

Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), x + 292 pp., US \$16.95 (paper).

More than Paul Veyne's witty and insightful *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (1988), Whitmarsh's *Battling the Gods* enters a different fray, one that is pertinent to a world where religious conflicts rage between civilizations and in which the pressure of fundamentalisms of many stripes weight heavily on young minds devoid of historical contexts. Perhaps a more accurate title would be "Belittling the Gods," as the volume is not so much about contesting theologies or mythologies. Rather the work explores ways within a pre-Christian world to avoid the mixing of politics with civil cults and then imposing legal protocols of exclusion or extirpation for those practitioners who refuse to think in ways that uphold the state order. The lower-case gods are not monotheistic creators of the universe, nor are they givers of primeval laws in sacred documents nor spiritual saviors from a world gone mad and rotten with sin. They are all sorts of super- and sub-natural beings, processes and unconscious phantasms projected into the visible and tactile world.

Atheism, whether meaning god-forsaken or god-forsaking, is not a new idea, whether taken as a passive philosophical position from which to envisage a world without gods, spirits, sins and guilt-feelings or as an aggressive movement to silence the raucous sounds of fanaticism or to pull the comforting dummies from the mouths of the naïve and credulous. But while in our age we have the insights and effects of science and technology to bolster our arguments against delusions of spiritual absolutes, the ancient thinkers could, at best, clear the air of incense and the stench of burning sacrificial beasts in order to lay the groundwork for what eventually becomes scientific discourses and experiments. At worst they could engage the imaginations in flights of fancy – challenging the godlings and their minions, seeking to usurp their place through affirmations of one's own divine powers, or founding new cities without poets or priests. Paganism, polytheism, civic religions, whatever they might be called today, these cults and mysteries did not have coherent beliefs, sacred documents or vested authority to monitor

private beliefs and moral proclivities. Wars there were aplenty and debates in the middle of the *fora* or under the shade of the *stoa*, but not inquisitions or even ducking stools.

Refreshingly clear-headed and well-phrased, this is history as she ought to be written, without annoying jargon or intrusive moralizing. Not all ancient Greeks believed in the Olympian or local gods, saw the myths chanted in epics, enacted on the tragic stage, or embedded in colors or forms of art as true, nor felt any guilt for their skepticism—or even feared the opprobrium of the community. But Whitmarsh assures us it behoved them all to know the common body of knowledge and to recognize the efficacy of the social bonding implied by these stories of supernatural beings and actions. Almost all analogies drawn between monotheistic religions and the Hellenic concepts and practices are misleading if not outright wrong, and it was as much for West European thinkers to untangle themselves from the superstitions and myths of their own Christian cultures as it was for nineteenth-century scholars to devise concepts and paradigms free of Catholic and Protestant categories of thought to begin to see what the pre-Christian world was all about.

While not focusing on the problems of Paganism in the antique world, this book does present a clear and cogent overview—and indeed an often detailed and probing examination—of the relevant texts and artefacts of ancient religions. Because a non-academic publishing house like Knopf knows that too many notes can turn off the once idealized “Common Reader,” this book provides just enough evidence and discussion in endnotes to prompt an educated audience into distinguishing between Whitmarsh’s nuanced overviews and syntheses of modern scholarship (which form the bulk of the text) and new insights he has (of which there seem quite a few) to clear away stumbling blocks and to update or deepen received opinions of our own day’s historiography, *Battling the Gods* can nevertheless be recommended to specialist and non-specialist alike. Moreover the author at several points draws on very recent discoveries of lost documents, decodings of monumental inscriptions and interpretations of archaeological features to provide new insights into an often neglected field.

Those readers particularly (or exclusively) interested in Pagan studies, however, may find themselves having to think through more carefully than usual how Whitmarsh’s discussions of atheism are applicable to their needs. The final chapter shows that to a great

extent it is Christianity that created the notion of Paganism in our normative sense. Before the transformation of religion into a body of dogmatic beliefs whose faith had to be held up against official standards, *atheism* was a fairly plastic term, one not always negative, and *pagans* were people in the countryside, away from the sophisticated ideas and practices of the cities, whose own cults of sacrifice and localized ideas about who and what gods were seemed at worst quaint and superficial.

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