Fear and Loathing in Ancient Athens

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Preface to the English edition

The German original of this book was published in 2000, a long time ago in terms of academic research. This revised English edition has certain limitations. In the German original, it was possible to take into account publications down to 1998, and even some that appeared in 1999. It would, however, have been impossible to read and comment on everything published in subsequent years, so great has been the volume of books and articles dealing with fifth-century Athenian history. In fact, a glance through recent publications on Greek history reveals that only some of them are really relevant, since just a few deal with the issues touched on in this book. Many new books are in fact textbooks or "companions" (the plague of the twenty-first century), which rarely present new interpretations or bold readings of Athenian history. I have thus been very selective in introducing recent scholarship into the footnotes (and even more so into the text). Recent studies that are missing here are either not relevant, or (I suspect, for the most part) they simply escaped my attention. Time becomes an increasingly scarce commodity.

This book is a "thesis" in the true sense of the word, in that it presents a clear statement of the importance of religion for Athenians in a time of crisis. In a nutshell, as readers of Asterix and Obelix already know, the only thing that the Gauls in general, and the superstitious Obelix in particular, really feared was that "the sky would fall on his head". The argument here is that the Athenians, stricken by a terrible plague, the horrors of war and the loss of an empire, similarly feared that "the sky would fall on their heads". For such is the standard response to calamity in pre-modern societies, in the context of religion and religious strategies. In other words: religion mattered and was far from being a "dead issue". There is a tendency to maintain that the Athenians of what has been called the "Greek Enlightenment", with their wide-ranging and penetrating philosophy, were just like us: sceptical and witty modernists who underwent the acid test of the (real) Enlightenment. We

must, however, keep reminding ourselves that, with the exception of a few zealous but marginalized philosophers, Athenian society was characterized by religious traditions based on the fundamental belief that (a) gods exist, (b) they could influence our world and (c) it is advisable to keep in with them if one wants to avoid the consequences of neglecting the divine.

In such a context, events such as the Arginusae trial, or the impiety trials of philosophers, especially the one against Socrates – events that have disturbed the Athenians' modern admirers, because they reveal an "ugly" side to "our" sublime Greeks – appear in another light. It is argued here that some major events of Athenian history during the Peloponnesian War should be seen as motivated by religious, or, in Doddsian terms, "irrational" concerns.

The original book resulted from a Konstanz PhD thesis supervised by Wolfgang Schuller (and examined by Robert Parker of Oxford). Even if after this revision it feels like a new book, the general tenor and direction have remained much the same, for all that I might have changed my mind about some (minor) issues. *Fear and Loathing* was first translated into Romanian (in 2006) and benefited from a useful index provided by the translator Victor Cojocaru that has found its way into the English edition. There were several reviews, two positive (B. Smarczyk in *Klio* 86 [2003]: 246–9; M. Dillon in the *Classical Review* 52 [2002]: 90–92), one euphoric (by the late Karl Christ, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* [18 August 2001]), one critical but balanced (W. Nippel in *H-Soz-u-Kult* [10 October 2001]) and one utterly hostile (B. Bleckmann in *Historische Zeitschrift* 277 [2003]: 700–01 – easily explained in the light of the footnotes in Chapter 8).

It has been gratifying to observe, during the past few years, what Robert Parker has called a growing "underswell of resistance to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's 'polis religion' model of Greek religion" (in *Classical Review* 60 [2010]: 477–8). My first two chapters can be viewed as an early contribution to this "underswell", since I struck a blow already in 2000 for the importance of individual belief or "personal piety" (see further Rubel 2011, 2013) as a fundamental criterion for any social aspects of religion (Faraone [2008] and Boedeker [2008] also illustrate a growing interest in private aspects of religion). There have been some very interesting recent studies of religious issues during the Peloponnesian War, and it is pleasing to note that M. A. Flower (2009) and D. M. Schaps (2011) – among others – draw pretty much the same conclusions from the evidence as I did more than ten years ago, with the proviso, however, *Germanica non leguntur*. R. Mitchell-Boyask, too, in his important book *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* (2008), is as convinced as I was while writing *Stadt in Angst*, that the "great Plague" had a still underestimated major impact on the morals and behaviour of the Athenians. P. Cartledge (2009) has argued that the Athenians were, indeed, correct to convict Socrates of impiety; they performed a collective civic rite of purification, "purifying the citizen body by purging it of a cancerous religious traitor" (Cartledge 2009: 89). Much the same, with almost the same arguments, could have been read in Rubel (2000: 342–63), and you can read it again in Chapter 9. The bottom

line, however, is that my ideas on the importance of religious fear among ordinary Athenians cannot have been too far-fetched.

Perhaps this will be the major benefit of an English edition of this rather old book: to see that some of my ideas will be received, and, with luck, well received, in the Anglo-American world, and also by those who do not read German. In this context, might I dare to relate a story about Louis Robert? It is said that in the late 1940s, at a time when Franco-German friendship was not yet as cordial as it is today, he always asked, at the beginning of his undergraduate courses at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, whether there was anyone in the class who did not know German. Monsieur Robert was a very small man, of a generally humble appearance, and he used to ask this question in a low, quiet voice. When, as usual, several young men, who were often veterans of the Second World War, proudly raised their hands, Robert leapt around like a dervish, screaming at the top of his suddenly stentorian voice: "In three weeks you know German!" Well, times they are a-changin'. German is no longer the most important *Wissenschaftssprache* in the field of *Altertumswissenschaften*. But the famous saying of the German scholar H. Heimpel is still valid: "*Literaturkenntnis schützt vor Neuentdeckungen*" (knowledge of literature prevents new discoveries).

That this book is now available in English is owed to one individual. Michael Vickers was firmly convinced that it should have more readers, even though he does not necessarily agree with all of my conclusions. In some respects, though, I think that we may be pretty much birds of a feather, in that we both like Eastern Europe (the "Wild East"), and prefer a lively thesis to books that overuse the word "perhaps". Michael not only convinced the publisher, Steven Gerrard, of the importance (his word) of this book, but he also took on the difficult task of putting a useful but rough English translation by Alina Piftor into something a little less like "Translationese", which would have been impossible for me to provide. Thanks are due to all three: Michael, Steven and Alina. Thanks are also due to the VEUK-Club of Konstanz, the Alumni-association of my Alma Mater in Germany, with its president, Hanns Fahlbusch, which provided a contribution to the translation costs.

