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## Atheism in Antiquity

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*Published in:*  
The Cambridge Companion to Atheism

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*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2006

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bremmer, J. N. (2006). Atheism in Antiquity. In M. Martin (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (pp. 11-26). Cambridge University Press.

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# ATHEISM IN ANTIQUITY

by

JAN N. BREMMER

In 1942 the French historian Louis Febvre published his epoch-making study of Rabelais, in which he noted the absence of atheism in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Febvre explained this absence as a kind of *blocage mental*. In the life of society and the individual, Christianity was of overriding importance. Its festivals constituted the rhythm of the year; important transitions in the life of the individual – birth, marriage and death – were completely integrated into religious life, as were everyday activities. Churches, whose bells would always remind the forgetful believer of its existence, often dominated the landscape. It was simply impossible to think Christianity away from medieval society.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequent research has modified Febvre's findings to some extent,<sup>3</sup> but his main findings still stand. Antiquity was not that different from the Middle Ages in this respect. The ancient Greeks and Romans also moved in a landscape where temples were everywhere, where gods adorned their coins, where the calendar went from religious festival to festival, and where religious rites accompanied all major transitions in life. Consequently, atheism never developed into a popular ideology with a recognisable following. All we have in antiquity is the exceptional individual who dared to voice his disbelief or bold philosophers who proposed intellectual theories about the coming into existence of the gods without, normally, putting their theories into practise and to reject religious practice altogether. If we find atheism at all, it is usually a 'soft' atheism or the imputation of atheism to others as a means to discredit them.

Even if we may assume that mankind always has known its sceptics and unbelievers, the expression of that scepticism and unbelief is subject to historical circumstances. Some periods are more favourable to dissenters than other times, and later times may interpret as atheism what earlier times permitted as perhaps only just acceptable theories about the gods or the origin of religion. This means that we must be attentive to the different periods in which atheism more or less flourished, the interpretations by later Greeks and Romans of their predecessors, and the

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<sup>1</sup> In my contribution I will limit the notes as much as possible to the most recent, accessible literature and to matters pertaining to ancient atheism. For more information on the various 'atheists' discussed see the relevant literature, which is now easily consulted in *Der Neue Pauly* (Tübingen, 1996-2003)

<sup>2</sup> L. Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle: la religion de Rabelais* (Paris, 1942).

<sup>3</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1973<sup>2</sup>) 198-206 notes that sceptics were often aliens and strangers to the district.

reasons why contemporaries impute atheism to people who differ from them in religious opinion.

The Epicurean Philodemus (ca. 110-35 BC) classified the various kinds of atheists in antiquity as follows:

- (1) Those who say that it is unknown whether there are any gods or what they are like;
- (2) Those who say openly that the gods do not exist;
- (3) Those who clearly imply it.<sup>4</sup>

Although this classification is a fairly acceptable one, it stays at the level of ideas and neglects practising atheists. More seriously, it does not mention atheism as a labelling device to slander your opponents, be they religious or philosophical ones. That is why we do not follow Philodemus but divide our evidence into three periods: (1) the classical period; (2) the Hellenistic period which started to label earlier thinkers as atheists and developed a ‘soft’ atheism that tried to save the existence of the gods, and, finally, (3) the Roman period when the Christians were called *atheoi* by the pagans and vice versa. Given its interest for the history of atheism, we will concentrate on the classical period. In all cases, we will use the term ‘atheism’ rather loosely for those thinkers and people who denied the existence of the gods or put forward theories to explain the existence of the gods.<sup>5</sup>

It is not our intention to give an exhaustive listing of all people that have been called an atheist in antiquity. This has already been done in a very competent manner and needs not to be redone.<sup>6</sup> Atheism itself has also been studied repeatedly.<sup>7</sup> Yet recent publications of new papyri and re-editions of already published texts enable us to take a fresh look at the older Greek evidence and thus to sketch a better picture than was possible in most of the twentieth century.

### 1. *The classical period*

Atheism in Greece becomes visible especially in Athens in the second half of the fifth century, although the first ‘atheist’ was not from Athens. The first prominent philosopher that was later

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<sup>4</sup> *P. Herc.* 1428 cols. 14,32 – 15,8, cf. A. Henrichs, ‘Die Kritik der stoischen Theologie im *P.Hercul.* 1428’, *Cronache Ercolanesi* 4 (1974) 5-32 at 25; D. Obbink, *Philodemus, On Piety I* (Oxford, 1996) 1f.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Winiarczyk, ‘Methodisches zum antiken Atheismus’, *Rheinisches Museum* 133 (1900) 1-15 and ‘Antike Bezeichnungen der Gottlosigkeit und des Atheismus’, *ibidem* 135 (1992) 216-25.

<sup>6</sup> M. Winiarczyk, ‘Wer galt im Altertum als Atheist?’, *Philologus* 128 (1984) 157-83 and, with supplements and addenda, ‘Wer galt im Altertum als Atheist?, II’, *Philologus* 136 (1992) 306-10.

