

Atheophobia

A Genealogy of a Foundational Panic

by

Tolga Theo Yalur

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Introduction

The Architecture of a Panic

In Toulouse in 1619, the Italian philosopher Giulio Cesare Vanini was dragged from the prison to the stake by torches and ropes, his tongue torn out with pincers, his body strangled, and his ashes dumped on the flames to be burnt. The charge against him was atheism. He was accused of believing that God did not exist. More precisely, he was accused of believing that God did not exist by the Inquisition and by the Parliament of Toulouse. And yet, with few exceptions, the heresiarchs and governors of early modern France did not have to deal with people who explicitly declared themselves to be atheists. Most of those individuals who were persecuted as godless were, if not Christians, then followers of some heterodox religion, natural philosophers of various persuasions, or simply malcontents who opposed some of the Church's privileges.

This fact highlights the first paradox of non-belief, which is that atheophobia was an extremely pervasive phenomenon in early modernity, where the persecution of atheists was a serious political and social issue. The reason for this was that in the political and theological context of early modern Europe, the very idea of an atheist was perceived as a threat to the existing order. It was a threat because the entire political order and the ethical and social frameworks were predicated on the acceptance of God's will as the supreme authority. For these reasons, it is not surprising that early modern Europe was not a particularly tolerant environment for non-believers.

Most modern historical studies of secularism mistakenly focus on anti-atheist persecution as a manifestation of anachronistic religious zeal, which is essentially an anticlimactic reaction to the rise of rationalism (Chadwick, 1975). From this perspective, early modern atheophobia is seen as primarily a conservative force that has been slowly weakened throughout the rise of Western philosophy and the gradual relaxation of the religious orders' grip on society. Such a viewpoint ignores the ways in which the concept of an atheist has been historically linked to the idea of a non-believer in general.

The problem of atheophobia as a concept is that it encompasses too broad a phenomenon that cannot be seen as an offshoot of the early modern zeal for rooting out dissidents. To a significant extent, it actually predates the early modern period, having been formally established as a part of the broader condescension toward non-believers. That is why throughout this book, we attempt to analyze the evolution of this concept. We look at the historical precursors of anti-atheist rhetoric, trying to demonstrate how the early modern concept of an atheist was intertwined with a variety of early religious philosophies and the related ideas of the divine. In particular, this book focuses on the development of the religiously-motivated opposition to secularism in Europe.

Describing Atheophobia

The first step to analyzing the history of non-belief is therefore to distinguish between theoretical disputes over the nature or even the very existence of God and the more broadly based fear of what society might be like in the absence of a god to act as a universal overseer. Atheophobia speaks to the latter concern because it takes

society's potential response to godless life seriously as a social and political phenomenon. We will therefore use the term atheophobia from now on in order to refer to a specific institutional complex, to which we will return shortly, of anti-civic sentiments involving a pervasive fear of ethical collapse in a world deprived of divine retribution at its core.

At the root of atheophobia always lies a particular theological-political axiom that asserts, explicitly or implicitly, that ethics can exist only in God's gift. Consider John Locke's formulation in the influential treatise on toleration that was written during the early years of the revolution: "Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist" (Locke, 1689/1983). This way of thinking was common to most writers on politics and theology during the early modern period. They were convinced that the entire ethical and social order relied on God as the ultimate judge and punisher. Consequently, in the public mind, the non-believer always appeared as some kind of an ontological anomaly, of a social outsider who had chosen to become unworthy of living in society.

Atheophobia is an affective state centered on the idea that non-believers are dangerous to society and should be kept away. There is nothing rational about this assumption. It stems from a three-partite set of related affective tropes that are commonly found in theological discourse: (i) the trope of arrogance that interprets the non-believer's position as a manifestation of his or her overarching desire to usurp God, (ii) the trope of degradation that assumes that non-believers are unable to entertain the idea of higher powers or are ethically corrupt by nature, (iii) and the trope of contamination

that views the non-believer as source of societal rot that needs to be purged by means of exiling or killing.

What this cluster of beliefs has in common is that it understands non-belief as a certain kind of affective provocation to be responded to with anger. This is why atheophobia is most often manifested through anger, which is the basic affect that emerges when people feel wronged. The key point is that atheists are perceived as wrongdoers whose wrong doing consists in denying the self-evidence of divinity. They are dangerous to society because they undermine its ethical foundations. This idea was widely shared by many theorists of civic life, among whom the most persistent and eloquent was perhaps Walter Berns. According to Berns, religious faith and particularly the faith in God's justice is the best possible guarantee for good laws being actually followed. When law enforcement is proved to be ineffective as a mere practical measure, the alternative that always presents itself to responsible lawmakers is to appeal to oaths and to religion in general (Berns, 2001). A society that is committed to natural law and the ethical order it establishes therefore needs non-believers as a kind of a counterweight that allows it to test its resilience to existential challenges.