In conclusion, some apologies to the reader. My teacher Wolfgang Schuller once told me of a book, written in German by a foreign scholar, and published in his series at Konstanz. It received a rather favourable review, but the reviewer drew attention to grammatical errors and idiomatic ambiguities in the text, and added that the editor should have had imposed his authority more vigorously. As he read these lines, Wolfgang smiled and thought to himself, "You should have seen the manuscript!" I thus apologize for all the anaconda-like sentences with no end. Many were cut to pieces by Michael Vickers, but some may have survived together with "Germanisms". For the German original of this book, I occasionally used German editions of books that were in fact originally written in English, and I certainly used the German originals as well, even if there might be English translations. I abstained from including page references to English editions for practical and economic reasons. I also could not resist the urge to use this somewhat

immodest title, but it is in fact an accurate translation of *Stadt in Angst. Religion und Politik während des Peloponnesischen Krieges*. To those who are annoyed by the long, detailed, and very un-British notes (you will be), I recommend Anthony Grafton's book on the history of the footnote, which is, or so it would appear, a German invention.[1]

1
Introduction

Nun sag, wie hast du's mit der Religion?
Du bist ein herzlich guter Mann,
Allein, ich glaub, du hälst nicht viel davon.[1]

1.1 Religion and the Peloponnesian War

When Socrates met Euthyphro in front of the Stoa Basileios, near the entrance to the law courts, the famous philosopher told him of the accusations that had been brought against him. When explaining the charges – that Socrates was the "inventor" of new deities (ποιητὴν εἶναι θεῶν), and that he did not believe in the ancestral gods (δ᾽ἀρχαίους [θεούς] οὐ νομίζοντα) – Euthyphro was hardly surprised. On the contrary, he observed that such an accusation was likely to be successful, because such calumnies would easily find their way to the ears of the mob, a fact of which the accuser Meletus was well aware (εἰδὼς ὅτι εὐδιάβολα τὰ τοιαῦτα πρὸς τοὺς πολλούς).[2]

Euthyphro, presented as a seer and an expert soothsayer, is usually taken as a conservative representative of traditional religiosity and, as such, as an expert in religious matters: the sort of specialist that Socrates confuted with dialogues in his characteristic style.[3] Euthyphro's observation, presented shortly before Socrates' trial for impiety (399 BCE), that the Demos would easily adopt the charge of religion profanation, or at least its significant points, is thus expressed by an authoritative voice.

At first sight, however, the statement of this specialist in religious matters is astonishing. Such imputations of religious intolerance seem unacceptable for democratic Athens during the classical period, labelled by K. Popper, for example, an "Open Society" in a well-known paper.[4] Was Pericles not correct when, in his famous speech for the war dead, he praised the tolerance of democracy in the context of which everybody is granted personal freedom to the highest degree? Aristotle expresses the same opinion about an Athenian democracy that allowed everyone to live as they pleased:[5] ζῆν ὡς βούλεταί τις. Furthermore, many recent publications on Greek religion mention that institutions within the polis did not

care for the "orthodoxy" of their citizens, a concept that was in fact alien to polytheism. Instead, they focused on the correct practice of religion (orthopraxy) and, as such, they were concerned as to whether citizens were fulfilling their legal religious obligations.[6]

The basic freedom from dogma in Greek religion, a religion that lacked the organization of a centralized "church", or any hierarchical structure, or any priestly class with exclusive special knowledge, is always underlined by modern scholars in order to differentiate it from modern religious conceptions dominated by Christianity.[7] When analysing the passage from Plato, we might also have to take into account the possibility that the author might have exaggerated slightly in denouncing what in his view was the outrageous injustice brought against his famous teacher on account of the Athenians, as a violent deed of the Demos and as a judicial assault.[8] Could it be that Plato's viewpoint – present throughout *Euthyphro* – came about only on account of the denunciation of Socrates, without corresponding in any way to Athenian public opinion in *c*. 400?

When considering more closely, however, the period for which according to Plato Euthyphro offers his view concerning the general atmosphere of the time, and looking back as far as the 430s, religious issues move to centre stage. This interval of around thirty years, when the Athenians lost not just a war, but also a maritime empire, when they experienced two oligarchic coups, and when the population fell to less than half on account of plague and war, was dominated by religious themes.[9] That they are not expressed in an obvious manner is due to the reticence of Thucydides, the main source for this period. The great historian refers to religion-related issues but rarely and insufficiently; to a certain extent, he excludes religion on principle.[10] Nonetheless, this phase of Athenian history witnessed important events that are studied more for political analysis than for their indisputable religious significance. The same period of Athenian democracy is marked by numerous charges of impiety brought against philosophers[11] who had criticized religion, but mostly against the persons who had mutilated the Herms and profaned the Eleusinian Mysteries in 415 BCE. Such religious trials were unique to this period.[12] It is thus legitimate to talk about a "heated" atmosphere at Athens at the end of the fifth century, expressed through the trials judged by the Assembly and by the courts, where the accused were charged with religious offences.

Otherwise, scholarly attention is attracted by a series of new gods and cults, "borrowed" during this interval; there is still no firm explanation for this development. Bendis, Sabazius, Cybele, Asclepius and Adonis make their solemn entrance to the city, thus enlarging the spectrum of the traditionally worshipped divinities. At the same time, in 411/10 there was a revision and codification of Solon's calendar for cults and festivals. This measure is rightly regarded as the strongest traditional element of conservative religious politics.[13]

There was also an important religious component, often played down, in the 406 prosecution of the generals who had won the battle of Arginusae.[14] These genuine

religious disputes had from the start a direct influence upon the history of the city. Because Alcibiades, probably the most skilled general of his day, was convicted of impiety, he was pushed into the arms of his enemies. Similarly, the naval victory of 406 became a defeat *post factum*, through the collective conviction of the generals. In the same context belong the major architectural monuments built during the war; through their function and configuration, they underline traditional religious virtues, frequently interpreted as the influence of a conservative current.[15]

What is often referred to as the Plague of Athens was of crucial importance during the Peloponnesian War. Moreover, it constitutes the starting-point of this paper. It is essential to realize that this (still not entirely understood) malady, which killed about a third of the population between 430 and 427/26, was the crucial event in the life of the Athenians at the beginning of the war. The consequences of this plague marked the public conscience for a long time. The religious dimension of the epidemic, interpreted from a pre-modern perspective as a punishment from the gods, has often been overlooked, largely because of Thucydides' rationalist approach.[16] Some scholars have of course commented correctly and provided a real insight into the religious aspects of these events and of their consequences.[17] Nevertheless, there is still no work on these consequences as a homogeneous system of a crisis, defined in its essence through the experience of the plague and of the difficulties caused by the war.[18]

One wonders whether, generally speaking, these events and their consequences, with their predominantly religious connotations, should be seen in the context of a coherent overall picture of religious anxiety. I refer here to the charges of impiety brought against philosophers, to the persecution of the profaners of the Mysteries and mutilators of the Herms, to the admission of new deities in the city, to the conviction of the victorious generals after the battle of Arginusae and, eventually, to Socrates' fate. Against this background, we must examine to what extent the period of the Peloponnesian War can be seen as a crisis period when, given the religious hysteria of the mob, the Assembly voted many inducements to radical action and important decisions, relevant in the context of the war. Among them should be mentioned the deposition of Pericles in 430, the recall of Alcibiades, and the conviction of the generals after Arginusae. As W. Furley has succinctly put the matter: "religion was anything but a dead issue".[19]

This then is the central theme of my research. The decision-maker, and thus the sovereign of the democratic state, was the popular Assembly, where all Athenian citizens, regardless of origin and social status, voted on the political interests of the state.[20] Obviously people from lower socio-economic groups delivered most votes during the session of the Assembly.[21]

This is why, in the context of this book, the opinions of the Demos – which the politicians took into account or should have influenced – will take centre stage. Such research is, however, handicapped because the Athenian Demos is less represented in the sources. The historians and philosophers of that time naturally belonged to social elites and usually shared the political outlook of their aristocratic

or oligarchic upbringing; they do not have many good things to say about the fickle Demos, and even then, only if its concerns were brought forcefully to their attention.[22] Their interpretation of the behaviour of the masses during important political votes is subordinated to their elitist view of the world; this is why they seldom saw democracy as a congenial political system.[23]

Plato and the "Old Oligarch" saw the Assembly less as an institution that supported the state than as a meeting of the mob, where illiterates and the poor could speak against the norms of reason.[24] Nevertheless, even these tendentious views provide enough material for the present research, because the contemporary interpretations and estimations are also based on events that are open to fresh interpretation.