<sup>7</sup> P. Decharme, *La critique de traditions religieuses chez les grecs* (Paris, 1904); A.B. Drachman, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (Gyldendal, 1922); W. Nestle, ‘Atheismus’, *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum* 1 (Stuttgart, 1950) 866-70; W. Fahr, *Theous nomizein. Zum Problem der Anfänge des Atheismus bei den Griechen* (Hildesheim and New York, 1969); W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge, 1971) 226-49;

categorised as such was Protagoras (*ca.* 490-420 BC) from Abdera, a city in the north-east of Greece, where Democritus (*ca.* 460-400?), who could have developed into an atheist but apparently did not, was born. He was famous for what probably was the opening sentence of his work called ‘Concerning the Gods’, as in antiquity the titles of prose works often consisted of the opening words:<sup>8</sup>

Concerning the gods I am unable to discover whether they exist or not, or what they are like in form; for there are many hindrances to knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear from this quote that Protagoras was an agnostic rather than an atheist, as Cicero in his *De natura deorum* (I.1.2) still recognised. And indeed, during his life he was highly respected: Pericles, the leading Athenian politician in the middle of the fifth century, invited him to write the constitution of the panhellenic colony Thurii in Southern Italy (Heraclides Ponticus, fragment 150 Wehrli<sup>2</sup>) and Plato even noted in his *Meno* (91e) that Protagoras had lived out his life in high repute. Yet his fame soon took a turn for the worse, and already in the Hellenistic period notices started to appear that he himself had been condemned to death and that his book with the famous opening words was burnt in the market place.<sup>10</sup> Although these reports are probably fictitious, they developed into accusations of straightforward atheism in, at the latest, the second century AD in the Empiricist Sextus Empiricus (*Adversus Mathematicos* 9.50-1, 56) and the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenoanda (fragment 16 Smith), who may have derived his accusation even from Epicurus himself.<sup>11</sup>

Protagoras’ agnosticism can be explained only in the most general of terms. There is little known about his life and hardly anything about his intellectual formation. Yet we can say something about the intellectual climate he grew up in and the pre-conditions for his agnosticism. Protagoras belonged to the so-called Sophistic Movement, a loose term that denotes the critical intellectuals, in particular the philosophers of the second half of the fifth century BC.

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M. Winiarczyk, ‘Bibliographie zum antiken Atheismus’, *Elenchos* 10 (1989) 103-92.

<sup>8</sup> For the problem of early titles see most recently A. Dihle, ‘Ein früherer Buchtitel’, in S. Böhm and K.-V. v. Eicksted (eds), *Ithakê. Festschrift für Jörg Schäfer* (Würzburg, 2001) 171-4.

<sup>9</sup> Protagoras B 4 Diels/Kranz (= DK). All fragments are quoted from their standard editions.

<sup>10</sup> For the development of this legend see K.J. Dover, *The Greeks and Their Legacy* (Oxford, 1988) 142-45, 158; R. Parker, *Athenian Religion* (Oxford, 1996) 207 note 36.

<sup>11</sup> Obbink, *Philodemus, On Piety*, 355.

The Sophists were connected with books by their contemporaries,<sup>12</sup> and this points to literacy as an important condition for the development of critical philosophy. Its importance for philosophy becomes visible around 500 BC when Pythagoras (*ca.* 560-495 BC) was criticised by Xenophanes (B 7 DK: *ca.* 570-495 BC) in writing, and Heraclitus (B 129 DK: *ca.* 500 BC) even reproached him for having plundered many writings.<sup>13</sup>

The latter two influential philosophers also fiercely attacked the anthropomorphic gods of Homer and Hesiod, the authoritative Greek poets. Xenophanes even proclaimed ‘the one god, greatest among gods and humans’ (fragment B 23 DK). In other words, he and his contemporaries tried to introduce new ideas of the divine rather than abolishing the idea of the divine altogether. The situation started to change with Anaxagoras (*ca.* 500-428 BC), who was the first philosopher known to have settled in Athens, at the time the centre of intellectual life in Greece, probably in the middle of the 450s. According to the third-century AD Diogenes Laertius (2.7 = fragment A 1 DK), ‘he said that the sun was a red-hot mass of metal’. We may not think this revolutionary, but for the Athenians the sun was a god, Helios, and Anaxagoras’ observation stripped the sun from its divine nature.

When did Anaxagoras pronounce this statement? Unfortunately, his chronology is not at all assured.<sup>14</sup> Much of our evidence points to the years he came to Athens, but later accounts connect him with attempts to harm Pericles, and speak of a process caused by his ‘impiety’.<sup>15</sup> The trouble with these accounts is that mockery of the views of natural philosophers starts to appear in our texts only in the 420s. In his *Panoptai* (fragment 167 Kassel/Austin), which must have appeared shortly before 423 BC, the playwright Cratinus mocks the philosopher Hippon, who is later pictured as impious, because he had stated that the sky is a baking-cover.<sup>16</sup> In 423 BC, Aristophanes put on the *Clouds* and mocked the inhabitants of the ‘Reflectory’ (*phrontistêrion*) for espousing the same idea; Socrates even says: ‘I walk the air and contemplate

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<sup>12</sup> J. Mansfeld, *Mnemosyne* IV 33 (1980) 94 note 345; Bremmer, ‘Literacy and the Origins and Limitations of Greek Atheism’, in J. den Boeft and A. Kessels (eds.), *Actus. Studies in Honour of H.L.W. Nelson* (Utrecht, 1982) 43-56.

<sup>13</sup> Bremmer, ‘Rationalization and Disenchantment in Ancient Greece: Max Weber among the Pythagoreans and Orphics?’, in R. Buxton (ed.), *From Myth to Reason?* (Oxford, 1999) 71-83 at 78.

