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Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. Pp. ix, 290. ISBN 9780307958327. \$27.95 (hb).

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[Preview](#)

In this fine polemic, Whitmarsh rightly argues that the greatest debt the modern world owes to ancient Hellas is the freedom to question received beliefs. In his view, the persecution of freethinkers, scientists, and other such dangerous people was rare in antiquity; most Hellenes easily tolerated scepticism about their own religion. What he calls ‘atheism’ but I prefer to call freethinking has, he shows, a longer and more illustrious history than most of us suppose, and was crucial to the rise of modern science and society. Religion, his argument suggests, is not innate, but a human construct that can and should be subject to rational scrutiny.

His ambitious, provocative, and timely book deserves to make an impact like that of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Swerve*. ¹ Written for a general audience, it has enough of a historical armature that it should satisfy readers with no prior background. Seasoned classicists will find it radical and illuminating. However, like all good polemicists, Whitmarsh tells only half the story: he understates to what extent we owe to Athenian democracy the first violent *reaction* against freethinking. Culminating in Socrates’ execution, this reaction profoundly slowed the progress of science, invention, and human rights in the ancient and medieval worlds.

In Whitmarsh’s analysis, religion is ‘at the structural level an allegory of political power’ (25); monotheist absolutism, combined with absolutist politics, has generally proved more hostile to freedom of thought than the acceptance of diverse sources of power that undergirds polytheistic beliefs. That acceptance ended with the imposition, for absolutist political reasons, of Christianity on the Roman Empire (231–42), to revive only with the Enlightenment, when people knew that ‘wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen’ (Heine). Now absolutist religions again seek to impose their ways on the world. Freethinkers face intolerance in countries ranging from Bangladesh to the United States. Libraries and temples of past or present ‘infidels’, from Bamiyan and Palmyra to Mar Elian and Timbuktu, are deliberately burned or destroyed. The murder of Farkhunda in Kabul in March 2015 well illustrates the reaction of peddlers of superstition to any challenge, however pious its motive. It is no coincidence that Greek scepticism is suspect.

The introduction (3–12) argues that religious universalism—the view that religion is ‘hardwired’ into humanity—is a profound error: freethinking is cross-cultural. Its history goes back at least as far as monotheism; its antiquity belies the claim that atheism is an invention of the Enlightenment. Our ancient sources, Thucydides excepted (81–6), tend to suppress freethinking.

Part I, ‘Archaic Greece’ (15–68), lays out the felicitous circumstances that created the Greek miracle. Whitmarsh rightly sees the physical geography of Greece as crucial for the political diversity that let some Hellenes think so freely, while at the same time the sea allowed great connectivity (15–27). Only language, culture, and religion

held Hellas together, but most dimensions of Greek religion were local rather than Panhellenic. Priests had only a civic, not a political or moral function. Crucially, ‘the gods had little to do with the law’ (22). Gods were in the natural world rather than transcendent, with no required ‘spiritual’ dimension; ‘there was little interest in generating religious orthodoxy’ (26). Next he shows that the Greeks lacked sacred texts (28–39): Homer and Hesiod were open to reinterpretation by anybody. As early as 525 B.C.E., Theagenes used allegoresis to explain away the battle of the gods, to which Xenophanes had objected.

The following section (40–51) shows that myths about challenges to the gods in general or to Zeus’ leadership of them prove that Hellenic gods lack the absolute power that monotheists ascribe to their Deity. Such stories also existed in Babylonian, Phoenician and Ugaritic myth, but are already under erasure in the Hebrew bible. Whitmarsh focuses on Salmoneus in Hesiod’s *Catalogue of Women* (47–50). By dating this story of the hubristic imitation of Zeus to the sixth century, he relates it to anxiety over the ‘manufacture’ of gods via sculpture and theatre; but the statistical study of its language shows that the *Catalogue* is as old as Hesiod.² The next section (52–68) is on the Presocratics, arguing that, when ‘the pre-Socratics speak of divinity, we can often substitute “nature”’ (54); ‘you say “god,” I say air, wind or some other material principle’ (58). Whitmarsh calls the Milesians’ position ‘atheist/naturalist’, as opposed to ‘theist’, wherein divine agency causes phenomena like thunder. He attributes their inventiveness to a competitive environment and Near Eastern influence. Even Xenophanes, a theist, ‘shifted gods from Olympus into every living being, into science and matter’ (61); the first true *atheos* was the Pythagorean Hippias of Samos (63), who saw no role in the universe for anything save matter. But Hippias belongs later, since Cratinus mocked him;³ his label of *atheos* reflects the Athenian reaction against science. Anaxagoras was probably the first scientist to be so called, whether or not Thucydides son of Melesias was his accuser.⁴ Also, Whitmarsh claims that, if by ‘Nous’ Anaxagoras had meant ‘god’, we would have heard this; instead, Nous is the principle that the universe is intelligible (65). However, since Anaxagoras called Nous ‘the mind of God’⁵ he was on the same naturalizing track as the Milesians. Whitmarsh thinks he reached Athens in the 430s (64), but Plutarch’s story of his clash with Lampon the seer proves he was there before Thucydides’ ostracism in 442.⁶