Methodologically, the research has to be conducted from the other direction, since the literary sources – written by members of the elite – only allow indirect insights into the attitude of the Demos on religious issues. Thucydides, for example, does not seem to be at all interested in religion, since he eliminated it for the most part from his concept of history. He does, however, provide some ideas about the religious life of his contemporaries, if only between the lines. For example, when he wants to denounce the superstitions of the Demos as old-fashioned and irrational, he inevitably ends up speaking of widely held superstitions and religious fears.[25] Thus, when talking about the plague, he mentions a very puzzling oracle; in this context, people associated the sombre prophecy with the plague, thus propagating the idea, which led to a general state of anxiety.[26] Through this episode, Thucydides provides an important fact that he would have otherwise certainly omitted, had he not wanted to draw attention to the narrow-mindedness of the mob.

The orators – with some exceptions – and Aristophanes were more explicit. Given their professional background, they had to frequent the Agora; they were thus well aware of generally accepted opinion relating to religious issues, and they made their own statements about widespread beliefs. For the most part, the orators display a rather more positive attitude to democracy and, unlike historians and philosophers, they serve mainly a "common ideology".[27]

Texts survive of popular decrees regulating the conduct of cults, or referring to the development and endowment of sanctuaries, and they provide additional information regarding state organization of religious life. Other epigraphic sources (votive epigrams, for example) constitute particularly eloquent testimony in the field of private religiosity.[28] In addition, the ever-growing archaeological material, mostly discovered during the past few decades, provides more knowledge about the day-to-day religiosity of the Athenians. Thus, after 430, the year of the plague, there are indications that the Agora witnessed the invigoration of old heroic cults.[29] Even the fact that during the war, despite the difficult financial situation, Athenians retained an interest in erecting expensive temples and developing cult-related monuments (often with distinct archaic characteristics) provides indirect information regarding the status of religion during this period.[30] By including the results of recent archaeological research, the present study is more evidence-based than older accounts such as the fundamental work of E. R. Dodds.

The documentary material is heterogeneous and the presentation of the literary sources, mainly referring to issues related to politics and the state, is tendentious (and thus unsatisfactory). This is why it seems more appropriate to measure the Athenians' attitude to religion less through the words transmitted by written tradition than through the attested actions and reactions of the Demos. It will thus first be necessary to analyse the religious implications of various democratic decisions, with their consequences for the fate of Athens. In this context, it is worth considering whether the votes of the Assembly were based in the main on political, rational, concepts or, in view of the period of crisis, whether religious fears and considerations were given more importance than usual.

1.2 Religion and politics

1.2.1 The concept of "religion" in the study of religion[31]

In his handbook on Greek religion, W. Burkert begins with a brief presentation of the history of research before developing the subject both chronologically and thematically. He naturally starts with the idea that a phenomenon such as "Greek religion", or "religion" in general, exists *per se*, and the reader is expected already to possess a fairly clear idea of the underlying concepts. The author can thus reasonably count on the pre-scientific understanding of the reader, with sufficient understanding of the relevant concepts, to make detailed explanation superfluous.

To proceed in the same manner would, however, run the risk of taking as read concepts that are open to question. It is not that one hesitates to enter *in medias res* or because one wishes to see problems where they do not exist. One is simply trying to draw a distinction between "religion" and "politics", the distinction to which attention was already drawn in the heading of this sub-section. In view of the current state of research on "Greek religion", the distinction perhaps requires a brief explanation. Its purpose is to ensure that the separation of the ancient concept of politics will not be considered methodologically inadmissible; it was only in modern times, in the context of secularization, that a distinction has been made between "religion" on the one side and "politics" on the other.

In what follows, we shall consider a topic with several possible answers in the context of research on religion. This study has many branches that include, for example, the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion, the phenomenology of religion or, indeed, *Religionswissenschaft*. The existence of such research implies a certain consensus about the subject.

It is indisputable that in all known cultures there are phenomena that we call "religious". "Religion, in one way or another, is present in each human society."[32] The exact definition of religion is, however, much disputed within the disciplines constituting *Religionswissenschaft*. Moreover, if scholars in the field of religious studies have reached a consensus, it is that there is no universal definition

of religion, specific to all cultures.[33] In the first place, we cannot formulate such a universal definition, since in most languages there is no equivalent for the word we use so freely and for the meaning that it implies. The title of the research topic itself thus reveals the Western origin of the concept.[34]

Ancient Greek (unfamiliar with the concept) lines up with most of the languages that do not have an equivalent for the term "religion".[35] The fact, moreover, that the concept has such a broad meaning suggests that so far as the historicity of the concept in central Europe is concerned, it evolved rather late, as a post-Reformation concept; previously, "religion" was related exclusively to Christian thinking.[36]

Thanks to Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion, which in many ways provided the foundation for the modern study of religion, research grew away from the Christocentric idea that was still dominant during the Renaissance. In the twentieth century, inspired by the important ethno-sociological writings of E. Durkheim and B. Malinowski, there developed a predominantly functional concept of religion. This held that in the first place, religion constitutes a social phenomenon; such a view progressively replaced the hitherto dominant theological orientation within the study of religion, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, even R. Otto supported the new perspective.[37] In this philosophy, religion is studied not for its spiritual content, concerning specific manifestations of belief, or for its relevance for individuals, but mostly for its social bases and its socially stabilizing functions, in particular in the context of ritual. A functional assessment came to prevail and with further support from N. Luhmann's systemic theory, it has essentially determined current research within *Religionswissenschaft*.[38]

With regard to the field of religious representations, there is a consensus that religion serves as a meaningful symbolic system. In so far as distinct cultural determinations are concerned, this system usually acquires the function of a model to explain the world, whose meaningful elements help people recognize a certain order beyond the apparently chaotic conditions of nature.[39]

Kehrer harshly described current discussion of a universal and generally unifying definition as "an uncertain dispute around a functionalist or materialist concept of religion". He also believes that, in this context, the two opinions are different because the method of materialist definition, following a historico-hermeneutical tradition, aims to show what religion *is*, while the functional method, supported by the socio-ethnological theory, aims to point out what religion *does*.[40]

The fact that there is no consensus with regard to the exact scientific definition of religion is indeed an impediment, but at the same time "this is not a catastrophe, since the object of study remains".[41]

The incompatibility of definitions does not bring research on concrete religious systems to a close. And what is more, even though a biologist would find it similarly difficult to define the concept of "life", a psychologist that of "soul" or a historian that of "history", not many would question the scientific character of biology, psychology, or history and the outcomes of their knowledge.