<sup>14</sup> For Anaxagoras’ chronology see the fair account by Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 209; D. Sider, *The Fragments of Anaxagoras* (Sankt Augustin, 2005<sup>2</sup>) 1-11.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Ephorus *FGrH* 70 F 196.

<sup>16</sup> S. Shapiro, ‘Hippon the atheist: the surprisingly intelligent views of Hippon of Samos’, *J. of Ancient Civilisation* 14 (1999) 111-23; note also Aristophanes, *Birds* 1000f.

the sun'.<sup>17</sup> In 421, another playwright of comedies, Eupolis, implicated even Protagoras in these ideas in his *Flatterers* of 421 BC by representing him as pontificating 'about the heavens' (fragment 157 Kassel/Austin), and in 414 Aristophanes let the chorus of his *Birds* say that people have to pay attention to them so that 'you may hear correctly from us all about the things on high' (690), which in the text seems connected with the only briefly later mentioned Prodicus (below).<sup>18</sup>

But it was not only the authors of comedy who took a jibe at the new philosophy. The tragedian Euripides, too, contributed to the general resentment by letting the chorus of an unknown play recite: 'who, seeing this, does not teach beforehand that his soul is considered a god, and does not hurl far from him the crooked deceits of talkers about the heavens, whose mad tongues make random throws about what is hidden, devoid of understanding'.<sup>19</sup> It is this connection between atheism and speculating about the nature of the heavens that also comes to the fore in Plato's *Apology* (18bc), where Socrates says that his accusers state:

There is a wise man called Socrates who has theories about the heavens and has investigated everything below the earth, and can make the weaker argument defeat the stronger. It is these people, gentlemen of the jury, the disseminators of these rumours, who are my dangerous accusers, because those who hear them suppose that anyone who inquires into such matters must be an atheist.<sup>20</sup>

This testimony from an early dialogue of Plato is most valuable, as it shows that speculating about the heavens was indeed already connected with atheism by Socrates' contemporaries.

We move in a different direction with the sophist Prodicus of Keos (ca. 465-395 BC). Unfortunately, next to nothing is known about the title, content and scope of the work in which he expounded his views. The best candidate is perhaps his *Horai* or seasons personified,<sup>21</sup> which must have appeared around 420 BC, as Prodicus' theory was parodied in Aristophanes' *Birds* of

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<sup>17</sup> Aristophanes, *Clouds* 225-9, 360, 490, 1284.

<sup>18</sup> N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes, Birds* (Oxford, 1995) 436, who compares Aristophanes, *Clouds* 360 and the Christian Epiphanius, *Against Heretics* 3.21.

<sup>19</sup> Euripides, fragment 913 Kannicht, tr. Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 209, adapted in the light of Kannicht's revised text.

<sup>20</sup> Plato's *Apology* 18bc, see also *Apology* 26d and *Laws* 967a.

<sup>21</sup> A. Henrichs, 'The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion: Prodicus as the Spiritual Father of the Isis Aretologies', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* [= *HSCP*] 88 (1984) 139-58.

414 BC and echoed by Euripides' *Bacchae* of 406 BC.<sup>22</sup> Although Prodicus was also one of those philosophers with the reputation of speculating 'about the heavens' (above), this was not his main claim to fame. In fact, his ideas were much more radical as, according to Philodemus, he maintained 'that the gods of popular belief do not exist nor do they know, but primitive man, [out of admiration, deified] the fruits of the earth and virtually everything that contributed to his existence'. The highly stylised character of the language suggests that this passage reflects rather closely Prodicus' very words.<sup>23</sup> But what did Prodicus actually mean?

Renewed attention to the fragmentary papyri that are our best source for Prodicus' ideas has shown that Prodicus proposed a two-stage theory of the origin of polytheism. First, primitive man started to call 'gods' those elements of nature on which he was most dependent, such as sun and moon, rivers and fruits. Subsequently, those humans who had been the main benefactors as inventors of the proper usage of the fruits of the earth, viz. bread and wine, Demeter and Dionysos, were likewise called 'gods' and worshipped as such. Evidently, there had been a time without gods yet for Prodicus, even though man was already there.

Comparison with other cultural theories of his time suggests that Prodicus located the beginning of religion in agriculture. Now the advent of Demeter and Dionysos with their gifts of bread and wine was part of Attic mythology. In fact, Athens prided itself as having given agriculture to the Greek world.<sup>24</sup> Prodicus may well have heard about this claim on his island Keos, which was in easy reach of Attica, but he may also have been influenced by his frequent stays in Athens, where he did not forget his own interests while being ambassador of his island. The fact that he appeared before the Athenian Council and had impressed them by his eloquence almost certainly guarantees that he had well prepared his case by studying Attic mythology.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to Prodicus, the only other fifth-century intellectuals in whose work clear atheistic statements can be found are Euripides and Critias. Unfortunately, ancient biographical evidence for Euripides' atheism is based primarily on inferences from his poetry, which were elaborated, often with a degree of malice, by writers of the fourth century and after. Even the

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<sup>22</sup> Euripides, *Bacchae* 274-85, where the seer Teiresias hails Demeter and Dionysos as the respective inventors of bread and wine cf. A. Henrichs, 'Two Doxographical Notes: Democritus and Prodicus on Religion', *HSCP* 79 (1975) 93-123 at 110 note 64.

