the powers of the gods, and even their very existence? In the

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[393] Ibid., 9.176-77.

[394] Ibid., 9.136-75.

minds of some citizens, the very process of being able to deify living human beings may have weakened the image of, and respect for, the concept of an actual god. For this reason, these philosophical schools were able to question the validity of the existence of the traditional view of the Olympian gods, and generally they could do it with impunity[395]. This was a very big step from the political and social implications of those philosophers who were prosecuted under the Decree of Diopeithes. The belief in the Olympian gods, or at least the way in which they had been traditionally perceived, was continuing to be doubted within a number of intellectual and philosophical circles. The deification of mortal men was seldom mentioned by intellectuals, although one poet did allude to this when he wrote about the "impiety of granting divine honours to men"[396].

There were even instances of prominent members of these philosophical schools enjoying positions of prominence, despite their statements concerning their lack of belief in the gods. Persaeus of Citium is one such example. As mentioned previously, he was prominent in the Stoical school, and he denied the existence of the gods altogether[397]. Despite this, he later became an important figure in the Macedonian court. When Antigonus captured Corinth (c.244 BCE), he (Antigonus) put Persaeus in control of Corinth as Archon. (Persaeus died in battle while defending the garrison at Corinth)[398]. Other philosophers with atheistic views from the philosophical schools lived into old age (an example being Carneades, former head of the Sceptical Academy), which implies that their denials of traditional religious beliefs were at least tolerated at that time, even though they may have been controversial.

Compared to the time of Socrates, and as far as we know from extant documents, there were no significant *negative* consequences for the religious views of the philosophical schools, even though these views were often considered to be controversial.

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[395] An exception to this is Aristotle, who was exiled from Athens. However, it is unclear if his religious views were the sole reason for this. The exile occurred during a time of war, and Aristotle was not an Athenian citizen. The reason (or reasons) for his exile must therefore remain indeterminate. To escape being executed, he fled Athens, and is quoted as saying "I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy", referring to the Athenians' previous execution of Socrates, [Reference is Catholic Way Publishing, *"The Philosophy Collection*", {2015}, Catholic Way Publishing, 26.]

[396] Philippides in Kassel, R., and Austin, C. (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci*, vol. 7, (2010), de Gruyter, Berlin, 471.

[397] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I 38 (trans. H. Rackham).

[398] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VIII 4, (trans. W. H. S. Jones).

CHAPTER 6: ROME AND CHRISTIANITY

The influence of Rome on atheistic attitudes

As we know, Rome (and its influence) was extremely predominant throughout the vast area which it eventually conquered, as well as on the areas which were contiguous with its borders. From the annexation of Sicily following the First Punic War (264-241 BCE) and onwards, the growth of the Roman Empire and its influence was all pervading. The empire was held together by various symbolic mechanisms which connected the imperial provinces to Rome. These mechanisms included (during the imperial period) the constant display of images of the emperor, publicly posting news from Rome, and also the presence of the army and the law, to continually remind residents of the Roman order[399]. The Greek Stoic Panaetius (185-110 BCE), who helped to bring Stoicism to Rome, taught that the universe is governed by providence and therefore every action is a result of divine will[400].

From this the idea was developed in Rome that if there was belief in the universe being directed by divine providence, then the Roman Empire was ordained by the gods to be the governors of the world, and in the very best way possible[401]. This approach was reflected in the *Aeneid*, Virgil's epic poem, in which Jupiter prophesies to Venus about the future of Rome:

> For these I set no bounds in space or time; but have given empire without end[402].

As had been the case in Greek society, religion and politics were still closely intertwined. In Rome's case, the idea of divine providence and imperial ideology were connected, so that any belief in atheism necessarily had a political implication. We are reminded again of Plato's identification of three types of unbelievers (as he saw it): those who believed that there were no gods, those who believed that the gods have no interest in human well-being, and those who thought that favour can be bought by prayers and sacrifices[403]. Either of the first two types had the implication of denying belief in providence, and could therefore have been seen as a slight against the ordained destiny of Rome. Dionysius in *Roman Antiquities* attacks fellow

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[399] Whitmarsh, 191.

[400] Review by Jeffery Aubin, of Collette, Bernard, *The Stoic Doctrine of Providence*, Routledge, New York, (2021).

[401] Brunt, P.A., *Studies in Stoicism*, (2013), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 275-309.

[402] Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278-9, (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Revised by G. P. Goold).

[403] Plato, *Laws* 885b, (trans. R. G. Bury).