The Genealogical Method

The methodology which underlies this research is largely indebted to a particular genealogical tradition which traces its roots back to Nietzsche and Foucault (Nietzsche, 1887/1998; Foucault, 1977). A genealogical investigation does not seek to unveil the development of ideas in favor of atheists or even to defend skeptical thought against ideological onslaughts, however, rather it attempts to

ascertain precisely the conditions for the very appearance of this notion. In other words, genealogy tries to understand what kinds of political interests were invested in the emergence of the concept of the “atheist” and what did this idea seek to suppress.

The analysis conducted by Foucault on madness demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that any definition of a political category is born out of a desire to institutionalize it (Foucault, 1965). Madness is not normal sanity run amok but rather the opposite: sanity is simply a particular kind of madness. Similar reasoning can be applied to politics, religion, and ethics. An inquisitorial tribunal does not bring heretics to God, but rather the Church serves to delineate the space of legitimately religious society. The idea of the “atheist” serves the same function in that it enables society to insulate itself against supposed unethical agents, thus ensuring stability, security, and general welfare.

This premise alone is enough to demonstrate that the category of the “atheist” is not a stable entity which has survived unaltered throughout the ages. On the contrary, in different social contexts, the expression “atheist” served to mask a wide variety of undesirable behaviors. Be it witchcraft, sexual deviancy, regicide, or economic mismanagement... any charge could be added to the list of accusations leveled against one’s political or religious opponents (Hunter & Wootton, 1992). As such, the charge of “atheism” was not an obstacle to societal development but rather one of the tools in the broader arsenal of state repression.

A similar observation can be made in regard to the changing theoretical underpinnings of the accusation. In ancient societies, the foundations for a relationship between a citizen and the gods

were conceived in relative terms whereas in strictly monotheistic societies, belief in any entity other than the supreme deity (God/Elohim/Allah) was considered anathema. Clearly, the appearance of new dogmatic religions changed the nature of the conceptualization of “unbelief” and this evolution is directly linked to the process of secular political development. In brief, the book makes a case for the claim that the formation of anti-unbelief rhetoric is inextricably linked to the development of sovereignty as theorized by Thomas Hobbes.

The Modern Persistence of an Ancient Fear

One might think that with the advent of modern secular states, democracy, and the protection of freedom of conscience, atheophobia would have become a relic of the past. Not so, says sociology: non-believers are still at the bottom of the social trust league table. Religious organizations continue to significantly influence modern politics, and various democracies still suspect non-believers of being unreliable, corrupt, or generally unethical partners (Gervais et al., 2011; Edgell et al., 2006).

In fact, according to Edgell et al.’s (2006) sociological study on the credibility of different groups in America, atheists are the category of people who are least likely to share a common vision of America. Subsequent studies confirmed cross-culturally the existence among people of an “anti-atheist trust bias”, with mistrust being manifested specifically in the association of serial killers and fraudulent financial deals with atheists (Gervais et al., 2017).

Contemporary anti-atheist bias cannot be reduced to just political or ideological struggle. It is the shadow cast by the political and theological dogmas of the past. Carl Schmitt, a political theorist and a devout Catholic, once wrote that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt, 1922/2005). This means that in the modern world, the image of God still influences the perception of the concept of "state". The suspicion of people of faith about their secular colleagues is due to the fact that the ethical ideal of the state continues to be viewed in America through the prism of social conservatism. Studying these phenomena, this book aims to demonstrate how we can get out of the dogmatic framework in which we find ourselves, and what consequences it has for human relationships and politics.

The Relational Shift: From Civic Impiety to Ontological Treason

To understand where atheophobia got its existential baggage, one has to understand the shift in the religious discourse from the ancient worldview to that of the proto-modern one. For the ancient Mediterranean, South Asian, and East Asian cultures, polytheism was the default, with various gods being associated with places, items, virtues, and so on (Burkert, 1985; Assmann, 1997). The overarching religious framework was relational, pragmatic, and localistic. The concept of a God as the exclusive creator of the world as we know it did not have much ground there. Therefore, the denial of a particular God's existence or supremacy did not necessarily entail the assertion of the non-existence of the divine in general. The word which later in Western tradition would come to be associated with "atheist" (*atheos*/ἄθεος) did not have a strong

ontological connotation in antiquity. First and foremost, it was used as an adjective to describe something that had nothing to do with gods (Drachmann, 1922; Whitmarsh, 2015). One could be *atheos* when one was homeless, shipwrecked, or unemployed. But one could also be *atheos* to your city's gods, meaning that you denied their existence or authority. That was not a crime per se, but it was deemed impious and imprudent because the city's gods were the guarantors of territorial prosperity and safety. In the best Athenian tradition, one was expected to treat one's gods as partners. Not doing so was akin to renegading one's civic duties. So, when Socrates stood trial in the Hellenic agora in 399 BC as accused of *asebeia* (ἀσέβεια), it was not cosmic "treason" that the Athenian jury had to deliberate on. Rather, it was whether or not Socrates was impious to Athens's gods and promoted un-Athenian ones, namely the *daimonia*. As far as Plato's *Apology* (1997) is concerned, the accuser Meletus did not claim that Socrates believed that the universe was devoid of gods. He only alleged that Socrates did not believe in the gods of the city and brought in other, foreign Gods instead.