<sup>23</sup> Philodemus, *PHerc.* 1428, fragment 19, tr. Henrichs, cf. Henrichs, 'Two Doxographical Notes', 107-15, whose interpretation I here follow, including Henrichs' second thoughts about the translation in his 'The Atheism of Prodicus', *Cronache Ercolanesi* 6 (1976) 15-21.

<sup>24</sup> F. Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit* (Berlin, 1974) 22-39; Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 99.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Cratylus* 384b, *Hippias Major* 282c.

tradition of Euripides' trial for atheism is probably either derived from comedy or invented in analogy of the trial of Socrates.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand these inferences had some material to work from.<sup>27</sup> In the end, though, there is only one passage with a clear atheistic content and it pays to quote it in full. In a fragment that has been handed down in Christian times from the *Bellerophon*, a tragedy that was probably performed around 430 BC, Bellerophon himself states early in the play:

Does someone say there are indeed gods in heaven? There are not, there are not, if a man is willing not to rely foolishly on the antiquated reasoning. Consider for yourselves, do not base your opinion on words of mine. I say myself that tyranny kills very many men and deprives them of their possessions; and that tyrants break their oaths to ransack cities, and in doing this they are more prosperous under heaven than men who live quietly in reverence from day to day. I know too of small cities doing honour to the gods that are subject to larger, more impious ones, because they are overcome by a more numerous army. I think that, if a man were lazy and prayed to the gods and did not go gathering his livelihood with his hand, you would [here is a lacuna in the text] fortify religion, and ill-fortune.<sup>28</sup>

The statement is a radical expression of a feeling encountered more often in Euripides that the irreligious prosper, whereas the pious suffer.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the gods have no power and religion is imaginary. Such a radical stance must be one of those that elicited Aristophanes' scorn,<sup>30</sup> but at the end of the play the traditional order was re-established and Bellerophon's atheistic declaration more than outweighed by his pitiable lot. In other words, the statement is the expression of a character in the play, not the opinion of the playwright himself.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For the texts see R. Kannicht, *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, Vol. 5.1 (Göttingen, 2004) T 98-100, 166c, 170-171ab.

<sup>27</sup> A. Dihle, 'Das Satyrspiel 'Sisyphos',' *Hermes* 105 (1977) 28-42 at 33; M.R. Lefkowitz, 'Was Euripides an atheist?', *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* III 5 (1987) 149-66 and "'Impiety" and "Atheism" in Euripides' Dramas', *Classical Quarterly* 39 (1989) 70-82.

<sup>28</sup> Euripides, fragment 286 Kannicht, tr. Collard, slightly adapted. The last line of the fragment may not originally belong to it. For the date see C. Collard *et al.*, Euripides, *Selected Fragmentary Plays I* (Warminster, 1995) 101.

<sup>29</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1102ff., *Scyrii*, fragment 684 Kannicht.

<sup>30</sup> Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusai* 448-52, *Frogs* 888-94.

<sup>31</sup> C. Riedweg, 'The "atheistic" fragment from Euripides' Bellerophon (286 N)', *Illinois Classical Studies* 15 (1990) 39-53.



There could be a second passage, but its authorship is highly debated. It used to be ascribed to the sophist Critias (ca. 450-403 BC), who was one of the most unscrupulous members of the Thirty Tyrants, a group of aristocrats that had seized power at the end of the Peloponnesian War and was remembered for its rule of terror. As such, the cynical tone of the piece seemed to fit perfectly the image of its author in the historiographical tradition. On the other hand, Critias is mentioned only once as the author of this passage, whereas Euripides is mentioned twice. In fact, several recent studies have persuasively argued that it is completely out of character of the genre of the satyr play that a character would develop here a highly provocative theory for the very first time instead of parodying it, as indeed seems to be the case here – the more so when the passage does not reflect the opinion of just one philosopher but those of several. Moreover, a character that tries to persuade somebody that a crime without witnesses will remain unpunished fits a satyr play much better than a tragedy. Finally, the passage contains a number of words that occur only in Euripides. Consequently, the passage could have belonged to either Euripides' *Sisyphus* (415 BC) or, perhaps more attractively, his *Autolykos A* (date unknown).<sup>32</sup> Yet the recent authoritative edition of Euripides' fragments has not accepted these arguments and once again ascribes the fragment to Critias.<sup>33</sup> This is probably correct, since the new edition of Philodemus' *On Piety* (519-41) shows that Epicurus already concluded that what Critias himself had said about the gods 'made it impossible for them as generally conceived to exist'; in fact, lines 539-40 and 1185-1217 of *On Piety* exhibit vestigial echoes of the *Sisyphus* account. In other words, Critias' reputation as an atheist predates the Hellenistic biographers.<sup>34</sup> Given its interest for the history of atheism I will quote the piece in full:

Once there was a time when the life of human beings was disordered,  
and similar to that of animals and ruled by force,  
when there was no reward for the virtuous  
nor any punishment for the wicked.  
And then I think that humans decided to establish laws

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<sup>32</sup> See the very detailed discussion of N. Pechstein, *Euripides Satyrographos* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1998) 289-343; note also M. Davies, 'Sisyphus and the Invention of Religion', *Bull. Inst. Class. Stud.* 36 (1989) 16-32; M.C. Santoro, 'Sisifo e il presunto ateismo di Crizia', *Orpheus* 15 (1994) 419-29 and 'Il fr. 19 Snell del "Sisifo" di Crizia come testimonianza della concezione socratica del divino: Crizia "accusatore" di Socrate?', *Elenchos* 18 (1997) 257-76; R. Krumeich *et al.*, *Das griechische Satyrspiel* (Darmstadt, 1999) 552-61 (text, commentary and German translation by N. Pechstein).