1.2.2 On the similarity between religious systems

In view of all this, it is important to acknowledge that so far as the study of "Greek religion" is concerned, the term "religion" should be considered a modern one dominated by a Christian vision; the Greeks did not even have a name for it. The science of religion exists only as a mark of Western culture and one cannot conceive of it without taking into consideration the imaginative horizon of Occidentals. Consequently, this historical fact determines the nature of the questions that a Western scholar of religion asks. "It is utterly naïve to speak of promoting an 'impartial', or 'objective' approach to religion."[42]

This naturally leads to an essential issue of theoretical knowledge and epistemology that makes comparative religion difficult beyond cultural borders, and this was increasingly debated during the twentieth century within the study of Greek religion.[43] A. D. Nock used to present the issue during his seminars by means of an anecdote. He spoke of an anthropologist exposed to a danger similar to that of a classical scholar when studying Greek religion. The Danish anthropologist Knut Rassmussen asked an Eskimo chief whether or not he or his people believed in gods. The Eskimo looked blank and could only reply: "We do not believe; we fear."[44] This story shows clearly that anthropologists, like scholars in the field of religious studies, are determined by specific cultural matrices and thus often formulate questions that do not really concern the object of their study.

This observation, referring as it does to the distinction between religious concepts marked by the monotheism of a deeply secularized modern industrial society, and that of pre-modern cultures, may simply indicate the profound gap that after 2,500 years separates the world of our concepts from that of the Greeks of the classical period. Consequently, the latest research has implicitly insisted upon the basic difference and strangeness of ancient Greek culture and its religion.[45]

1.2.3 Religion and polis

Fundamental to such research is the view formed during the course of the last century that "religion" and "politics" represented in Greek states a phenomenon opposed to modern concepts, and that a distinction of a kind that would be natural in the way both fields are regarded today would be anachronistic in the field of Greek culture.[46] The principal cult obligations in Greek cities were established by means of documents that today would be regarded as purely political, and this led to the widespread view that it was not possible to draw a distinction between politics and religion in the sphere of public life, since in the world of the polis, the two phenomena were mutually sustaining. Such inseparability of "religion" and "politics" is always – and correctly – defined in recent studies as a particular characteristic of the Greek city-state. In this sense, stimulated by important discoveries in anthropology and the sociology of religion, the focus has always been on the functional aspect of Greek religion and on the *social* importance of religion.

Extraordinary importance therefore attaches to the socially unifying function of religious practices and rites that rarely took place in classical Greece in private,

but frequently as part of a public cult. Much later, a secularized modern period imposed a distinction between the area of "the political" in the modern sense of the word, and that of religion.[47] Modern research has paid tribute to the realization that there is a basic unity between religion and politics through the concept of "polis religion",[48] which enables the modern observer to regard the often elusive intertwining of the two areas as an essential characteristic of the ancient city-state.

Plato himself defines the meaning of religious practice in precisely the same way, in presenting correct and legal cult practice not only as a precondition for the happy life of all "good" people, but also as the foundation of the political community.[49] The fact that religion typically dominated the entire public life of the polis is clear in the case of Athens from the annual appointment of archons. After the candidate had made a sacred oath in a certain part of the Agora (the political centre of the city), he had to repeat the same words on the Acropolis, the most important religious centre of Athens.[50] In this way, the archon's duties attest the unity of political and religious functions. The eponymous archon, the highest state magistrate, was charged with, for example, organizing important celebrations and processions. The basileus, besides his judicial functions, was also in charge of the traditional cults, celebrations and sacrifices. The polemarchs had similar duties.[51] The concept of the special importance of religious institutions for the prosperity and well-being of the entire city is, moreover, clear from the oath by which the ephebes of Athens swore to protect by arms the "sacred" and "sacralized" institutions of the polis.[52]

The polis also regulated by law official relationships with the most important protecting divinities of the city-state, whose support had to be ensured. For Plato, earning the favour of the gods through an official cult was the foundation of any civic order, and religion (τὰ ἱερά) was always the starting point. Aristotle too concludes that the state should have the gods as its primary concern.[53] The economic or military prosperity and success (τύχη) of a political community depended in large part on a serious concern with cult-related duties.[54]

The institutions of the polis were thus charged with the correct organization of sacrifices, with the creation of the official calendar of celebrations, as well as with the construction and maintenance of religious monuments. In a word, the city regulated all the interests of its religious life.[55] From birth, through "rites of passage", initiation, marriage, to death, religion and cult practice were an indisputable, natural part of public and private life. There were no exceptions – war and peace or commerce and agriculture – religious rituals accompanied all activities.[56] Religion was, in the terms of its social function, a cohesive force that guaranteed the stability of the polis, and which played an integrating role, especially during domestic or external crises.[57] This is why, in hard times, the city gods were naturally seen as the protectors of the community, being invoked together with other divinities.[58] Popular feelings of belonging to the community were reinforced by collective cult practice.[59]

The polytheistic religion of the polis was characterized by a freedom from dogma, as there were no mandatory beliefs, no authoritarian clergy with special

knowledge, and no "church". There was thus no risk of heresy. Nevertheless, despite all the apparent openness of polytheism, there was an "unwritten" duty to acknowledge and attend the cults of the city. This is why the very acknowledgement of fundamental beliefs and the public participation of all the citizens at solemn sacrifices and cult-related activities guaranteed the favour of gods. Without this, the community believed there was no hope of stability. In addition, fragile rural communities felt themselves defenceless without the protection of gods; they felt vulnerable against the menace and danger of a hostile environment in a period when war was a natural instrument of politics.[60] S. Price was thus right to criticize the still widely held view that the Greeks' polytheism, unlike Islam or Christianity, offered a relatively liberal and open religious system: "This romantic view of Greek religious liberalism has little to commend it."[61]

1.2.4 Religion and psyche

A combination of the realization of the way that cults within Greek religion served to support the state, and an increasingly functionalist orientation within *Religionswissenschaft*, has led to the impression that Greek religion, and even more the religion of Graeco-Roman antiquity as it is viewed by classical scholars, should be understood in the first place from the perspective of the social significance of its symbolic content. Although such an approach is justified, the functional aspect in so far as Greek religion is concerned has brought about a certain narrowing of vision.[62]