Similar reasoning can be applied to the outlook on non-theistic or materialistic religious worldviews in ancient South Asia. Various traditions of the so-called "Indian atheism" were not really atheists in the Western sense of the word. They only rejected the theocentricity of the Vedas, the Hindu scripture, and the notion of *ātman* (आत्मन्) or soul in particular. The most well-known example of Indian atheism is the nihilistic and materialistic school of *Cārvāka* (Lokāyata). The adherents of this school claimed that all matter was physical and therefore denied the Vedic rituals and the existence of an eternal soul (Chattopadhyaya, 1959; Bhattacharya, 2011). In Indian philosophical discourse, they were labeled *nāstika*

(*नास्तिक*). This term should not be confused with the Western notion of “atheism.” Roughly it means “not existing,” but the label *nāstika* was used to denote heterodoxy in general and the rejection of the Vedic authority specifically. The belief in gods was not seen as a cornerstone of religious practice and community in South Asia. The *Cārvākas* may have been seen as “wrong,” but they were not considered dangerous. Orthodox Brahmins who fiercely opposed the *Cārvākas* were not regarded as corrupt, defective, or anti-social. In fact, over the centuries, the views of the *Cārvākas* had enough presence in Indian public discourse to be consistently opposed and countered in the philosophical literature. The Indian atheists were wrong, but they were not existential threats to the social order.

What changed was the development of what Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1997, 2004) calls the “Mosaic distinction.” As Christianity developed, its adherents proclaimed the existence of one God who created everything. The God was not one of the many creators, as was the case in the ancient world. He was the transcendent creator of all existing beings, realities, and gods. The proto-modern religious thinkers took the exclusiveness of God’s creative power to make it ontologically exclusive. What set Judaism, Christianity, and Islam apart from the earlier religious traditions was that they proclaimed their Gods’ absolute and unrivaled supremacy. From the religious perspective, it meant that other Gods simply did not exist. Any religious belief that did not center on the Jewish God was deemed outright wrong and blasphemous.

The political implication of this theological innovation was that all these religious traditions began to perceive other belief systems as

existential threats. If the God of the Jewish Torah, Allah, or Jesus is the creator of all that exists, every other God is a usurper and a pretender to the throne. Likewise, any system that does not worship God is outright anti-existential. It follows that any religious belief that denies the supreme God's existence or supremacy must also be deemed anti-existential. The proto-modern religious thinkers went as far as claiming that the denial of the God's existence was not only ethically wrong but intrinsically impossible. Because the God is the first truth, to deny the God is to deny the very notion of truth. With regard to the proto-modern Western atheism, it is important to note that it was not really "atheism" as we know it today. The early Christians were still polytheists in all but the Church's scriptures. They believed in the Christian God, yes, but they also worshipped the Roman Emperors and Gods. However, with the advent of Constantine the Great and the Roman Empire's official adoption of Christianity, the Catholics reversed the stance and began to accuse the pagans, Jews, and heterodox Christians of being atheists. Not believing in the Christian God was no longer heresy. It was existential blasphemy, outright denial of the first truth and the first blasphemy. The early Church Fathers recognized that, too. It was Tertullian, one of the first Christian apologists, who in the face of Roman prosecution accused the Roman authorities of being atheists themselves.

Overview of the Book

The book follows the genealogy of atheophobia through four distinct stages that witnessed the development of a political myth and its institutional, secular, and popular iterations. Focusing on the changing perceptions of non-belief from antiquity to modern

times, each chapter draws out the mechanisms by which a putatively universal suspicion of atheists was manufactured and promulgated as a necessary condition of social cohesion.

The first chapter focuses on non-belief before the dominance of exclusive monotheism, discussing the ways in which pre-modern religious thought conceptualized the relationship between civic religion and individual behavior. In particular, this chapter analyzes the reception of early materialist and eliminativist philosophy in both Mediterranean and South Asian traditions, highlighting the nuanced understanding of impiety that existed before the rise of systematic atheophobia. The early Greek and Indian philosophers did not consider unbelief to be an inherent category of human experience. Rather, their criticism of religious practices was contextual and contingent upon a person's broader attitude toward civic and communal life. The chapter also contextualizes the development of early charges of impiety, or *asebeia*, by means of a discussion of Socratic dialogues and their reception in both popular and academic culture. In analyzing fragments of *Cārvāka* poetry and their reception in later Hindu thought as well as similar trends in ancient Greece, the chapter demonstrates that pre-modern attitudes toward impiety were not characterized by the same existential despair and ontological angst that came to define atheophobia. Instead, the early Indian and Greek philosophers viewed unbelief as a manifestation of civic resentment and self-consciously unethical behavior, not as an all-encompassing category of human experience.