<sup>33</sup> See Kannicht, *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, 2.658f.

<sup>34</sup> Obbink, *Philodemus, On Piety*, 355.

as punishers so that Justice (*Dikê*) might be ruler  
[lacuna] and keep Crime and Violence (*Hybris*) as slave.  
And they punished only those who kept doing wrong.  
Then, since the laws held open deeds of violence in check,  
they continued to commit them in secret; then, I believe,  
a wise and clever-minded man  
invented for mortals a fear of the gods, so that  
there might be a deterrent for the wicked, even if  
they act or say or think anything in secret.  
Hence from this source he explained the divine:  
there is a deity (*daimôn*) who enjoys imperishable life,  
hearing and seeing with his mind, his thought  
and attention on all things, bearer of a divine nature.  
He will hear whatever is said among mortals  
and be able to see whatever is done.  
If you silently plot evil,  
this will not escape the gods. For they  
[lacuna] have knowledge. With these words  
he explained the most delightful part of the teaching  
and hid the truth with a false tale.  
He said the gods dwell there  
where he – by placing them there – could frighten human beings most,  
whence, as he knew, fears come to mortals  
and troubles for their wretched life; that is,  
from the vault on high, where they beheld  
the lightnings and fearful blows  
of thunder and heaven with its starry eyes,  
the beautiful, brilliantly decorated building of Time, the wise craftsman.  
Whence too the brilliant mass of the sun strides and  
the liquid rain falls on the earth.  
[4 interpolated lines]  
It was thus, I think, that someone first persuaded

mortals to believe that there exists a race of gods.<sup>35</sup>

In this long passage, which most likely was pronounced by Sisyphus, the cleverest Greek in mythology, we see the first occurrence of the theory that religion (here: the gods) was invented to ensure good behaviour of humans. It is unique in its time, but it is hardly imaginable that a playwright would put forward such a theory in a play meant to entertain his audience without any previous knowledge of it among its spectators. Now it is clear that several aspects of this passage must have been familiar to the audience. First, the picture of an animal-like situation at the beginning of humankind was a recurrent topos in descriptions and parodies of the primeval situation by contemporaries of Euripides.<sup>36</sup> Second, the opposition between public assent to laws but private freedom from restraint can be paralleled in the work of the contemporary sophist Antiphon, who stated that justice would be most advantageous to a man if ‘he were to regard the laws as great in the presence of witnesses, but nature as great when deprived of witnesses’ (F 44(a), I, 13-23 Pendrick). Third, Democritus’ (A 75 DK) institutors of religion relied on human fear of celestial phenomena and, fourthly, Prodicus had also advanced a two-stage theory of the development of religion (above). Yet the theory espoused in our passage goes further and is more cynical than anything proposed in our surviving texts.

Critias’ (or Euripides’) drama well illustrates a gradual change in mood regarding the gods in Athens in the later fifth century. There was worse to come. In 415 the Athenians undertook a major expedition to Sicily to conquer Syracuse, and our sources still enable us to observe the nervous mood of the Athenian population at that time.<sup>37</sup> It was at this precarious moment that the highly guarded secrecy of the Eleusinian Mysteries twice came under attack. One morning, shortly before the Athenian fleet was due to sail to Sicily, it was discovered that nearly all the images of the god Hermes in public places had been mutilated. Those denounced were also accused of having profaned the Eleusinian Mysteries.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the mutilators had parodied the Mysteries (if they actually had done so) in private circumstances, around the same time Diagoras, a citizen of the island Melos, mocked the Mysteries openly after the Athenians had treated his home

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<sup>35</sup> Critias, *TGrF* 43 F 19I, tr. Ch. Kahn, ‘Greek Religion and Philosophy in the Sisyphus Fragment’, *Phronesis* 42 (1997) 247-62 at 247-8, adapted in the light of Pechstein’s translation and commentary (note 32).

<sup>36</sup> See most recently Pechstein, *Euripides Satyrophos*, 323f.

<sup>37</sup> For the mood see also Bremmer, ‘Prophets, Seers, and Politics in Greece, Israel, and Early Modern Europe’, *Numen* 40 (1993) 150-83 at 170.

<sup>38</sup> Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 206; F. Graf, ‘Der Mysterienprozess’, in L. Burckhardt and J. von Ungern-

island badly.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, as the eleventh-century Arab Mubashshir, whose account - directly or indirectly - seems to derive from the erudite Athenian Apollodorus (*ca.* 180-120 BC), notes:

When he [viz. Dhiyaghuras *al-mariq*, or “Diagoras the heretic, or apostate”] persisted in his hypocrisy [or “dissimulation”], his unbelief and his atheism, the ruler, the wise men [or philosophers, *hukama*] and leaders of Attica sought to kill him. The ruler Charias the Archon [Khariyus al-Arkun (415-4)] set a price on his head [literally: “spent money”, *badhal*] and commanded that it should be proclaimed among the people: “He who apprehends Diagoras from Melos [*Maylun*] and kills him will be rewarded with a large sum [*badra*, traditionally a leather bag containing 1000 or 10,000 dirhams]”.<sup>40</sup>

