



# REVIEW: BATTLING THE GODS. ATHEISM IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

*Posted on July 1, 2017 by C.B. Forde*



***It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates everything to itself, as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by everything you see, hear, read, or understand (Chapter 1.XLIV). Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy.***



Atheism strives to be the next “religion” of the West, as promulgated by its [evangelists](#), who declare God to be a delusion and propound faith in science, which alone embodies everything that people will ever need for life and happiness. Religion, they say, is superstition, which humanity has simply outgrown.

It was Wittgenstein who made a crucial observation in his [Tractatus](#): ““...even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all.”

Science fails whenever humanity needs more than bread to live, which is why people have always held the belief that they are greater than their body, for they have a soul.

Certainly, some have denied this expression and concluded that beyond the physical there is only the unknown.

It was the Greek philosophical tradition which first produced such incredulity and which the Polish scholar, [Marek Winiarczyk](#), spent a lifetime researching, as he built on the foundations laid by both [Adolf von Harnack](#) and [Anders Bjorn Drachmann](#).

This philosophical denial is not equivalent to contemporary atheism, however, since known ancient doubters could not abandon transcendence (as expressed in the question of the [One and the many](#)). For them, transcendence meant the totality of being outside the self, namely, other people, other creatures, and the entire cosmos (which included the gods).

*all strawmen require monolithic simplicity*

Thus, ancient doubters could only question, or deny, the totality outside the self - but this is not atheism.

What lay beyond the material realm was never denied. “Nothing escapes the divine,” said the philosopher [Epicharmus of Syracuse](#), and [Heraclitus](#) observed, “Human nature has no knowledge; divine nature does.”

The tradition of doubting totality beyond the self begins with the [Pre-Socratic philosophers](#). But while they questioned the traditional (Homeric) structures of belief (the gods), they could not deny transcendence, from which all things were created, including the gods.

In effect, they were speculative thinkers, who sought to get beyond the shortcomings of their polytheism in order to understand the One (the transcendent precondition of the material world).

Indeed, the various gods were an [embarrassment](#) to the Greco-Roman philosophers, who had achieved great sophistication of thought, but lived in a culture that worshipped deities that could be no more than wilful human beings.

*why does an atheist demand Christian ethics?*

These philosophers termed this transcendence the [apeiron](#), or the Undefined, the Unbounded, which guaranteed the existence of all creatures (the many in the material realm).

By way of the Socratic tradition, such understanding veered into the clarity of Judeo-Christian philosophy, whereby the [apeiron](#) is God, who is beyond all creation, as necessity, while also being universally present – [the first and final cause](#) (as [Thomas Aquinas](#) states).

Thus, the Greco-Roman doubters were not atheists in any modern sense of the term (not even the ancient [Skeptics](#)), for their doubt was a step towards knowing a greater reality beyond the gods.

In the [words](#) of [Sextus Empiricus](#), “the Skeptic does not frame his life as a man according to the doctrine which he professes as a philosopher.” Life cannot be lived by denying the [apeiron](#).

Modern-day atheism, in fact, is deeply [grounded](#) in Christianity, for it cannot think beyond the structures that Christianity has established - it can only work to deny them, and thereby establish [scientism](#). Thus, present-day atheism is simply a Christian [heresy](#).

To be specific, atheism has a very clear lineage – Cartesian [separatism](#), Enlightenment [libertinism](#), Hegelian [development](#), Darwinist [determinism](#), Nietzschean [will to power](#), Marxian [materialism and idealism](#), [existentialism](#), [fatalism](#), and the Heideggerian [impasse](#).

This convoluted process may easily be simplified as, [nihilism](#).

[Dawkins](#) and his ill-tutored ilk aside, proper atheism is the erasure of the question of God – it is not simply the denial of God for lack of proof (as commonly misunderstood). This means that God is [impossible](#) within space and time, because there cannot be a precondition to physical things - the many do not need the One.

In Greco-Roman philosophy, however, the question of the One (God) is never erased – it cannot be erased, because being is impossible without preconditions. Thus, again, there was no atheism in the ancient world.