Greeks who do not accept the inevitability of Roman domination of the known world. He is especially scornful towards:

> …the more malicious (who) are wont to rail openly at Fortune for freely bestowing on the basest of barbarians the blessings of the Greeks. And yet why should I mention men at large, when even some historians have dared to express such views in the writings they have left, taking this method of humouring barbarian kings who detested Rome's supremacy,—princes to whom they were ever servilely devoted and with whom they associated as flatterers,—by presenting them with "histories" which were neither just nor true?[404].

One of those to whom Dionysius was referring was undoubtedly Metrodorus of Scepsis, who wrote that the Romans were unworthy rulers, and that Rome's rise to power was the result of chance rather than as the result of divine providence. The negative implications as a result of his writing however were slight, because he wrote while living in the court of Mithridates VI of Pontus, a kingdom on the shores of the Black Sea (and therefore conveniently far removed from Rome). Mithridates was implacably hostile to Rome, and was often at war with it. As a youth in Athens, Metrodorus had studied under Carneades and he counted Clitomachus as an associate. As we have seen, both of these men were interested, and influential, in the field of philosophical atheism[405]. However, Metrodorus was just one of a number of Greeks in the first century BCE who stressed the role of chance, rather than divine providence, in the rise of Roman power[406]. But this suggestion concerning the origins of Roman power as a result of mere chance hit barriers in Rome which did not exist in Greece. Firstly, in Rome there was a complex hierarchy of priests which did not exist in Greece. So, whereas in Greece atheism could not be necessarily seen as an attack on any type of clerical hierarchy, this was not the case in Rome. In Rome, the highest priestly offices were occupied by political figures (an obvious example being Augustus who was for many years the Pontifex Maximus), and atheistic views ran the risk of being interpreted as an attack on the aristocracy, which therefore included an attack on their divinely ordained right to exist and to govern. Secondly, although Greece had progressed technologically, there was no collective idea of society moving forward through innovation, whereas in Rome there was the notion of the whole empire moving forward through technological innovation. The idea of forward movement being solely because of chance was not an acceptable notion in Roman thought[407].

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[404] Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 1.4.2-3, (trans. Earnest Carey).

[405] Plutarch, *Lucullus* 22.1-5, (trans. Bernadotte Perrin).

[406] Ferguson, N., (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, (1997), Penguin, London.

[407] Whitmarsh, 206.

Plutarch challenges the notion of Roman providence, although tactfully. In his work *On the Fortune of the Romans* he points out that in Rome there are temples to Fortune, where the Romans venerate her as a goddess. He suggests that Alexander owed his success to his own special qualities, whereas the Romans owe theirs to Fortune. However, he says that the Romans have altered the meaning of the word “fortune”. While it originally meant “chance”, it is now interpreted as meaning “fate” (meaning predestination). He says:

> When she (Fortune) approached the Palatine and crossed the Tiber, she seems to have taken off her wings, stepped out of her sandals, and abandoned her untrustworthy and unstable globe. Thus did she enter Rome to stay, and that is how she is today[408].

The implication of Plutarch’s writing is to tactfully question the nature of Roman success: was that success providential (i.e. as a result of a divine mandate)?; or was it just achieved by chance? If the former, then the gods superintend the universe, and Rome are their agents. If the latter, however, the power of the gods themselves can be challenged – because Rome may therefore fulfil her destiny anyway, with or without the influence of the gods. The result was that any doubting of the concept of Rome’s providentially ordained success had a political resonance. The Roman emperor was usually regarded as a living god. Stoicism, which believed in the existence of a benign creator, was compatible with the idea of Roman imperialism. Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* suggested that individuals should subordinate themselves to providentially ordained Roman authority[409]. A notable contrast to this view is offered by Lucian in *Zeus the Tragedian,* where he imagines a debate between a Stoic, and an Epicurean who denied the providential care and intervention of the gods. The Stoic sees the universe as a ship with a divine captain in charge, ultimately benefitting all the passengers. The Epicurean however contemplates a badly designed ship run by miscreants and moving about without real purpose[410].

The analogy arguably refers to the Roman Empire. The suggestion that Rome’s success was not due to providence was a risky political act and a potentially dangerous one.

Rome tolerated many different religious sects. The more predominant ones included the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, the Persian deity Mithras, the Syrian fish deity Atargatis, and Yahweh in Judaism. Minucius Felix, a Christian writer in the second century CE wrote:

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[408] Plutarch, *Moralia. On the Fortune of the Romans*, 318a (trans. F.C. Babbitt).

[409] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*: For example, Book iv, 12; and also Book ix, 23. Also: Copleston, 435.

[410] Lucian, *Zeus Tragoedus* 47-49, (trans. W. H. and F. G. Fowler).