This slightly one-sided consideration of the social and symbolic dimension of Greek religion originates not least in the fact that the functional aspects of the Greek religion, with no confessions (mentioned in the sources, at least), are better described from existing sources. In addition, the psychological and emotional sides of religious practice frequently play no part in historical analysis.[63] At the beginning, I referred to the fundamental issue of "otherness" specific to ancient culture, attested by the very fact that, unusually in our opinion, religion dominated the public life of the polis. This distinction leads to an epistemological issue that directly concerns research on Greek religion, and is thus impossible to solve. I underline this strangeness and distance that separate us from the realities of Greek culture. Nonetheless, one should not overlook (if preoccupations concerning Greek religion are not to end in an impasse) that certain phenomena that bear no relation to our own world, and that never fully cast off their strangeness, must and can be "translated" (or at least paraphrased) so that we understand them. At the same time, little can be achieved by the appeals of scholars who have dedicated themselves to anthropological comparisons, meant to ensure the necessary distance from the object of study, by underlining its foreign character and the heterogeneity of the phenomena studied.[64]

The dilemma is that there is on the one hand a danger of falsifying the object of study during the process of description; this is something that scholars of religion expose themselves to when they focus too much on models dominated by

the Western tradition. On the other hand, by adopting models specific to other cultures, they end up speaking a very different language and will thus cease to be understood. In practice, this means that in describing the religious practices of antiquity, it is inevitable that we should employ concepts dominated by Christian tradition and difficult to separate from its connotations. Concepts such as "belief" or "piety" are often rejected as categories to determine certain phenomena of Greek religion. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore them.[65]

To enable a comparative understanding within *Religionswissenschaft*, we must use a "metalanguage" in order to name and classify religious phenomena. The related process of abstraction inevitably involves "an estrangement of the symbolic system elaborated and, of course, an alienation from the religious life itself".[66]

In spite of the obvious differences between our perception of religion and that specific to ancient Greeks, and in spite of efforts to produce a universal and wide-ranging definition of religion, we can however assess theoretical knowledge of the ancient system of symbols and see that there are "certain fundamentals", as Stevenson justly stated.[67] In other words, there are certain essential points that make comparison between religions possible.

As for comparisons with Greek religion, A. Henrichs once made the very pertinent observation: "If, in the given circumstances, we dare to relate to the present, we end up facing Antiquity only if we remain aware of the totally different character of our historical situation."[68]

If there is thus a slightly "anachronistic" distinction between "religion" on the one hand and "politics" on the other, at least from an analytical perspective, this does not in any way contradict the original statement, since any distinction is not substantial.

By focusing research on the social function and on the symbolic character of collective cult practice, attention will be drawn away from an aspect of Greek religiosity that has been more or less ignored in the specialized literature and which goes beyond the purely political. Its social function apart, religion is without doubt an emotional and psychological phenomenon that can be classified in the category of "religious experience".[69]

Apart from its social function, religion always finds a place in each individual's life and, as such, it is related to "experience". In this sense, R. Otto's view is of fundamental importance; he defined the "sacred" as a basic category of religious experience within which the "numinous" serves as the power of divine action, qualitatively different from man and the world.[70] As a systematic category, the sacred is the "totally other" opposed to mankind.[71] This opposition regarding the insurmountable essence of the sacred towards mankind makes the latter feel fear, fright, veneration; these are phenomena that Otto defines as "sentiment of being" (*Kreaturgefühl*).[72]

Otto's aprioristic concept of the sacred was especially influential, for all that it was not an infallible method, being influenced by his religious experience. Beyond legitimate criticism, it refers in this sense to people's essential orientation towards another – or "totally other" – reality where we are obviously talking about an

essential experience, with a matching basis of experience in all traditional cultures, "seemingly related to the constant presumptions of a profound human existence".[73]

A. D. Nock offered some indications of the ways the religious customs and beliefs of the Greeks – so strange for moderns and oriented towards the community of the polis – existed "side by side with deep feelings of dependence and devotion and awe".[74] This "side by side" action of both dimensions of religion, of its functional and emotional sides – in a way the two sides of the same coin – should be properly taken into account in what follows.

In particular, fear of the gods is a category of fundamental importance, responding in large part to emotion; it therefore plays a pivotal role in our research. One deduces fear or respect for the gods from essential knowledge gained from the experience of surrendering to certain powers that are generally beyond personal control.[75] In the first instance, and as an easy example, we might invoke the natural powers whose concrete influences, such as the positive and negative actions of the forces of nature on the environment and vegetation, are perceived by people as such and are divinized in many polytheistic religions. With regard to what man cannot dominate, religious experience has always collided with an awareness of a limit to what can be rationally grasped. In this sense, the Enlightenment and Modernism have always kept alive a sense of the rational insoluble. Fear is thus related, perhaps, to a lack of progressive knowledge of the world within societies once described as "primitive" or "archaic" and, for this reason, any "Enlightenment pathos" is inappropriate in this sense.[76]

In contrast with the Greeks of the classical period, modern observers in our technological age see nature as "profane", but there are still essential unsolved mysteries, such as growth and decay, life and death, which could "surprise people who are not completely over-sophisticated".[77] This is why the basic comparison between religious phenomena appears to be fully justified, distanced as it is in time and beyond cultural frontiers, within the limits of the theoretical knowledge described.

In this sense, fear of the gods is related to "the basic experiences of Religion" and it thus appears as mankind's subjective response to the transcendence perceived in the uncontrollable forces of certain divine powers.[78] Man experiences a sense of fear, a *tremendum* (that has its origins in his conception of the divinity as fundamentally marked by its "otherness"), even when addressing Zeus as though he were a father.[79] Starting from the insurmountable gap between people and gods, a frequent theme in Greek myth (while venerating any essential superiority of the gods), man develops a sentiment of being that influences his actions and experiences related to the divine, characterized by submission.

Plato describes the relationship between people and gods as like the rapport between a master and his slaves.[80] In the field of Greek religion, we can invoke numerous relevant examples of the fear of gods as a necessary and integral part of religious beliefs.[81] Ζεὺς ὁ πάντων κύριος (Zeus the lord of everything) appears in Pindar, and in a Chorus in *Antigone* there is a celebration of the fall of the

Labdacids, brought to ruin by the arm of a mighty god that knows no mercy: οὐδ᾽ ἔχει λύσιν.[82]

There is also a brief sketch of the emotional repercussions of such fear during the early Hellenistic period at Athens in one of Theophrastus' *Characters*, in the entry on δεισιδαιμονία, a genuine "fear of the gods", but which, when taken to excess, leads to superstition.[83] Theophrastus gently lampoons, from an enlightened viewpoint, current religious customs, magical practices and the excessive fear of his fellow Athenians regarding supernatural forces.[84]

An essential observation in the field of *Religionswissenschaft* is the fact that individuals and communities experience not only submission to superior forces, but also dependence on them. Theognis clearly shows that no man might be responsible for personal success or achievement, since both derive from the gods.[85] Starting from such "absolute dependence" (*schlechthinnige Abhängigkeit*) – as Schleiermacher defines the phenomenon – people use magic or religion in an attempt to make these forces advance or recede, depending on their own intentions.[86]

This leads to another practically universal characteristic of religion, namely the fundamental belief that supernatural powers govern people's destinies and that their attitude towards people is determined, largely, by people's behaviour in relation to these forces.[87] That belief animated all religious facts and feelings of the Greeks, and it fundamentally determined the concept of "gift exchange" between people and gods.[88] The orators constantly recall the important practical influence of the gods on human destiny.[89] The gods are mainly present in battle, when, for example, they support one side by weakening the enemy forces, or when they indicate through mantic practices the expected outcome.[90]