Tim Whitmarsh argues otherwise in his book, *Battling the Gods. Atheism in the Ancient World*, by claiming that present-day atheism is the same as "ancient atheism."

It has to be said at the outset that most chapters of this book read like extended lectures notes, likely thrown in to give girth to an otherwise rather lean output. For example, why is a lengthy geography lesson on the Greek peninsula included, followed by the tedium of a crash course in the entire breadth of the history of ancient Greece? Indeed, what do the Minoans and the Macedonians have to do with atheism?

*moral excellence through wisdom*

The book seems like some twenty-page academic journal article puffed up into a full-blown book.

Whitmarsh is a professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, who self-identifies as "fiercely secular," and as a "New Atheist: "Is there any synagogue, mosque or church where the ideas of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris are expounded seriously and constructively?"

(Whitmarsh fails to mention why such explanations would be serious and constructive, or even necessary, since none of his three "saints" can hold a candle to [Maimonides](#), [Avicenna](#), let alone the sublime [Thomas Aquinas](#)).

The context in which Whitmarsh writes his book is postmodernism, which is the precondition to universities nowadays.

Among many other things, postmodernism (properly, poststructuralism) denies expertise, while privileging opinions, since truth and values do not exist. Consequently, history can only be spin, a rhetorical exercise, to display style, preference, choice, or a political posture. Herein lies Whitmarsh's strength.

To be fair, Whitmarsh does admit early on that notions of atheism are markedly absent in antiquity, and only in some instances of Greek thought does doubt about the gods arise.

But Whitmarsh wants to service several agendas with his book. one being that atheism is "a human rights issue: it is about recognizing atheists as real people, deserving of respect, tolerance, and the opportunity to live their lives unmolested."

Who knew that atheists were not considered "real" human beings?

More importantly, how is it that a devout atheist is advocating for human rights? This might have led to some interesting insights, but Whitmarsh has none to offer. Nor can he explain where these rights will come from, and who will guarantee them worldwide, so that they may be freely dispensed in aid of beleaguered atheists.

(What manner of hubris is it that allows authors to imagine that their words will actually save people, or feed people, or even stop some imagined oppression dead in its tracks now that their book has seen print? *Vade retro me, Satana*).

Both "respect" and "tolerance" are part of Christian morality; they are hardly vanguards of atheistic expedience. Why does a fervent atheist demand Christian ethics? Whitmarsh seems unaware of the contradiction he is invoking.

Another agenda is the lament for the vanishing interest in things classical. Whitmarsh is likely just flummoxed because he cannot justify the subject that he teaches, which has zero utility in the kind of atheistic society he wants to create.

The best he can come up with is the vague notion that by studying the Classics, people will know where ideas like atheism come from (which certainly serves as a handy justification for his own book).

#### *rhetorical "victory" over Christianity*

But why is knowing the origin of atheism, or any idea, important to anyone trying to earn an honest living in this harried world? The book offers no clues.

Whitmarsh might have wanted to look deeply into why he teaches what he does in a post-Christian context. Why does an atheist decry the absence of value, in a world made empty of meaning by atheistic postmodernism? He seems not to know that as an atheist he can only advocate skill and never wisdom (which is morality, which is guaranteed by God), *techne* over *Sophia*.

Atheism cannot offer values, because the minute you start demanding values (rights), you are demanding God (for whom courts and politicians are a very poor substitute).

Values lead us into moral natural law, and that brings us back to a Creator who actually loves us enough to ingrain in us a code of decency, and we therefore treat others decently as well.

Education used to be about guiding people towards moral excellence through wisdom, the consequence of which was the good society, as first pinpointed by the Greeks and later embodied in Christianity (hence the creation of schools by the Church). In such a Christian system, the study of the Classics imparted the ethical eloquence of civilization.

Thus, Whitmarsh simply leans upon the “simulacra of morality” (in the words of [Alasdair MacIntyre](#)) to demand nothing.

It was Nietzsche who pertinently observed that nihilism is marked by the inability to answer the question, “Why?”

Skills education is ultimately about creating complaint workers for vanishing industries, a process in which the Humanities (especially arcane subjects like Greek and Latin) can play no role whatsoever.