Chapter two centers on the establishment of the first monotheistic worldviews and their impact on religious discourse, highlighting the ways in which new theological assumptions problematized all

forms of religious diversity. In particular, this chapter discusses the proto-totalitarian discourse of ‘godly’ governments that was prevalent in both Judeo-Christian and Islamic medieval traditions. Analyzing both Patristic writings and medieval Islamic theological literature, the chapter demonstrates how the emergence of monotheism led to the association of all religious innovation with anti-divine intent. The early theological literature on government and law, produced by both Church and Mosque authorities, sought to subordinate all aspects of life to the overarching religious authority, viewing any deviation from scriptural teachings as an inherently anti-divine act. This explains the particular pejorative connotations that began to be applied to heterodox philosophers, materialists, and naturalists in both Islamic and Christian medieval writings. The chapter also discusses the theological roots of the inquisitorial practices in medieval Europe, particularly the development of canon and sharia law as instrumental in the construction of the first comprehensive atheophobic discourse.

Chapter three examines the development of the anti-atheist paradigm in different medieval and early modern legal traditions, linking the rise of formal atheophobia to the shifting perceptions of human agency and interpersonal trust. Analyzing both medieval inquisitorial writings and early modern political treatises, this chapter discusses the increasing institutional emphasis on the role of faith as a guarantor of trust and fidelity. The chapter also reads selected early modern texts (including Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* and Bodin’s *Six Books of a Commonwealth*) in their ideological context, discussing the ways in which political philosophers and theologians conceptualized the role of religion in the emerging early modern states. Particular attention is paid to the way in which non-believers were perceived

as inherently untrustworthy individuals whose existence in society had to be regulated. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which these early modern ideas informed contemporary understandings of atheophobia.

Finally, the fourth chapter shifts the focus to modern Western nation-states and the ways in which their liberal ideologies interact with the persistent anti-atheist paradigm. In particular, this chapter reads several modern liberal texts in their ideological context, demonstrating the way in which the liberal nation-state prioritizes theistic faith as a cornerstone of national unity. Drawing upon modern sociological research, the chapter also discusses the ways in which anti-atheist prejudice affected the evolution of contemporary Western societies, producing ideological discourse in which theists have significantly more social power than do atheists. The discussion also includes the analysis of public debates about the role of the non-believers in modern Western nations, highlighting the extent to which mainstream discourse continues to associate atheism with existential vacuity and nihilism. Having demonstrated the pervasive nature of atheophobia in modern liberal ideology, the final section of the chapter discusses mechanisms by which it can be overcome, examining the ways in which human ethics and interpersonal trust can be decoupled from transcendent intent.

Chapter 1

The Relational God: Impious Civics in the Ancient World

This chapter presents a genealogical overview of the pre-monotheistic attitudes towards non-compliance, naturalism, and skepticism to establish the genealogical baseline of thought. It begins by discussing how the totalizing ethical panic around non-belief is a contingent political category that emerged as a specific historical formation. In particular, in the classical Mediterranean polytheism and South Asian religious traditions, the divine power was immanent, manifold, and distributed across various foci in the natural and civic realms. As such, these traditions did not consider metaphysical doubt, physicalism, or naturalistic epistemology as inherently impious or anti-civic because their orthodoxy was based on the orthopraxy, or the correct performance of rites and civic duties. Therefore, the accusations of impiety (*asebeia*) in classical Athens were always linked to the concrete acts of omission and transgression against the city's gods that occurred in the context of a specific political crisis. Similarly, in the classical South Asian traditions, the non-theistic religious schools of thought, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and the atheistic *Cārvāka/Lokāyata* philosophy, were able to participate in the public discourse and the royal court debates without facing extermination or panic.

Through an overview of the Hellenistic atomic theory developed by the Epicureans and Lucretius, the chapter then proceeds to

discuss how naturalistic physics was used as a tool to liberate the self from the tyranny of divine capriciousness. The adherents of this tradition, who have existed and thrived in the Hellenistic world for approximately five centuries, were able to found influential Epicurean gardens throughout the known-world at the time. Many Epicureans were the officials, magistrates, and members of the upper-class citizenry in their respective city-states. One can synthesize the information gathered from the overview of the pre-monotheistic attitudes towards non-compliance, naturalism, and skepticism to discern how the ancient cosmologies viewed the dissent from the religious views. For the ancient polytheists, impiety was always relational, depending on the context and the specific target of the impious action. Therefore, the ancient civilizations did not have a category of the non-believer that could be considered categorically corrupt and deserving of extermination. Rather, the ancient cosmologies acknowledged diverse faiths that coexisted within the same civilization. It was with the advent of the monotheistic religion and the consequential elevation of the divine to the realm of the absolute that the impiety transformed into the existential category of the non-belief.