Part II (‘Classical Athens: Atheism and Oppression’, 71–137) treats the religious crisis in Athens in the late fifth century. Whitmarsh rejects the consensus that Socrates’ execution was an aberration and that reports of other trials are wrong.⁷ Yet he underestimates the absolutism of the radical democracy, where defendants had no constitutional protections from jurors’ caprices (see Aristophanes’ *Wasps*). The Athenians even burned Protagoras’ books. Their religious crisis is the topic of a valuable book by Rubel,⁸ who rightly insists on the role of the plague in provoking religious intolerance. Whitmarsh cites this (259), but a more careful perusal would have saved him from errors like misdating their decree against the ‘atheist’ Diagoras of Melos to 423–415 (112), when it was passed in 415/4.⁹ Diagoras was neither tried nor accused of parodying the Mysteries (121–2, 220): his crime was committed in word not deed ([Lys.] 6. 17–18), i.e. in his book. More crucially, neither author cites three vital pieces of evidence that explain the vehemence of the reaction of 415 and its choice of targets. First, no fewer than eight people in Socrates’ circle were accused — Acumenus, Adeimantus, Alcibiades, Axiochus, Charmides, Critias, Eryximachus, and Phaedrus.¹⁰ Second, the bizarre content of the Derveni papyrus explains the unpopularity of Anaxagoras and company. That treatise was not, as is conventionally held, by a theist,¹¹ but by a naturalist of Anaxagorean type; its author, Diagoras as I suspect, decodes an account of Anaxagorean physics in a theogony that was used for initiation into the Orphic mysteries, intending to prove that the poem is compatible with religious faith if (and only if) it is interpreted allegorically according to Anaxagoras’ system.¹² Finally, a testimony from Socrates’

own lifetime links him with a disciple of Anaxagoras, since Ion of Chios says Anaxagoras' pupil Archelaus took the young Socrates to Samos.¹³ This is why Aristophanes' *Clouds* attacks Socrates as if he were a follower of Anaxagoras, conflating him with Diogenes of Apollonia and Diagoras,¹⁴ who was a sophist as well as poet. Philodemus lists Diagoras among several sophists, including Prodicus (93, 209).

Whitmarsh does get right the atmosphere of the Athenian reaction against science, and offers wonderful analyses of passages from drama, notably the opening of the *Knights* and Sophocles' *Oedipus*, which he rightly sees as an attack on the notion of chance; Oedipus is, for him, an avatar of Pericles, and Tiresias of Diopieithes (100–6). He is right that Euripides and Aristophanes allude to scandalous ideas like Diagoras' (106–13). But his analysis of the term *atheos* is inadequate (116–17); the Athenians conflated belief in new gods with belief in no gods at all, yet themselves accepted new gods like Bendis and Asclepius, as Plato noted.¹⁵ He scants the role of the Eleusinian priesthood in 415, and indeed in prosecuting Aristotle in 322.

Part III ('the Hellenistic Era') deals confidently with 'godlike kings and godless philosophers' (141–85)—ruler-cult, Stoicism and Epicureanism, with fascinating accounts of Hermocles, Euhemerus, Persaeus and the Epicureans (151–5, 173–85), well suggesting that it was Epicurus' theory of perception that made him believe in gods. Whitmarsh puts much weight on the lost work of Clitomachus, but the crucial evidence for ancient freethinking is the final part of Philodemus' *On Piety*, which does survive. Dirk Obbink's reedition of the relevant sections is still not out; Whitmarsh does not use even Adolf Schober's text.¹⁶ But he does grasp why Epicurus, like Plato before him, attacked true atheists so fiercely: 'classicists have much invested in the idea that their texts are the product of pure reflection and that ancient cities were spaces of free intellectual expression' (177). 'Impiety' was a capital offence in Athens, especially perhaps for professors; even Philodemus had to flee Himera after accusations that his 'atheism' caused a plague.¹⁷