After much grumbling, Whitmarsh finally launches into his real (and rather divergent) agendas:

- That twenty-first century atheism is Greco-Roman in origin;
- That “monotheism” is genetically violent;
- That “polytheism” was tolerant and peaceful;
- That Christianity, as monotheism, is violent, as well as fraudulent and power-hungry, and it destroyed the tolerant, pacific world of antiquity.

Tackling all this requires Whitmarsh to be an anthropologist, sociologist, classicist, historian, philosopher, theologian, and literary critic. Needless to say, therefore, errors and confusion abound, as Whitmarsh argues with a sledgehammer, to misuse a Nietzschean trope.

Immediately, terminology poses a stout challenge. “Atheism,” “polytheism,” “monotheism,” “violence,” “tolerance,” “religion” are hardly monolithic, self-evident categories that are readily transposed from the Oxford English Dictionary all the way back to the Greco-Roman world.

In fact, these terms are entirely meaningless, and scholars avoid them, and Whitmarsh's uncritical use of them sabotages his arguments.

For example, “polytheism” does not mean worshipping lots of gods, as Whitmarsh assumes.

Rather, ancient belief systems blended [pantheism](#), [pandeism](#), [henotheism](#), [panentheism](#), along with magic, shamanism, ancestor-worship, natural science, music, [dance](#) (such as, the maze-dance, or the cult-dance), and psychology, as evidenced by the Greek [mystery cults](#) and [Mithraism](#).

In fact, ancient belief was always a mixture of expectation, desire, hope, and the urge for well-being.

As for the term, “atheism” itself - since Whitmarsh does not define it, he therefore confuses it with Greco-Roman [skepticism](#), [pessimism](#), [pragmatism](#), [cynicism](#), [atomism](#), [syncretism](#) and [gnoseology](#) – all of which, in turn, encompass much variety.

Thus, Whitmarsh's reductive methodology is blind to complexity. Indeed, complexity would destroy the various strawmen that he needs in order to further his agendas - all strawmen, it would appear, require

the simplicity of monoliths.

In fact, since polytheism was so multifaceted, the very idea of atheism is irrelevant in the ancient world.

Because Whitmarsh fails to define what he means by "ancient atheism," he assumes that there is an unchanging "essence" to "atheism" which persists through time and space (a very theist notion in itself).

He tries to overcome this deficiency with awkward sweeping summaries: "[Thucydides'] History can reasonably be claimed to be the earliest surviving atheistic narrative of human history;" and, "as a rule, Greek religion had very little to say about morality and the nature of the world."

This all just Pelion piled on Ossa.

More to the point, Greek philosophy perfectly understood the paradox of unbelief as belief – which means that the material world was deemed unimportant and therefore subject to unbelief, while belief in the immaterial was unquestioned.

In fact, unbelief led to belief in the immaterial – this is why Plato says that the material world is not real. "Knowledge is the joining of the act of knowing and the soul," explains the [sophist](#) Lycophron.

Although Greek philosophy could do without the gods, it could not do without the *apeiron*, which Plato would name, the Great Architect (the Demiurge), and Aristotle would call Pure Form, or the Unmoved Mover – and which Christianity came to call, God.

Even, [Carneades](#) (whom Whitmarsh uses as his ancient atheist poster-child), when he says that the Demiurge is unknowable, is not being an "atheist," but is simply expressing the limit of human reason – his real doubt is in the ability of both sense and reason to comprehend and explain the immaterial. This is hardly atheism – and Carneades' subtlety entirely escapes Whitmarsh. The limitation of the mind does not lead to the impossibility of God.

Thus it is not surprising to find more pointless generalities: "The search was on [in ancient Athens] for nonsupernatural causes for pretty much everything." (Further instances would be tedious to quote).

Actually, much of what we know of the workings of reason in the Greek world contradicts Whitmarsh's statement, because the Greeks were very careful to distinguish between all learning (causes), or *polymathie*, and intelligence, or *noos*, and the role of both in reason.

Again the words of Heraclitus will serve to correct Whitmarsh: "Wisdom is one thing, but to understand the purpose which guides all, through all things."