The Polytheistic Cosmos

In the ancient Mediterranean, Near East, and South Asia, people thought of the world as a polytheistic one. The divine was not perceived as an infinite, omnipotent power existing independently from the creations of Gods and nature. Rather it was seen as something diverse, connected to the environment, customs, urbanism and even geography (Burkert, 1985; Vernant, 1983). In the ancient world, polytheism did not presuppose the existence of an all-encompassing, omnipotent God or Gods, but rather a variety

of centers of power (*dynameis/δυνάμεις*) existing within the same ecosystem of the world (Lefkowitz, 2003). Walter Burkert in his book of *Greek Religion* notes that the multiplicity of the Gods in Ancient Greece was linked to the variety of honors (*timai/τιμαί*) and different areas of responsibility (Burkert, 1985). Different Gods could be responsible for similar phenomena and the same Gods could be appealed to in different capacities as well as exercise different roles, coexisting with other Gods, ancestors and spirits in a system of mutual gifting (*charis/χάρις*). Ancient polytheism did not differentiate between “true” and “false” Gods or between God and demon, but emphasized the plurality of voices and cosmologies (Burkert, 1985; Vernant, 1983). Egyptologist Jan Assmann argues that the ancient polytheistic civilizations had a mechanism of accommodation and translation of the Gods and rituals of foreign cultures, perceived as different but equal variants of the same cosmic order (Assmann, 1997, 2004). This means that when the Greeks encountered the Gods of Egypt or Phoenicia, they did not consider them to be false idols or demons. Rather, they perceived them as counterparts to their own Gods. The Gods of other civilizations were anthropomorphized in the same way their own were and seen as expressions of the same cosmic order. Ancient Greeks saw Amun as equivalent to Zeus and the Phoenicians saw Astarte as similar to Aphrodite. But they all saw themselves as part of the same system (Veyne, 1988). This allowed the cultures of the ancient world to interact and recognize each other as equal, albeit different, parts of the same whole.

Within such an open, translatable cosmos, the idea of “denying the God” in any absolute, all-encompassing sense would scarcely have made any sense at all. One could have withheld due homage from a particular deity, neglected to offer due respect to a local patron,

and doubted the oracles' truthfulness, but one could not deny the presence of the divine in the very fabric of the universe: in the sky and the sea, in the rhythms of nature, in the passions of men, in the law and in the city (Whitmarsh, 2015).

A fundamental difference between the ancient and modern approaches to religion is that the former prioritized *orthopraxy* (right practice) over *orthodoxy* (right belief). In other words, the religious domain in the past did not revolve around articles of faith, creeds, and absolute doctrines, as many modern theocracies tend to promote. Ancient religions did not possess systematic scriptures, dogmas, or professional priesthoods to enforce them (Drachmann, 1922; Price, 1984).

Whoever inhabited the city-state had to conduct a set of externally visible religious acts (unlike internal emotional states or mental conditions) in order that everyone could be certain that their fellow citizens had engaged in these acts (Feeney, 1998). The public and civic orientation of ancient religious life explains why the Romans called their system the *pax deorum*, the peace brought by gods to society (North, 1990; Scheid, 2003). The city needed the gods' help and protection, sought to secure them by arranging cults, sacrifices, offerings, banquets, and festivals. In turn, gods received their share of power and influence in human affairs as rewards for their loyalty to the civic union and its institutions. So, both the city and its free citizens were religiously inseparable entities, whose relationship was based on a mutually beneficial exchange. In this context, the violation of any part of this system could be perceived by the authorities as a serious crime against the state and an anti-social act in general, undermining the integrity and security of the whole city-state (MacMullen, 1981).

While modern societies tend to regard religious misconducts mainly as theological issues, interpreting them as supernatural violations of some divine law, the ancient Greeks and Romans considered them as civic offenses first of all. In fact, in case if an individual violated any part of the established religious code, the natural aftermath was rather a civic punishment than a divine judgement (Burkert, 1985). Sacrilege (secular sacrilege, not the religious one) was the most severe penalty in the Roman criminal law, being applied to the most serious crimes against the state (MacMullen, 1981).

However, the reason why impiety (*asebeia* in Greek, *impietas* in Latin) in general, and especially sacrilege in particular, were considered offenses against the state is because Romans strongly believed in the gods' involvement in the secular realm. Hence, the misbehavior of any kind committed by the citizen would result in misfortune and calamity, which the city's institutions and economy would bear first (North, 1990).