This is a pretty exact report of the events, since the Athenians promised one talent of silver to anyone who killed Diagoras, and two to anyone who caught him alive. Now Diagoras is already mocked in Hermippus’ comedy *Moirai* (fragment 43 Kassel-Austin), which was written before 430. In Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (830), which even in its revised version cannot be later than *ca.* 418 BC, Socrates is called the ‘Melian’ for espousing ‘atheistic’ views. This must mean that Diagoras had been living safely in Athens for many years despite his irreligious views - a fact which also shines through in the Arab report. However, his mocking went too far, and Epicurus already mentions Diagoras together with Critias and Prodicus as the arch-atheists.<sup>41</sup> In that capacity Diagoras would remain notorious all through antiquity.<sup>42</sup>

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Sternberg (eds.), *Grosse Prozesse im antiken Athen* (Munich, 2000) 114-27.

<sup>39</sup> As is persuasively argued by C. Auffarth, ‘Aufnahme und Zurückweisung “Neuer Götter” im spätclassischen Athen: Religion gegen die Krise, Religion in der Krise?’, in W. Eder (ed.), *Die athenische Demokratie im 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Stuttgart, 1995) 337-65; F.E. Romer, ‘Atheism, Impiety and the Limos Melios in Aristophanes’ *Birds*’, *American J. of Philology* 115 (1994) 351-65 and ‘Diagoras the Melian (Diod. Sic. 13.6.7)’, *Classical Weekly* 89 (1995-96) 393-401.

<sup>40</sup> Mubashshir *apud* F. Rosenthal, *Greek Philosophy in the Arab World* (London, 1990) Ch. I. p. 33 (= *Orientalia* 6, 1937, 33), tr. Gert Jan van Gelder, whom I thank for his comments and fresh translation of the passage; note also Melanthius *FGrH* 326 F3; Craterus *FGrH* 342 F16. For the date see Diodorus Siculus 13.6,7 and, independently, Mubashshir.

<sup>41</sup> Philodemus, *On Piety*, 525 Obbink.

<sup>42</sup> For Diagoras see most recently M. Winiarczyk, *Diagorae Melii et Theodori Cyrenaei reliquiae* (Leipzig, 1981), to be read with his ‘Ergänzungen zu Diagoras und Theodoros’, *Philologus* 133 (1989) 151-52; Bremmer, ‘Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece’, in H. Kippenberg and G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment* (Leiden, 1995) 61-78; Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 208; Obbink, *Philodemus, On Piety*, 525-26; J. Hordern, ‘Philodemus and the poems of Diagoras’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* (= *ZPE*) 136 (2001) 33-38. The recent attempts by R. Janko, ‘The physicist as hierophant: Aristophanes, Socrates and the authorship of the Derveni Papyrus’, *ZPE* 118 (1997) 61-94 and ‘The

More famous than Diagoras, if less for his atheism, was Socrates (469-399 BC). It is clear from Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates in the *Clouds* that already in that time the latter was considered to be something like an atheist; this is also suggested by his frequent association with Euripides in comedy.<sup>43</sup> It is therefore not wholly surprising that in 399 BC the Athenians charged Socrates as follows: 'Socrates does wrong by not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledges, and introducing other, new powers (*daimonia*). He also does wrong by corrupting the young'.<sup>44</sup> The process of Socrates still poses many questions, but it is certain that for many Athenians Socrates had moved too close to those who questioned the traditional gods.<sup>45</sup>

It is only about a decade after Socrates' death, in Plato (*ca.* 429-347 BC), that we start to find the Greek word *atheos*, which originally was used in the meaning 'godless, without gods, godforsaken', denoting intellectuals who denied the gods of the city or any form of deity. This particular meaning may of course be slightly older, but its date fits our impression of the intellectual climate of the last decades of the fifth century.<sup>46</sup> The increasing criticism of the gods by philosophers and poets had eroded the traditional beliefs in the gods and some intellectuals drew the inevitable consequence. Yet the combined power of traditional belief and Plato's influential theism made that 'real' atheists would always remain a rare phenomenon in the Greek world.

## 2. The Hellenistic period

The death of Socrates constituted the end of an era. Most philosophers had got the message and remained pretty careful in expounding their views. There was the occasional exception, such as Theodorus of Cyrene (*ca.* 340-250 BC), who is mentioned most with Diagoras as the atheist *par excellence*. However, our evidence mainly exists of anecdotes, and it is hard to reconstruct his theology.<sup>47</sup>

In the Hellenistic period two important developments are noticeable. First, we now start

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Derveni papyrus (Diagoras of Melos, "Apopyrgizontes logoi"?): a new translation', *Classical Philology* 96 (2001) 1-32 to make Diagoras into the author of the Derveni papyrus are refuted by G. Betegh, *The Derveni papyrus: cosmology, theology, and interpretation* (Cambridge, 2004) 373-80.

<sup>43</sup> Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1491, fragment 392 Kassel/Austin; Teleclides, fragments 41-2 Kassel/Austin.

<sup>44</sup> Favorinus *apud* Diogenes Laertius 2.40, tr. Parker; note also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.1, *Apology* 10; Plato, *Apology* 24b8-c1, *Eutyphron* 3b; Philodemus, *On Piety*, 1696-7 Obbink.