Part IV ('Rome: the New World Order') is equally wide-ranging; it deals with the idea that divine providence led to the rise of Rome (193–204), doxographies of freethinkers (205–14), Apuleius' accusation that his opponent was an atheist (216–8, but his aim was surely to deflect attention from the likelihood that Apuleius did practise 'magic'), Lucian (220–7), and Plutarch (227–30). The Romans' criminalization of the Bacchanalia and 'magic' and their expulsions of philosophers pass unmentioned. The last section ('Christians, Heretics and Other Atheists', 231–42) starts from the fact that Constantine and his successors used Christianity to unify the Roman empire: 'This was the real ideological revolution engendered by the Christianization of the empire: the alliance between absolute power and religious absolutism' (236). The truth is of course more complex.¹⁸ It is strictly true, but also tendentious, that *atheos* now became the term for 'the absence of belief in the *Christian* god' (238): even in Socrates' time, it denoted those who did not believe in the gods in which the city believed, whether they were theists or not: Pentheus is called *atheos* for refusing to recognize the new god Dionysus.¹⁹

In conclusion, this brilliant study ranges over the whole of antiquity: sometimes inadequate or outdated in detail (perhaps more often than I have the knowledge to recognize), its most important contribution is that it is conspicuously correct regarding the *longue durée* of ancient thought and history, even though the after-effects of an excessive faith in the Athenians' tolerance of freethinking live on in its pages. Pericles personified such tolerance, but failed to stop Diopieithes' decree. To protect freedom of thought, and by extension freedom of worship, all states need laws and institutions to keep religion out of politics; for, without inalienable human rights, democracy can easily become the tyranny of the many.²⁰

Notes:

- [1.](#) *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York 2011).
- [2.](#) R. Janko, ‘πρώτον τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν ἀεῖδειν’, in *Relative Chronology and the Literary History of the Early Greek Epos*, in Ø. Andersen and D. Haug (edd.) (Cambridge 2012), 20–43.
- [3.](#) VS 38 A 2.
- [4.](#) D. L. 2. 12, citing Satyrus. Nor did Orphism spread from Thrace (63); the cult, perhaps invented by Pythagoras, spread from Magna Graecia, where Pythagoras and Hippo both lived.
- [5.](#) VS 59 A 48, νοῦς δὲ αὐτὰ διεκόσμησε θεοῦ (Aëtius 1. 5. 7).
- [6.](#) *Per.* 6. 2.
- [7.](#) So K. J. Dover, ‘The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society’, *Talanta* 7 (1975), 24–54, reprinted in Dover, *The Greeks and their Legacy* 135–58.
- [8.](#) A. Rubel, *Stadt in Angst. Religion und Politik in Athen während des Peloponnesischen Krieges* (Darmstadt 2000), translated as *Fear and Loathing in Ancient Athens: Religion and Politics during the Peloponnesian War* (Bristol 2014).
- [9.](#) Rubel (see n. 8) 68–70, citing T10 Winiarczyk.
- [10.](#) D. Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis and Cambridge 2002), s.vv.
- [11.](#) Whitmarsh 115–116. Like others, he relies on the attack in column 5 on ‘disbelievers’; but this, like column 20, is an attack on believers who do not challenge absurdities. See R. Janko, ‘The Derveni Papyrus (Diagoras of Melos, *Apopyrgizontes Logoi?*): a New Translation’, *Classical Philology* 96 (2001) 1–32, at 2. I have now confirmed the necessary readings by taking digital microphotographs with a new technique (see ‘Parmenides in the Derveni papyrus’, *ZPE* 200).
- [12.](#) So first W. Burkert, ‘Orpheus und die Vorsokratiker: Bemerkungen zum Derveni-Papyrus’, *Antike und Abendland* 14: 93–114.
- [13.](#) D.L. 2. 23, Ἴων δὲ ὁ Χίος (FGrH 392 F 9) καὶ νέον ὄντα εἰς Σάμον σὺν Ἀρχελάῳ ἀποδημήσαι.
- [14.](#) *Clouds* 227–34 (views of Diogenes), 830 (Socrates ‘the Melian’).
- [15.](#) *Rep.* 1. 327a, *Phaedo* 118a.
- [16.](#) ‘Philodemi *De pietate* pars prior’, *Cronache Ercolanesi* 18 (1988) 65–125.
- [17.](#) Aelian fr. 40 Hercher.
- [18.](#) D. S. Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013), especially 150–9.
- [19.](#) Euripides *Bacchae* 995.
- [20.](#) For help with this review I thank the goddess Egeria.

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