The victory over the Persians, Herodotus assures us, was first that of the gods and then that of the Athenians, since the gods banished the Persian king.[91] The gods provide victory or determine defeats. Whoever defies a peace treaty reinforced through an oath to the gods – as the Spartans did in 382 BCE when they took the Theban Acropolis by surprise – will have no more victories in war. In this way, as Xenophon demonstrates, the Spartan catastrophe at the Battle of Leuctra (371 BCE) might be explained by the fact that they violated the treaty negotiated soon after the Theban victory under Epaminondas.[92] For both community and individuals, the favour of the gods was of equal significance, and it was the principal objective of religious practice to guarantee it.[93] We can see how, mostly in the area of offerings and sacrifices, individuals asked the gods for help to protect their children and their property, or to be guarded against disease. In exchange, the gods received thank-offerings for having saved people from danger, such as from shipwreck, for curing disease and many other such things.[94] Hard times, long wars with bad luck, natural catastrophes, diseases, poor harvests or other such misfortunes made the Greeks, and many other cultures, believe that the gods had forsaken them.[95]

Fear of divine punishment, or at least of not having the support of the city gods, is an understandable emotional response to expressions of oppressive poverty and of hard times. People's first reaction is to take religious measures, exemplified by

the German proverb "need teaches one to pray" (*Not lehrt beten*). Livy expressed the same idea in the pregnant sentence: *adversae res admonuerunt religionum*.[96]

Emotional reactions that have left perceptible traces in the social and public behaviour of the Athenians, as well as attempts at re-admission to the favour of the gods through religiously motivated actions, constitute the subject matter of our research. Finally, it is worth mentioning the three essential beliefs for the religion of the Athenians that H. Yunis once noted[97] are of fundamental importance when judging the events of the Peloponnesian War, namely: (a) the gods exist; (b) they are concerned about human affairs; (c) and there exists some form of reciprocity, however unequal, in the relationship between the gods and humans. Theophrastus elegantly put the essential rapport between the gods and humans in a nutshell: τριῶν ἕνεκα θυτέον τοῖς θεοῖς· ἢ γὰρ διὰ τιμὴν ἢ διὰ χάριν ἢ διὰ χρείαν τῶν ἀγαθῶν.[98]

In view of the emotional and psychological aspects of religion that are under-lined here, aspects that have their place together with social phenomena, it seems right to make an abstract differentiation between "religion" and "politics" for ana-lytical purposes, so long as it does not lead to the loss of the differences between modern individualizing religious concepts and the social accomplishments of reli-gion within the Greek polis. Modern Western religious practice still leaves room for the social dimension of religion. We think, for example, of the US president George Bush, Sr., who in 1991 attended special religious services together with his fellow citizens (and TV cameramen), in order to invoke, together with the American "community", divine support for the Gulf War. In the same way at Athens, the sphere of private piety and the fear of gods, as individual emotional reactions to an outside danger, held a special position within a religion dominated by collective cult practice. This interdependence between the two areas is also described by Euthyphro who, in the discussion with Socrates, defines sacrifice and prayer as equally important, not only for each individual in the private sphere, but also in the community. ἐὰν μὲν κεχαρισμένα τις ἐπίστηται τοῖς θεοῖς λέγειν τε καὶ πράττειν εὐχόμενός τε καὶ θύων, ταῦτ' ἔστι τὰ ὅσια καὶ σῴζει τὰ τοιαῦτα τοὺς τε ἰδίους οἴκους καὶ τὰ κοινὰ τῶν πόλεων.[99]

1.3 The Peloponnesian War as chronological frame

As we have just seen, there are important events in Athenian politics during the Peloponnesian War that clearly have an additional religious aspect. This observa-tion encourages a likely connection between the experience of war and religious practice. Furthermore, this phase of Athenian history appears to have been existen-tial, and the crisis that shattered the polis to the foundations seems to have entered the conscience of contemporaries, eclipsing the experiences of previous wars and preceding crises. In particular, we shall take note of the exceptional role of the effects of the plague at the beginning of the war, with its sky-high mortality rate that led, in addition to those fallen in battle, to a dramatic decrease in population.

An event with comparable demographic repercussions, if on a smaller scale, was the crushing defeat in Egypt in 454 BCE, when the Athenians unsuccessfully sent reinforcements led by the Libyan king Inaros against the Persians. By comparison, the Athenian reaction was logical and pragmatic when, after the loss of their fleet, the treasury of the Delian League was threatened by the Persians operating in the Aegean basin, and moved from Delos to Athens without any signs of panic or fear.[100] There is still no scholarly consensus regarding the number of the fallen, but judging by information supplied by Thucydides, it must have been rather large.[101] Despite heavy losses, the Athenians were little affected by this operation of the League, but the mysterious deaths of so many people during the epidemic gained in importance, since it only affected the Athenians within the city walls. Such death was rationally inexplicable for contemporaries, unlike a military defeat.

The possibility that the Peloponnesian War might be considered as a self-contained unit was first shown by Thucydides, who designated the two phases of the war as part of a unitary evolution, and who considered the interwar period between 421 and 415 not a peaceful interval, but more like a breathing space in the context of growing confrontation.[102]

Thucydides specialists are divided between "analysts" and "unitarians", who debate whether this dissection of the great historian really takes into account the situation of those times, or whether Thucydides – who could not have known at the beginning of the war how long it would last or how matters would turn out – has combined two designs. Perhaps after the conflict was reignited, during the events in Sicily, he improperly conflated struggles between the Delian League and the Peloponnesians, rather than treating them separately. This *Thukydidesfrage*, as it is often called, is a perfect example of a philological "Penelope's Loom",[103] and despite the view that one could never get the right answer, it has preoccupied generations of researchers, mostly within the German-speaking sphere.[104] It is certain that both contemporaries and those who lived after Thucydides took over his divided model.

Indeed, one can attribute the *Thukydidesfrage* to the exceptional influence of his work, which but a few talented imitators dared to oppose, as that situation could also be interpreted as a sustainable appreciation of his work.[105] The end of the war is not in question, since it was sealed when Athens capitulated and simultaneously lost its maritime empire, on which its power uniquely rested.

Another question is whether the military operations resumed after the cancellation of the thirty-year peace in 432/1 differ in any obvious manner from the earlier battles of the so-called first Peloponnesian War, or whether the entire period after the Persian wars, especially after 460, should be treated as a constant conflict between Sparta and Athens,[106] sometimes "hot" and other times "cold". The beginning of hostilities, related by Thucydides to the fact that the Peloponnesians believed the Athenians had violated the treaty, seems to have introduced a new dimension to the confrontation.