The material world cannot exist without purpose (transcendence) – i.e., God.

Further, in an attempt to summarize Democritus, Whitmarsh concludes, "the fact that our world is as is

is the result not of an integrated design in the universe but of luck."

(Such awkward syntax is a "nervous tick" throughout the book, evident whenever Whitmarsh veers into unfamiliar territory. The many hats he has forced himself to wear tend not to fit too well).

Unwieldy sentences aside, Whitmarsh thoroughly misunderstands Democritus. Atoms had size, shape and position (in other words, purpose - precisely an "integrated design"), and because of this purpose, atoms were enabled, predetermined, to construct material things (very much like Legos, which are "designed" for shape, for things).

This is why Democritus advocated the importance of *physis* (the soul), which gives the body its purpose. He never denied its existence.

*the Bible is part of ancient Greek literature*

Thus, atoms were part of the *apeiron's* (God's) ability to create. As for luck, Democritus corrects Whitmarsh in this way - "Fools are shaped by the gifts of luck."

It is curious indeed that Whitmarsh resorts to half-truths and outright half-baked claims to convince his hapless readers - while consistently failing to address the far more important paradox in Greek philosophy - why unbelief could never become a rigorous and codified system of thought, and why therefore only brief instances of individualized unbelief survive - and these cannot be cobbled into some sort of grand narrative of "ancient atheism."

In fact, all Greco-Roman thinkers fall into the "believers" category. Hence the inherent, likely unwitting, contradiction in the very title of the book. If one is "battling the gods," then the gods exist, and "ancient atheism" therefore does not.

This might well have been a focused, and much shorter, compendium of expressions of doubt in Greco-Roman thought (although Whitmarsh is unable to add anything of value to Winiarczyk's excellent work).

However, "ancient atheism" is simply a means to a greater agenda - the final debunking of Christianity, which Whitmarsh energetically pursues by way of the now familiar *modus operandi* - questionable scholarship.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with a vigorous and intelligent critique of Christianity, but Whitmarsh can muster neither.

Instead, borrowing the logic of the middling conspiracy theorist, he sets out to "reveal" what has been hidden and suppressed by conniving Christians for two millennia (surely, the time has at last come to



put such “revelations” out to pasture, since they are now meaningless).

Next, Christianity is declared to be inherently violent because it is monotheistic, and then charged with bringing untold suffering into a happy, tolerant, polytheistic Mediterranean world.

*polytheism had nothing to offer*

Here, Whitmarsh adheres to the simulacra of scholarship by uncritically accepting [Jan Assmann's](#) peculiar notion that monotheism is inherently violent.

This is, of course, all [warmed-over](#) Freud, who first set up the misleading dichotomy of a violent monotheism (Judeo-Christianity) opposing a tolerant polytheism..

Both Freud and Assmann needed this hypothetical dualism to make sense of Nazi atrocities within the context of German culture, and both cared little for historical fact, which is why Assmann could conclude that the Holocaust was ultimately a [creation](#) of the Jews themselves, since they brought monotheism into the world (a claim that he now disavows).

Like Freud, Assmann is a good “novelist.” Whitmarsh, on the other hand, is not. He simply accepts all of Assmann’s ruminations about matters psychological – as Gospel truth.

The result is a caricature of not only the Greeks and the Romans, but of Christians and Christianity, whereby polytheism is held up to be tolerant and peaceful, while Christianity (because it is monotheistic) is declared to be intolerant and violent.

Whitmarsh’s opining is easily dismantled by the idea of love in Christian philosophy and theology – where love is a universal and universalizing principle that embraces not only friend but also foe; that responds to hatred with compassion; that seeks humility and the ceaseless surrender of the self for the benefit of others. Love is the highest, and the only, form of morality that the world needs.

(Whitmarsh might have done well to put aside his ideological blinkers and contemplatively read Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, in its entirety, not just the more famous Chapter 13. Curiously enough, Whitmarsh avoids the New Testament and the entire Christian tradition. Both would make for a very poor strawman).