> Hence it is that throughout wide empires, provinces and towns, we see each people having its own individual rites and worshipping its local gods, the Eleusinians Ceres, the Phrygians the Great Mother, the Epidaurians Aesculapius, the Chaldaeans Bel, the Syrians Astarte, the Taurians Diana, the Gauls Mercury, the Romans one and all[411].

It is clear that many views on religion were tolerated, and this also included atheism. Atheists could live in a relatively unmolested fashion, provided that they took part in their communities, including at the very least a minimum of religious observation[412]. The notable writer Pliny the Elder was one who expressed ideas of religious scepticism. In his second book of the *Natural History*[413], he wrote:

> I think of it as a sign of human imbecility to try to find out the shape and form of a god. Whoever 'god' is – if in fact he exists at all – he consists in pure sense, sound, soul, mind: he is purely himself….

He emphasises illogical points in religious belief: gods marry without producing children; some are always old; others are always young. He argues that the idea of the gods originated in the celebration of human achievements: the names of the gods were born from the "merits of men". Further, he asserts that the concept of divinity comes from a human need for a belief system which rewards moral behaviour and punishes immoral behaviour. He suggests that the idea of deities is constructed by humans. In the same book he wrote:

> God is one mortal helping another.

Part of the reason for this thinking is that the religious system of the Romans was based on ritual, rather than on dogma. Their religious tradition prescribed what rituals they should follow, not what they should believe. The only religious "belief" for Romans was a belief that the gods were the benevolent partners of mortals in the management of the world. The rituals were prescribed as a necessary way of requesting such assistance in advance.[414]. In general terms then, other belief systems were tolerated, unless they openly denied the existence of the Roman gods, or criticized Roman ritual practice. Atheists could therefore proceed with impunity, providing that they adhered to these expected social norms of behaviour. However, this tolerance was to change markedly with the increasing influence of Christianity in the Roman world.

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[411] Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6.1, (trans. T. R. Glover, Gerald H. Rendall).

[412] Whitmarsh, 219.

[413] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 2.5., (trans. H Rackham).

[414] Scheid, J., *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, (2003), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 173.

The advent of the Christian influence

Much has been written previously, by many authors, about the prejudices held and the cruelties committed against early Christians by the Romans, and there is little need to repeat them. But as time went on, and Christianity was more widely accepted within the Empire, the meaning of the word *atheoi* – atheists – was changed, depending on who was using the word. The traditional Romans considered Christians to be atheists, because they denied the existence of the Roman gods altogether, and spoke out against Roman religious practices. But where Christian writers were concerned, the word now meant anybody – not just Romans – who denied the existence of the *Christian* god[415]. From the point of view of the Romans, the Christians were clearly atheists, because they not only denied the efficacy of Roman religious practices, but they also had no temples, and no statues of gods or sacrifices. To the Romans, these were the very basis of a religion. One of the many Christian martyrs was Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna from c.160 CE. His martyrdom occurred before the mass persecutions ordered later by emperors such as Diocletian. However, his life and career reflect the tensions which were already forming throughout the empire, when the Christians rejected the "pagan" gods of Rome. When he was captured by the Romans, the Roman governor tried to save him, by encouraging him to shout to the crowd "Away with the atheists!" while referring to a group of captured Christians. Instead, Polycarp waved his fist at the crowd and shouted "Away with the atheists!", implying that the true atheists were the pagan crowd[416]. As a result, he was bound and burned at the stake; when the fire failed to consume his corpse, he was stabbed[417].
Christian accusations of atheism went further than covering solely pagan religions. Ignatius of Antioch was one of the first of a growing number of Christian writers who also included some of his Christian contemporaries under that description, if they did not worship God in the "right" way[418]. And the term "atheist" was not just applied to Greeks and Romans, it included Judaism[419].

Initially, the implications of being a Christian in the Roman world involved personal danger from the Roman authorities, until the time that the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, often referred to as the "Constantinian shift". This edict decriminalized Christian worship within the Empire. Within ten years, Christianity had become the official religion of the

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[415] Lampe, G.W.H., (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, (1961), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 44.

[416] *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3, 1-2, as quoted by Whitmarsh, 240.

[417] Wace, H., *"Polycarp"* in *Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature*, (Reprinted 1994) Hendrickson Publishing, Carol Stream, Illinois.

[418] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians* 10, (trans. Bart D. Ehrman).

[419] Saint Paul (of Tarsus), *Letter to the Ephesians* II 11-18, including (in the King James Version, Verse 12): "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world".