As ancient polytheism was rooted in orthopraxy rather than creedal orthodoxy, it had a high tolerance towards metaphysical inquiry, naturalistic explanations and philosophical skepticism in the private sphere (Whitmarsh, 2015). The absence of a totalizing divine monopoly allowed early Greek natural philosophers (e.g., Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus) to seek the underlying principles (*archē/ἀρχή*) of the universe in the material elements (water, air, fire, the infinite) than in anthropomorphic divine interventions without being branded as ethical outlaws (Sedley, 2007).

It is in this flexible cultural backdrop that the Greek term *atheos*/ἄθεος first emerged. Its ancient meaning was considerably different from what we understand by the English word “atheist” today, that is, a person who asserts the non-existence of any god. Rather, in its earliest classical usage (in Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles), *atheos* was used as an adjective rather than a noun and was relational (contextual) rather than ontological (Drachmann, 1922; Winiarczyk, 2016).

Etymologically *atheos* is made up of a privative (*a*) and *theos* (god), and it had three primary meanings in antiquity, namely; descriptive/relational, civic/judicial and philosophical/theoretical. The descriptive/relational connotation was used in describing a person or city that was “abandoned” by the gods, that is lacking divine protection or acted in a godless, tragic manner (e.g., Oedipus in his tragic isolation). The civic/judicial description was applied by an individual who neglected the customary local cults or who denied the efficacy of the local patron deities. Lastly, the philosophical/theoretical description was reserved for philosophers who rejected anthropomorphic myths, normal divine providence or physical agency of the gods in human affairs (Whitmarsh, 2015; Winiarczyk, 2016).

Importantly, being labelled or describing a person as *atheos* in classical antiquity did not necessarily mean that one was an ethical monster or an existential threat to humanity. One could be described as *atheos* by an Athenian for questioning the local myths of Athena or Apollo and still have faith in the cosmic order or an elevated philosophical conception of a unified, abstract divine principle (e.g., Xenophanes’ criticism of Homeric anthropomorphism) (Leshner, 1992). Since the polytheistic framework

allowed multiple gods, rejecting one or naturalizing a celestial body (e.g., Anaxagoras declaring that the sun was a red-hot stone rather than the god Helios) was an act of specific local theological or civic contestation (Sedley, 2007). It did not pose a threat to the overall structure of reality because reality was not wedded to any one exclusive and jealous divine voice.

The relational and non-panic-inducing nature of early non-belief is even more apparent when we consider classical South Asian traditions. Ancient India possessed a religious and philosophical tradition informed by extensive epistemological debates about the nature of reality between various *darśanas*/दर्शन (thought-schools), broadly grouped into *āstika*/आस्तिक (orthodox) and *nāstika*/नास्तिक (heterodox) traditions (Chattopadhyaya, 1959; Bhattacharya, 2011). The *nāstika* (literally “it is not,” from *na asti*) is often translated into, or interpreted as, *atheist* or *unbeliever*, but it had a different meaning in the original Sanskrit context. A *nāstika*, then, was a school or thinker who rejected the supreme authority of the Vedas, the efficacy of the Vedic sacrifices (*yajña*), or the doctrine of an immortal soul (*ātman*) that undergoes rebirth (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957).

Among such non-theistic traditions in Ancient India were early Buddhism and Jainism, which explicitly rejected the notion of a supreme creator god (Īśvara) while developing sophisticated ethical doctrines centered on the notions of *karma*, *ahimsā*, and the attainment of *nirvāṇa* or *mokṣa* (Jayatilleke, 1963). The denial of creator gods, logically speaking, did not lead to social outlawry or panic. Non-theistic traditions held monasteries, patronage, and openly debated their theistic and Brahmanical rivals for over a millennium (Wardward, 1952).

The most radical early Indian anti-belief tradition is the *Cārvāka* (or *Lokāyata*) school of thought attributed to the mythical thinker Bṛhaspati (Chattopadhyaya, 1959; Bhattacharya, 2011). The *Cārvākās'* teachings were an uncompromising materialist, empiricist, and hedonistic worldview which rejected all notions of supernatural beings, sacrifices, and clerical hierarchy. As preserved in fragments and polemical summaries by their opponents, the *Cārvāka* positions can be summarized in four basic tenets, namely; epistemological empiricism, physicalist materialism, a rejection of the afterlife and transmigration, and criticism of the role of religion in society (Bhattacharya, 2011; Chattopadhyaya, 1959; Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957).