Logic firmly declares that there can only be one truth – not several. And the truth is very simple – Greco-Roman polytheism was unable to counter Christianity’s [deeper philosophy](#) and more cogent theology. In other words, polytheism had nothing to offer to counter Christian love.

*the ethical eloquence of civilization*

As for the matter of Christian exclusivism, Whitmarsh does not want to understand another simple concept – Christianity offered the Greco-Roman world what it lacked – a better, [greater morality](#).

Syncretism is never a strength, but a weakness – because it means that there is no developed method of discernment that can separate right from wrong. Christianity provided a mature ability to discern what is good and what is bad, what is real and what is not, what is true and what is false – all through the lens of love.

Next, Whitmarsh sets out to “prove” both his caricatures (violent Christianity vs. peaceful polytheism) as true. Facts easily derail him, however.

Violence was [deeply embedded](#) in the pagan world, as expressed in the rituals of animal – and human – sacrifice. Thus, the [gladiatorial shows](#) were more than entertainment – they were the *munera* (our word, “money” comes from this term); that is, blood offerings to the spirits of ancestors.

Child sacrifice also was endemic throughout the ancient Mediterranean, with the tophets in North Africa and the Levant (as shown by the work of [Robert M. Kerr](#), and others), while [child exposure](#) was the norm (the victims were often female infants).

War itself could only be [undertaken](#) if religiously [sanctioned](#). Thus politics and religion were never separate, as evidenced by the [Sacred Wars](#) of the Greeks.

Further, the [fetial priests](#) of the Romans gave [religious affirmation](#) to violence on the battlefield, through divine law (the *fas*), as blood-offering to the spirit (*genius*) of the nation.

All violence in ancient pagan societies, therefore, required religious permission in order to negate [ritual pollution](#). Christianity alone [put an end](#) to the necessity and logic of blood sacrifices.

Whitmarsh further claims that the ancient Greeks had neither the concept of, nor a word for, “sin,” since they had no divine laws to transgress, unlike the Christians.

*Love is the highest form of morality*

It is obvious that Whitmarsh conveniently chooses to ignore the concept of the [nomos](#) (tradition) among the Greeks, and the [ius naturale](#) (innate, natural law which all people obey) of the Romans.

To bolster his claim, he declares that, as a result, Christians had to “invent” a word for “sin” when they “translated” their Bible. This “invented” Greek word, he says, is *aliterios*.

This is wilful deception at best.

In fact, *aliterios* is never used in the New Testament. It is only found four times in the Book of the

Maccabees (2 Mc. 12:23, 13:4, 14:42, and 3 Mc. 3:16). It is an obscure word in an Apocryphal work (in the Protestant tradition), which hardly makes it crucial to the entire Christian theology of sin.

Further, *aliterios* does not mean "sin," but a "miserable person," a "wretch" in the context of Maccabees.

And *aliterios* is not a "translation" from anywhere but is found in the Septuagint, which was originally written in Greek by native speakers.

Thus, *aliterios* was not "invented" by Christians, since the authors of the Septuagint were Hellenized Jews, living in Alexandria, in the third century BC, and therefore writing in their own language (Greek).

Further, *aliterios* is hardly unique to the Book of the Maccabees; it is found elsewhere in non-biblical [sources](#). Whitmarsh can easily look it up in his Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon.

What Whitmarsh does not tell his readers is that the normal Greek word for "sin" throughout the Bible is *hamartia*, and the Greeks (like all humanity) knew what sin was - the transgression of divine law - otherwise, why would Oedipus stab out his eyes in ritualized penance?

There are eight other words for sin in ancient Greek, which are also found in the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, the Bible is very much part of ancient Greek literature, a fact Whitmarsh chooses to ignore, or does not care to know, because it is inconvenient to his agenda.

As well, Whitmarsh frequently asserts that Christians "translated" their Bible. By repeating this prevarication, he only displays his own nescience.

*all Pelion piled on Ossa*

How could the Bible be "translated" into Greek when it was entirely written in [that language](#), by native speakers?

There are many other such deceptions, and it would be over-kill to catalogue them all.

Whitmarsh next reaches into some obscure corners, namely, the [Circumcellion rebellion](#) in North Africa, in the fourth century AD, to keep his violent-Christianity narrative chugging along.