Roman Empire. Early in his reign, Constantine was tolerant of traditional sacrifices, and he encouraged the building of temples. By the end of his reign however, he had begun to order the pillaging and destruction of Roman temples[420]. Thus, the implications for traditional Roman religious worshipers were now the same as they had been for Christians in the early part of the Christian era, namely, a scenario of possible persecution for non-belief. Religion and politics were still intricately intertwined, because the emperor Constantine, sitting on the throne of the Caesars, had now determined what the predominant religion of the entire Roman Empire was going to be. As in the Greek world of previous centuries, the definition of what precisely constituted atheism, as well as what the implications were of being an atheist, were ultimately determined by the political leadership.

CONCLUSION

This paper has covered a period of almost one thousand years, from the time of Thales to the Constantinian Edict of Milan in 313 CE. The primary purposes were to research the implications for individuals which arose from their demonstration of atheistic thought; and also to investigate the reasons why the manifestation of these implications changed so dramatically throughout this long period. From this research, certain trends are apparent. One such trend, which was common to nearly all states, and which has already been well established, was that religious thought and practice were inextricably intertwined with the political will of the city-state's ruling classes. One major purpose of any city-state's ruling class was always to maintain social harmony and order, and religious practice was an integral part of this maintenance. Until the end of this long period, the gods were expected to be venerated and recognised ubiquitously as creators and controllers of everything in the world. The predominant god of each city was always given special veneration.

Further, the research has indicated that the implications for espousing atheistic thought varied widely. Thales and other prominent philosopher/scientists of his era dwelt in cosmopolitan environments which largely accepted their postulations – although these individuals generally appear to have remained aloof from involvement in the political affairs of their cities. This is in dramatic contrast to the *polis* of Athens in the era of Socrates. Despite having since proved to be one of the most influential philosophers within Western thought, Socrates was executed for "not worshiping gods whom the State worships". The sentence of execution arose initially from a prosecution made under the Decree of Diopeithes, but ultimately the conviction was enacted as a result of the democratic vote of the Athenian jurors.

In further contrast to this situation, however, many later atheistic philosophers did not suffer any negative implications other than criticism. Later still, when the divine cults of kings arose,

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[420] Hughes, P., *A History of the Church*, (revised ed. 1949), Sheed & Ward, London, Vol 1, Chapter 6.

atheistic criticism of the traditional gods could be made by writers and orators almost with impunity, while criticism of the king himself was not generally permitted. We also observed that eventually, with the advent of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, the tables turned completely. Denial of Christian belief was ultimately deemed to carry the risk, from a Christian viewpoint, of the eternal damnation of the soul of the non-believer. And at the same time, complete denial of the existence of the traditional Greek and Roman gods was deemed to be acceptable. The pendulum had therefore, by this stage, performed a complete oscillation.

There is a clear indication that the change in the implications of expressing atheistic thought, over time, bears a direct correlation to the political will of the ruling class of each city-state or state. The effect of this correlation has been observed within the scope of the research done, which was concerned with investigating statements and writings involving the major exponents of atheistic thought over a very long period. In every case, political will was observed to have had a major influence in determining the implications for the exponents of that thought.
Further research would be useful to determine the implications of similar atheistic thought which was expressed by ordinary citizens (that is, other than by philosophers, playwrights, writers, and other prominent citizens), although the archaeological and documentary record has not as yet, unfortunately, been able to produce significant information concerning this area. Hopefully this will change over time.

Much has been written previously concerning religion in Greece and the Roman Empire. Less has been written about atheism and atheistic thought which was expressed during that period. An investigation into the *implications* of atheistic thought has been necessary, among other reasons, to reflect on the acceptance (or otherwise) of unorthodox religious views. But anomalies persist. For example, the cults of Isis and Mithras et al. were tolerated, even though they did not worship the traditional gods in the conventional way, (however these cults themselves tolerated alternative belief systems). Nevertheless, atheism – in all its many degrees - was often regarded differently, and sometimes with great intolerance, as we have seen.

The purpose of the investigation has also been to observe the changing political influence on religious thought over time – and especially on the ability of individuals to freely express unorthodox religious views.

The study has indicated, in more succinct terms, that the political pendulum swung throughout this thousand-year period, from ambivalent acceptance of atheistic thought, to criminal prosecution for such thought (including execution), to the recognition of kings as living gods – which appeared to undermine belief in the traditional gods. Then with the Christianisation of Rome came the eventual haranguing and possible persecution of those who still espoused belief in the traditional Greek and Roman gods. At that stage, Christianity reigned supreme within Roman society, because the political leaders decreed that it should be so, and subsequent generations then also adopted Christian belief. Finally, prosecution for belief in the traditional Greek and Roman gods was eventually scarcely possible, because these gods had

ceased to exist in the minds of the people. The traditional gods, after considerably more than a millennium, were no more.

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