<sup>45</sup> For the charge and the process see now Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 199-207; P. Millett, 'The Trial of Socrates Revisited', *European Review of History* 12 (2005) 23-62.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Apology* 26c, *Laws* 12.967a, cf. Henrichs, 'Atheism of Prodicus', 20.

<sup>47</sup> M. Winarczyk, 'Theodoros *ho atheos*', *Philologus* 125 (1981) 64-94; *Diagorae Melii et Theodori Cyrenaei*, and 'Ergänzungen'; G. Giannantoni, *Socraticorum reliquiae*, 3 vols (Rome, 1983-85) I.301-15, III. 173-76.

to find a listing of atheists in an *index atheorum*. The earliest example is by Epicurus (341-270 BC) in the twelfth book of his *On Nature*, which must have been written around 300 BC.<sup>48</sup> He probably included his criticisms of Protagoras, Prodicus, Critias, and possibly Diagoras, as ‘raving lunatics’ in the context of how men first came to believe in and worship the gods. Epicurus himself was not an atheist, but later philosophers, probably the Stoics, attacked the premises of his physical system, inferred that the gods had no necessary place in his system and happily labelled him as an atheist.<sup>49</sup> After Epicurus, at the end of the second century BC, the list was extended by the Academic sceptic Clitomachus in his treatise *On atheism*.<sup>50</sup> He was an adherent of the most important representative of the sceptical Academy, Carneades (ca. 214-128 BC) who probably had alleged that Epicurus did not really mean what he said about the gods.<sup>51</sup> In turn he was followed by Cicero in his *De natura deorum* (I.1.63), Pseudo-Aëtius (ca. 50-100 AD),<sup>52</sup> and, towards the end of the second century AD, by Sextus Empiricus (*Adversus Mathematicos* 9.50-8).

The second development was the instant success of Prodicus’ theory about the gods, witness its reflection after Euripides (above) in later poets and historians. Yet his most famous follower lived a good deal later.<sup>53</sup> In the first quarter of the third century BC, the Alexandrian Euhemerus wrote his *Sacred Record* in which he turned the Hesiodic succession of Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus into a dynasty of mortal kings that inhabited a fictitious island called Panchaea.<sup>54</sup> It was the aim of Euhemerus to keep the gods but to present them in a form in which sophisticated people could believe. We have only a few fragments left,<sup>55</sup> but Sextus Empiricus seems to well summarize his work in that he said that ‘the traditional gods were important

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<sup>48</sup> D. Obbink, ‘The atheism of Epicurus’, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30 (1989) 187-223; Obbink, *Philodemus, On Piety* 1-4, 14-7.

<sup>49</sup> Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.123, cf. Obbink, *Philodemus, On Piety*, 352.

<sup>50</sup> M. Winiarczyk, ‘Der erste Atheistenkatalog des Kleitomachos’, *Philologus* 120 (1976) 32-46 and ‘Bibliographie’, 185f.

<sup>51</sup> Obbink, ‘Atheism of Epicurus’, 218-20.

<sup>52</sup> D. Runia, ‘Atheists in Aëtius: text, translation and comments on *De placitis* 1, 7, 1-10’, *Mnemosyne* IV 49 (1996) 542-76. Note that the name Aëtius was attached to this treatise only later, cf. Bremmer, ‘Aëtius, Arius Didymus and the Transmission of Doxography’, *Mnemosyne* IV 51 (1998) 154-60.

<sup>53</sup> Henrichs, ‘The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion’, 148-52.

<sup>54</sup> M. Winiarczyk, ‘Ennius’ Euhemerus sive Sacra historia’, *Rheinisches Museum* 137 (1994) 274-91 and *Euhemerus von Messene. Leben, Werk und Nachwirkung* (Munich and Leipzig, 2002); A. Baumgarten, ‘Euhemerus’ eternal gods or How not to be embarrassed by Greek mythology’, in *Classical studies in honor of David Sohlberg* (Ramat Gan, 1996) 91-103.

<sup>55</sup> See now M. Winiarczyk, *Euhemeri Messenii Reliquiae* (Stuttgart, 1991).

mortals and therefore deified by their contemporaries and considered gods'.<sup>56</sup> Euhemerus was particularly successful in Rome where the poet Ennius (239-169 BC) translated his work around 200 BC into Latin prose, perhaps in preparation of a spiritual climate favourable to the deification of Scipio Africanus, the victor of Carthage and Hannibal. Ennius did not make a literal translation, but he expanded the original somewhat and explained the Greek names to his Roman public, where his work proved to be highly successful and was read by Varro (116-27 BC) and Cicero and, eventually, furnished ammunition to the Christians.