His overwrought "proof," however, only demonstrates an inability to differentiate hostility as a literary trope from actual bloodshed (he points to sermons and hymns as evidence of Christian violence).

Further, he downplays the political and social causes of this rebellion which had little to do with religion and everything to do with economics. The result is a confusion of the history of ideas (hymns and sermons) as the history of facts (economics).

In fact, we know very little about the Circumcellions. Therefore, disparate data is often thrown together

to form some sort of coherent narrative, which suits Whitmarsh's purpose well.

The fourth century was a complex period in North Africa, with Berbers, Romans and Vandals vying with each other. As well, each of these groups practiced a different form of Christianity. Thus, there were always "[Christianities](#)," rather than "Christianity" (as is the case today). But such complexity simply gets in the way of Whitmarsh's reductive strategy. Monoliths are easier to rail at.

Next, Whitmarsh sets out to demonstrate that Christians lied their way into becoming the "winners" of history and therefore the suppressors of truth – because one writer ([Candida Moss](#)) says so. He does not tell us why he believes Moss's argument to be true, since it has been effectively [dismantled](#).

He persists with the logic of the conspiracy theorist by holding firm to the vapid notion that "winners write history."

Therefore, Whitmarsh can only repeat Moss's casuistic conclusion that the persecution and martyrdom of Christians in the Roman world is a myth, purposefully contrived to win sympathy and facilitate the takeover of the Roman Empire. Neither Whitmarsh nor Moss provide actual documentary evidence for this early Christian contrivance.

Nor can they answer the question as to how sympathy possibly leads to political and territorial acquisition (no doubt, many a would-be politician would pay good cash-money for such knowledge).

*a caricature of Christians and Christianity*

Again, the history of facts undermines Moss and thereby Whitmarsh. [Persecution](#) of Christians was frequent and grim at the local, communal level – and it was sporadic and far bloodier at the [imperial](#) level.

The Romans had no [police force](#) and thus neighborhoods ruled themselves; and it is within such small, self-regulated communities that many of the martyrdoms occurred.

On the imperial level, being a Christian was a [capital offence](#), as Pliny and the Emperor Trajan very clearly state, because Christians refused to honor, through sacrifice, the *pax deorum*, the "peace of the gods," which involved offering incense to the spirit (genius) of the Roman Empire, in the person of the emperor.

This offering defined "Roman-ness" because it was said to protect against the forces of chaos that might beset the entire state. These sacrifices were meant to ensure social, cultural and political stability.

The refusal of Christians to participate in this religious practice made them [atheists](#) in the eyes of the

Romans and therefore dangerous and subject to the death penalty - because their refusal to participate in sacrifices would mean upsetting the cosmic balance of human duty to the gods - and in turn the gods would refuse their duty of keeping chaos at bay.

This might have indicated to Whitmarsh that "atheists" were hardly tolerated by his caricatured polytheists. Enforcement of the law by imperial decree against Christians was haphazard, but when enacted, resulted in systematic persecution and executions.

Thus, Whitmarsh's entire book becomes a parody of scholarship, since his interest is not historical fact, but some version of rhetorical "victory" over Christianity.

First, he casts Christianity in the role of the wretched Other, then he proceeds to vilify, deride and misrepresent it by all means possible in order to "prove" the superiority of his own faith, atheism, as romanticized and idolized in his caricature of Greco-Roman paganism.

In the process, the "fiercely secular" Whitmarsh readily dispenses with truth (as a postmodernist, he does not need it) - and his various claims therefore are nothing more than spin in order to win a contest between his cause (atheism) and its opponent (Christianity).

Johann Fichte and Ludwig Feuerbach elaborated an important psychological trait of the modern world - autotheism. Thus atheism is ultimately autotheism, the endless veneration of the self as god. This is the greatest attraction of Whitmarsh's religion, and his book, therefore, is nothing but a selfie.

Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods. Atheism in the Ancient World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, 290 pp., \$27.95 hc.

***[The photo is of "The Last Day of Pompeii," by Karl Briullov, painted: 1880-1833]***