The most interesting lesson from the history of the premodern tradition of atheophobia deals with the reception of the *Cārvāka* materialists in medieval India. Despite being notoriously vituperative toward devotees and claiming scriptural and revealed faith to be “delusions” of the mind, the *Cārvākās* were never subject to the vengeful, inquisitorial prosecution characteristic of a truly theocratic regime. On the contrary, later Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain scholars engaged the *Cārvākās'* epistemic and ethical claims in their philosophical writings, discussing their theories on logic and perception while preserving them in their own corpus of knowledge. The *Cārvāka* materialist was regarded as a heterodox opponent in the wide arena of *ānvīkṣikī*, the traditional Indian philosophy, but not as a heresiarch whose existence challenged the very cosmic order.

A similar fate was proposed to the proponents of an early atheistic school of Epicurean physics in the Hellenistic Mediterranean. Founded in Athens in the fourth century BCE, Epicurean

philosophy developed a comprehensive set of teachings concerning the physical and mental structure of humans and the world around them. Rooted in the atomistic physics of Democritus and Leucippus, the Epicurean cosmology was also a vitalistic doctrine, claiming life to be the most desirable state natural for humans and all living creatures (Long & Sedley, 1987; Warren, 2004). According to the Epicureans, atoms, the smallest possible particles of matter, move in the infinite space, occasionally colliding and combining with each other in an unordered fashion, thus forming larger material entities. These interactions range from simple mechanical motion to complex agglomerations of matter endowed with sentience and will. In particular, the motion of atoms accounts for natural events, including thunder and lightning, earthly tsunamis and solar eclipses (Lucretius, trans. 2001; Sedley, 2007).

Unlike the later developments of mechanistic materialism, Epicurean physics did not explicitly deny the existence of gods. Instead, an entire system of theological assumptions was constructed around the notion of deities, designed to remove supernatural powers as a source of control or constraint over humans. Epicurus postulated gods to be material entities, no different in their physical nature from men and women, who inhabit the spaces between the infinite worlds (*metakosmia*/μετακόσμια) beyond human reach. Life in *metakosmia* is supremely blissful, and gods have no desire to interfere with the fate of mortals, for they possess everything there is necessary for happiness (Long & Sedley, 1987). Therefore, prayers and sacrifices, which the Epicureans regarded in the same light as most other mystery cults of the Hellenistic period, have no power over the gods' actions. Moreover, gods do not judge the deeds of mortals

and do not reward them accordingly after death. The Epicurean view of the afterlife is equally nihilistic, as the human soul is an association of atoms no different in nature from those combining in the body. After death, the body ceases to exist. Then the mind, the Epicureans believed, is dismantled, thus losing its ability to perceive anything: “Death is nothing to us. When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not” (Epicurus, 1994).

For traditionalists in the ancient world, Epicureanism was tantamount to atheism, as it removed divine anger as a tool for maintaining social order. Removing providence and intervention from the brief of the gods, Epicurus made civic cults and animal sacrifices structurally irrelevant to achieving human happiness (*eudaimonia/εὐδαιμονία*) (Warren, 2004). Nevertheless, communities of Epicurean (or “The Garden” as they were known in ancient Greece and Rome) persisted throughout the Greek and Roman worlds for centuries without being subjected to extermination orders from the state. Epicureans were known to hold prosperous, egalitarian communities that held women, slaves, and foreigners in a state of peace, living out their lives in the pursuit of friendship and simple pleasures as a route to achieving *ataraxia/ἀταραξία* (Fish & Sanders, 2011).

When Roman writers such as Cicero chose to criticize Epicureanism in their works, such as *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*), in practice, they were questioning the right of Epicurus to deny providence as a pillar of the social contract (Cicero, 1933). The materialist was free to practice his views within the broader intellectual mix of Roman thought, but he was seen as potentially undermining the cohesion of the wider society if he pursued his views to their logical conclusion.

It would be uncritical to argue that polytheistic ancient societies exhibited unlimited tolerance in their treatment of other religious beliefs or practices in their legal and civic life. The executions of individuals such as Socrates in classical Athens (399 BCE) and early modern thinker Giulio Cesare Vanini illustrate that there are limits to tolerance known to all cities in the ancient world. Nevertheless, looking at the way in which the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable religious practices were drawn in specific cases is useful because it illustrates the kinds of intolerance that were civic and pragmatic rather than ontological or atheophobic.

The legal tool used to prosecute religious transgressions in classical Athens was the *graphe asebeias/ἀσεβείας γραφή* (lawsuit for impiety). An examination of the known impiety suits brought in the 5th century BCE in Athens, including the cases of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Diagoras of Melos, and Socrates, would illustrate that they tended to coincide with periods of acute political tension or instances when the civic solidarity or cult practices of the city were seen to be compromised in some way (Drachmann, 1922; Bauman, 1990; Filonik, 2013). The trial of Socrates presents the most prominent example. According to the indictment presented by Meletus, Anytus and Lycon, Socrates was found guilty of not recognizing the gods that the city recognizes, but introducing other new divinities (*daimonia*); he is also guilty of “corrupting” the youth (Plato, 1997, *Apology* 24b).