The ever-expanding lists with atheists should not conceal the fact that in historical reality no practising atheists are mentioned in our sources for the period. In the first two centuries of our era, atheism had mainly become a label to be used against philosophical opponents but not to be taken too seriously. Even the Jews knew how to play the game and reproached the Egyptians for their atheism.<sup>57</sup> A new development becomes visible in the middle of the second century AD. In his *Life of Alexander of Abonouteichos*, the biography of a religious entrepreneur who had founded a new cult in Abonouteichos, a small town in Pontus in Asia Minor, the malicious satirist Lucian mentions that Alexander had excluded from his cult the 'atheist, Christian and Epicurean' (25, 38). The grave consequences of such an attitude become visible in Smyrna. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which probably dates from about 160 AD, a member of a group of Christian martyrs, the youth Germanicus, dragged the animal that was supposed to kill him, perhaps a leopard, on top of him. In reaction, the crowd shouted 'Away with these atheists. Go and get Polycarp!', the old bishop of the Christians (3.2). When Polycarp was caught and interrogated by the Roman governor, the latter tried to save him and asked him: 'Recant. Say, "Away with the atheists!"'. Polycarp looked at the crowd, shook his fist at them and said: 'Away with the atheists!' (9.2). He was not the only martyr confronted with the charge. When in 177 AD a group of martyrs was executed in Lyon, one of them, the youth Vettius Epagathus, requested a hearing from the prefect in order that he could explain that the Christians were 'innocent of atheism and impiety'.<sup>58</sup>

The accusation of 'atheism' must have been very widespread, since the Christian apologists often did their best to rebut the charge.<sup>59</sup> Towards the end of the second century AD,

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<sup>56</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 9.51, tr. Henrichs.

<sup>57</sup> Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 25.

<sup>58</sup> Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.1.9-10.

<sup>59</sup> Aristides 4; Athenagoras 3-5, 10; Minucius Felix 8.2, 15ff.; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.1.1.4; E. Fascher, 'Der Vorwurf der Gottlosigkeit in der Auseinandersetzung bei Juden, Griechen und Christen', in O. Betz *et al.* (eds.), *Abraham unser Vater: Juden und Christen im Gespräch über die Bibel* (Leiden,

Tatian (*Oratio ad Graecos* 27.1) even mentions that the pagans called the Christians *atheotatous*, ‘the most atheist ones’! Only Justinus in his *Apology* (1.6), written about 154-55 AD, tells us which opponent had made the charge. It was the Cynic Crescens, who would also be responsible for his martyrdom. Justinus admitted that the Christians were indeed atheists as regards their attitude to the pagan gods. It is indeed hard to see how the pagans could have thought differently, given that the Christians had no temples, statues of deities or performed sacrifices. In the eyes of the pagan philosopher Celsus (*ca.* 180), quoted by Origen (184-254) in his *Contra Celsum* (7.62: written *ca.* 249), this made the Christians comparable to other uncivilised peoples who had no gods either, such as the barbaric Scythians or nomadic Lybians. The charge had a long life and survived even into the fourth century.<sup>60</sup> It is hardly surprising that the Jews suffered from the same accusations, even though they had a temple.<sup>61</sup> Yet their separate position made them vulnerable too, and Julian the Apostate (*Contra Galileos* 43) even stated that the Christians had inherited their atheism from the Jews.

### 3. The Christian period

The Christians were not slow in taking up the possibility of labelling opponents as Justinus already called fellow Christians, with whom he disagreed, ‘atheist and impious heretics’.<sup>62</sup> Yet it took them some time before they were able to develop a strategy to refute the accusation of atheism. In his *Apologeticus* (24) of about 200 AD, Tertullian (*ca.* 160-240) tried to refute the charge by arguing that the pagan gods were no gods at all but demons. Consequently, the Christians could not possibly be atheists! Some Christians now even tried to turn the tables. Origen charged the pagans of an ‘atheist polytheism’ or an ‘polytheist atheism’.<sup>63</sup> Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 150-215) went even further and stated that the real atheists were those who did not believe in God or His Providence,<sup>64</sup> the prime example of those being Epicurus. Rather surprisingly, he tried to rehabilitate the ‘canonical’ atheists, such as Diagoras, Euhemerus and

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1963) 78-105; N. Brox, ‘Zum Vorwurf des Atheismus gegen die Alte Kirche’, *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 75 (1966) 274-82; P.F. Beatrice, ‘L’accusation d’athéisme contre les chrétiens’, in M. Narcy and É. Rebillard (eds.), *Hellénisme et christianisme* (Villeneuve d’Ascq, 2004) 133-52. Still valuable, A. von Harnack, *Der Vorwurf des Atheismus in den drei ersten Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig, 1905).

<sup>60</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 1.2.2-4, 3.13.4; Arnobius 1.26.3; Athanasius, *Contra gentiles* 1 and *De inc. Verbi* 1.2.

<sup>61</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Contra Apionem* II.65, 79, 148.

<sup>62</sup> Justinus, *Dialogus contra Tryphonem* 80.3 Marcovich.

<sup>63</sup> Origen, *Exhortatio ad martyrium* 5, 32 and *Contra Celsum* 1.1, 3.73.

<sup>64</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.1.6.1, 6.1.1.1 and 15.122.3, 7.1.1.1 and 9.54.3-4; *Protrepicus* 2.23.1.



Theodorus, by claiming that they had at least recognised the foolishness of the pagan ideas!<sup>65</sup>

It is time to come to a close. Our survey has shown that antiquity is important for the history of atheism in, at least, three respects. First, the Greeks invented the term *atheos*, which was taken over by the Romans as *atheus*, and thus reached the Middle Ages and modern times. Second, the Greeks discovered theoretical atheism, which ‘can be seen to be one of the most important events in the history of religion’.<sup>66</sup> Third, Greeks and Romans, pagans and Christians, soon discovered the utility of the term ‘atheist’ as a means to label opponents. The invention of atheism would open a new road to intellectual freedom, but also enabled people to label opponents in a new way. Progress rarely comes without a cost.

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<sup>65</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.24.2.

<sup>66</sup> W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1985) 315.