Overall, this war exceeded the previously known borders for regional conflicts, in that it extended first to the entire eastern Mediterranean, then the west, with

battles in Thrace and in the strategically important area of the Hellespont. This is especially the case if we take into account the disastrous losses and the geopolitical repercussions of the confrontation.[107]

Thus, from the perspective of time, space and ethics, the conflict developed beyond all imagining. Thucydides himself shows that his fellow historians, such as Herodotus or Hellanicus, did not view the period of growing Athenian influence after the Persian wars as a time of memorable events or important wars. This is why it would have been insufficiently researched or even absent from earlier literature.[108]

Although we should leave open the question as to whether the two events that Thucydides presents as a unified view of the Peloponnesian War represent a unit in reality, research on the period (both specialized and general) is significant for the purposes of this book. As we have just seen, exceptional historical-religious events, such as the acceptance of new gods or political events with a clear religious background, occur during the very period of the Peloponnesian War that Thucydides represents as a unity, as well as in its direct aftermath.

As stated earlier, this book is based on a clearly defined thesis, with a structured approach that guides the main questions, the "*Fragestellung*". The time of the Peloponnesian War is known as a period when religious aspects in many areas of domestic politics were decisive in determining action, and which made the Demos feel very unsafe, since the citizens assumed that the gods were no longer on their side. This state of anxiety was generated in particular by the experience of the plague and by the vicissitudes of war.

It is against this background that when significant events associated with a decisive religious moment are presented in what follows, there will be discussions of the internal political situation in the context of religious events, and perhaps more so than hitherto. With a clearly formulated thesis, however, our research is somewhat open to criticism. The broad synthesis and holistic approach to individual and specific heterogeneous phenomena inevitably bring a certain over-simplification in their wake.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that we shall not be dealing with an Athens "wearing sackcloth and ashes". The perceptible moments of religious hysteria are related to specific situations, marked by immediate fears with a particular cause. The exceptional dimension of this κίνησις μεγίστη (major revolution) and the profound experience of the crisis, especially with the plague as a key moment, truly contributed to a general tendency to religious anxiety on the part of the Athenian population. Religiously motivated fear arose easily in this context. Thus, religion and religiosity should be considered a kind of seismograph of the crisis, and the citizens' desire to thank the gods for their protection and favours gains an exceptional importance.

In the same 420s BCE, however, the course of the war was sometimes favourable to the Athenians. Nevertheless, taking an overall view of the Peloponnesian War from a religious perspective, disparate events contribute through their religious significance to the creation of a unitary and coherent picture: events that might appear as isolated flash points when analysed separately. The Athens of the

Peloponnesian War seems to have been marked by religious fear and a general predisposition towards religious issues, which during the crisis had its fall-out in politics. Nestor, the wise old man in Homer, described this attitude, in a phrase applicable beyond the frontiers of their Greek culture: πάντες δὲ θεῶν χατέουσ᾽ ἄνθρωποι.[109]

1.4 Structure and relevance of the book

The events and their consequences discussed here are mainly concerned with religious phenomena that arose during the Peloponnesian War, as well as with the internal political situation during the war. When focusing on such events, related as they are to the Athenians' religious scruples and fear of gods, significant events in domestic policy, such as the two oligarchic revolutions, can be treated only tangentially.

Two different ordering principles underlie the following chapters. Some sections focus on concrete events and on their religious implications, and are thus somewhat selective. Here, I analyse and describe significant cases and events as individual testimonies of an interdependent evolution. These include: the trials of the Sophists; the conflict caused by the mutilation of the Herms and the profanation of the Mysteries; the Arginusae trial; and the trial of Socrates. There are also, however, other chapters treated diachronically for objective reasons. Such chapters thus deal with important historical-religious phenomena that are present during the entire period under discussion, such as the unusual admittance of new deities and/or the development of places of worship during the war.

After an overview of the intellectual and historical situation at the end of the fifth century BCE, and after an initial venture into the issue of religious trials against philosophers, our research begins with the famous Plague of Athens. This was the key moment for the following period of the Peloponnesian War, marked as it was by religious fears. The repercussions of this epidemic on public morals and on the Athenian conscience perhaps provide the key for the better understanding of future events that were determined by religious scruples and by fear.

Athens, the cradle of democracy, does not appear as an exemplary "School of Hellas", at least during the Peloponnesian War, bearing in mind the religious trials of philosophers and the religiously inspired charges laid against political and military leaders (related to the mutilation of the Herms or the Arginusae trial). Besides all the great accomplishments of the Athenians that justly fill the handbooks, it must be stated unequivocally that the Athenians in the Assembly and in the Courts acted in conformity with the norms of 2,400 years ago when they sentenced to death those who had mutilated the Herms, or when they accused Socrates of impiety. Fifth-century BCE Athens was only the cradle, not the perfect fulfilment, of democracy.

This political system was not designed for the personal rights of the individual, but each citizen was a member and servant of democracy. By comparison with

our concepts of human and individual rights – the fruits of Christian ethics and modern philosophy – fifth-century Athenian society could not achieve much. The very prosecution of the genial and ironic Socrates, whom his disciples Xenophon and Plato sympathetically described as the innocent victim of a judicial assault, is still considered a mark of dishonour in the history of Athens. Nevertheless, Socrates would certainly have been among the first victims of the new order in his admirer and disciple Plato's ideal state.[110]

It is not that modern scholarship should still depend on idealistic views of Athenian democracy, nor that it should remain blind to negative aspects of the ancient state, as seen from the vantage point of our liberal and modern democratic views.[111] Naturally, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is still the prevalent view that Athenian democracy and the society it had promoted were essentially a good thing, and in fact the position is still dominant within classical scholarship.[112] This is why scholars find it easy to condemn as barbaric the harsh treatment meted out to profaners of religion; and yet in ancient terms, it was "the most natural thing in the world". It was as normal as the "treatment" – justly regarded as barbaric and condemned as such – suffered by an enemy city in antiquity; after a defeat, the male population would be killed, and the women (after being raped) sold together with their children into slavery. In this sense, J. T. Roberts is wholly correcct when she concludes: "By the standards of the late twentieth century, the Athenians were not very nice people."[113] Nor, by the same token, should these standards be applied to the Athenians who prosecuted Socrates.

Unpleasant feelings with regard to certain practices and convictions of the Athenians, stimulated by humanism and our current system of values, are probably responsible for the fact that even nowadays people want to recognize predominantly or solely political reasons for legal procedures or religiously motivated events, since they are easier to understand in the context of our experience in the modern world.[114]

2

Impiety trials against philosophers and Sophists

"Der Aberglaub', in dem wir aufgewachsen,
Verliert, auch wenn wir ihn erkennen, darum
Doch seine Macht nicht über uns".[1]

2.1 "Enlightenment" and religion: the challenge of Sophistic philosophy

2.1.1 The historical evolution of Sophistic thought

The fact that the intellectuals we call Sophists eventually found themselves on the wrong side of the law on account of their beliefs at the end of the fifth century requires a brief overview of the evolution of intellectual history during Athens' "golden era". This will help us understand how and why the Sophists who were known for their critical views on religion came to earn public criticism.