As Parker (1996) and Stone (1988) point out, the real explanation of this indictment is connected with the recent horrors of the Peloponnesian war, the overthrow of the democracy, and the tyranny of the Thirty, among whom were some of Socrates’

youthful friends (Critias and Alcibiades). Thus, not the belief in natural gods, but the unrelenting questioning of all matters of public and private life and association with anti-democratic oligarchs made Socrates “dangerous” for the newborn democracy. In other words, he questioned the basic social glue, the *homonoia*/*Ομόνοια*, and therefore had to be eliminated.

The same reason explains the condemnation of the notorious atheist Diagoras of Melos, who was driven out of Athens. It was not his impiety that exacerbated this, but he had treated the holy things of the Eleusinian Mysteries as open property, thus exposing and insulting them (Winiarczyk, 2016). This example shows that the concept of impiety was connected with concrete violation of religious traditions of a particular community and offending its sensibilities.

These examples demonstrate that before the appearance of the idea of one true God, there was no objective basis for considering someone as an *atheist* and treating him as a “criminal” for denying the gods. There was no notion of the divine will as an all-encompassing and absolute power that knows everything and judges everyone. Therefore, even if someone rejected traditional gods, it was not considered a fundamental violation. It could be seen as impiety or negligence, but the concept of atheism as an all-encompassing evil did not exist. Only the appearance of the idea of one true God and the association of this idea with unlimited power and claims to know everything gave the concept of *atheist* a negative meaning. Thus, an atheist began to be considered a criminal who perverts society and denies the principle of creation and the source of universal good.

Atheos as Civic Negligence

To comprehend intolerant policies towards non-believers, we should consider how ancient societies formally defined and prosecuted impiety. The dominant interpretation of the long history of Western thought is that there is a straight and unbroken line of development from the trial of Socrates in fourth-century BCE Athens to the inquisitorial tribunals of early modern Europe. In the popular account, the self-proclaimed martyrdom of Socrates at the hands of a religious establishment is presented as the first persecution of free thought by an intolerant dogma. But the interpretation of a direct line of development between ancient and early modern attitudes towards unbelief fails to understand the fundamental differences between them. Unlike later theocratic and inquisitorial societies, which developed mechanisms to investigate private interior belief, the ancient Mediterranean did not have an inquisitorial system of thought-policing. What classical cities prosecuted as impiety (*asebeia*) was not interior unbelief (*doxa/dόξα*). It was rather certain visible acts of contempt for the gods and established civic rituals (*ta nomizomena/τὰ νομιζόμενα*).

Classical Athenian law provided one specific and public means for prosecuting and punishing religiously deviant behavior: the *graphē asebeias* (lawsuit for impiety). *Asebeia* is the privative form of *sebeia* or *eusebeia*, words usually anglicized as “piety,” but which more accurately translate as “appropriate civic respect” or “reverence for order” or “due honor paid to social and celestial superiors” (Mikalson, 1983; Parker, 1996). To commit *asebeia* meant not that one held private heretical beliefs or even engaged in non-official worship, but rather that one performed a public act of contempt for the gods of the city or its traditional ritual infrastructure that

bound the citizen body together. A range of offenses came under the umbrella of *asebeia*, from destroying the olive trees in the territory of a gods' precinct, grazing cattle on a temple estate, and striking a priest to introducing foreign cults and ritually parodying state mysteries (MacDowell, 1978; Todd, 1993).

The procedures for trying impiety charges were also completely decentralized and non-clerical. Classical Athens did not have an inquisitorial system or even a professional class of theologians who interpreted a single set of scriptures or had any formal jurisdiction over sacrificial practices. Sacrifices were offered by magistrates elected by lot or by members of families that performed hereditary civic service to the gods (Garland, 1984). Furthermore, a public trial for impiety was not heard by an ecclesiastical court interested in saving the defendant's soul but by a lay jury (*dikastērion/δικαστήριον*) of hundreds of ordinary Athenian citizens selected by lot and presided over by an elected magistrate known as the *archōn basileus* (Harrison, 1971). It was a political trial that took place in the civic center of the democracy, where the plaintiff and defendant presented their cases to the city's political elite in the light of recently passed legislation or civic precedents that served the immediate political interests of the polis (Bauman, 1990).

This civic orientation is what makes the word *atheos* function in classical Athenian discourse as an abusive term, not as an atheoretical position. As already mentioned, the word *atheos* initially served as an adjective meaning "without gods," which could also mean that someone "had been deserted by" or "acted ungodly toward" a deity or failed to give the usual honors to the local gods (Drachmann, 1922; Winiarczyk (2016). However, when