Towards the beginning of the sixth century in Ionia, innovating thinkers succeeded in explaining natural phenomena rationally, by attributing them to laws of nature governing the universe. These natural philosophers, from Thales to Anaxagoras, cleared the way for the thinkers of the fifth century by applying novel research methods that thus emancipated them from inherited concepts of nature and the gods. The latter were the Sophists, as they were called by contemporaries, and it was by this name that they participated in the European history of ideas.[2]

By stating that all perceptible phenomena can be explained by inherent natural processes and underlying laws of nature (e.g. that the movement of stars is calculable, and that they are not necessarily guided by gods), the Presocratics who dealt in natural philosophy prepared a new emphasis.[3] In fact, such preoccupations led to a change of focus among philosophers from natural phenomena to the conditions of everyday human life and to people's actions. The Sophists were preoccupied by such questions in the middle decades of the fifth century, mostly in Periclean Athens, and were the main promoters of this change.[4]

Considering the difficulty of reducing the different preoccupations and activities of various personalities (labelled "Sophists") to a common denominator, it is not an easy matter to define quite what a Sophist was and what he did. In the first

place, there is a problem not unlike that of the early natural philosophers, in that the surviving testimonia relating to the Sophists are few and far between. Not one complete *opus* has survived; there are scattered fragments at best.[5] To make things worse, our main source of information about these thinkers is Plato, who was their most bitter adversary.[6]

Nevertheless, two defining characteristics of the Sophistic movement can be determined. The first relates to their occupation as teachers of oratory in Athens; for a fee, they taught their students how they might successfully achieve certain political ends in the Assembly. In this way, they fully met social and political needs, and ultimately the practical requirements of Athens that arose after a radical democracy was introduced in 462 BCE. This came about because a political career depended, from that moment on, in large part upon an ability to speak freely and persuasively before the Assembly, which decided all the important issues.[7]

On the other hand – and this is the second criterion – the Sophists, given their quality as thinkers, as philosophers, also had a tendency to reject the likelihood of an eternally valid reality behind the social facts of human societies. In other words, they denied the existence of a universal divine law in favour of a consistent relativism and subjectivism.[8] Despite this tendentious change of interests, which led to a certain distancing from the natural philosophy studied earlier by the Ionians, and despite their preference for rhetoric, the philosophers called "Sophists" never completely lost interest in traditional philosophical fields, such as natural phenomena and their explanation.[9]

Nevertheless, this relativism of Sophistic teaching seems to be the binding element that gave cohesion to Sophistic thought, with regard to its philosophical content. A significant example for the principle of relativity of human perception that makes final judgements impossible is Protagoras' concept of taste-related impressions: a dish that one finds sweet, another may find bitter.[10] This only creates a problem when one adds the genuine Sophistic idea that there is no mandatory definition for sweetness or bitterness that would allow individual opinions on sweetness or bitterness to be assessed or corrected. Consequently, such consistent relativity also targets twin concepts such as truth and lies, justice and injustice, good and evil, and so on, crucial for life in society.

After discovering and describing foreign peoples and their customs, the view of an overriding mandatory, irrevocable, divinely inspired law of human collective life (previously accepted as *nomos*) becomes obsolete. Sophists thus defined customs as the product of human conventions, which made regulations and laws subject to change on account of their human origin. The natural world order, which is not subject to human influence, was referred to by Sophists from the mid-fifth century as the concept of *physis*, and constitutes the antithesis to *nomos,* as defined by convention and tradition.[11]

In consequence, Sophists applied the *nomos–physis* antithesis to politics and the law. Gorgias, for example, postulated the natural legitimacy of the strong

dominating the weak.[12] Archelaus, one of Anaxagoras' disciples, who also assumed that moral considerations were the result of human convention, clearly stated the opposition between *nomos* and *physis*: τὸ δίκαιον εἶναι καὶ τὸ αἰσχρὸν οὐ φύσει, ἀλλὰ νόμῳ.[13] This evolution from a still "innocent" investigation of natural phenomena to general scepticism, questioning authority and the validity of social values, as illustrated by the antithesis between tradition and nature, would have long-term consequences.

On the one hand, it led to the creation of a philosophical religion (already propagated by the natural philosophers) that opposed a pantheist version of the transcendent to the anthropomorphic deities of myth. On the other hand – and this is very important – the issue of religion as such, and consequently of belief in the gods of mythological tradition, became central to the research. As Jaeger stated:

> any type of thinking that derives all existence from nature and any type of thinking that derives all existence from nature and its characteristic law and order must come to the point of regarding even belief in God as a product of human nature in interaction with the world that surrounds it, and therefore as something natural in itself.[14]

Acknowledging that *nomos* (custom) does not reflect immutable law or the divine regulation of human life, but clearly has its origins in the human imagination, and is perceived differently in various cultures, led to a criticism of tradition and to a growing disregard for the laws of the state.[15] Inherited belief in the gods of the Homeric pantheon, and in the moral and law-enforcing divinities depicted by Hesiod and Solon – divinities who were said to supervise comformity to *nomos*, and who guaranteed the punishment of offenders – was, if not fully rejected, at least questioned and subjected to critical examination.[16] An explanation of man's moral behaviour as presented by the captain in Büchner's *Woyzeck* – "Morality, that's when one is moral" – was no longer enough for the critical spirit of the age of the Sophists.[17]

2.1.2 Criticism of religion by natural philosophers and Sophists

The evolution just described from the development of knowledge regarding the philosophy of nature, and which questioned the vision of the essence of nature that had been valid until then, to the transfer of this knowledge to social phenomena, occurred gradually and far from the public eye. More than 150 years passed between the questioning of mythological tradition by Milesian natural philosophers and the formulation of radical doubt regarding the very existence of the gods. The controversies concerning the traditional content of Greek belief had their origins in criticism of the concept of anthropomorphic gods (as depicted by Homer and Hesiod), who were represented in myth with a set of human feelings.

Xenophanes expressed a critical attitude towards a simplified concept of human-like gods by means of well-known aphorism, according to which, if horses

could paint like humans, then their gods would look like horses.[18] Xenophanes' doctrine, which considers a god to be very different from human beings, physically and spiritually, is related to this criticism of the anthropomorphizing of the Greek gods.[19]

In keeping with Xenophanes, other representatives of Presocratic philosophy expressed their disregard for the mythical tradition of morally questionable gods, or else they relativized the significance of religious practices. These thinkers fundamentally questioned, and then abandoned, the simple, even naïve belief in the divine animation of nature, expressed through spring nymphs, river deities and spirits of the woods.[20] On the other hand, early critics of religion did not at all question the existence of a divine power that guarantees human *nomos* as an ultimate authority. They did not reject myth, but they corrected it, by eliminating its unbelievable elements, and by rationally remodelling it.[21]

Because of this way of thinking, intellectuals, who are numbered among the Sophists in Athens during the second half of the fifth century BCE, developed an agnostic view of the transcendent. Protagoras' view is typical. He states that his limited human perception could not allow him to judge whether gods existed or not: περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι ἥ τ' ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.[22]

This attitude did not correspond to an atheism with no illusions, but to a Sophistic doubt in the universal validity of human knowledge, most obvious in the famous *homo mensura* rule, according to which human beings and their ability to make judgements are "the measure of all things"; consequently, their limited perception is the principle of any knowledge.[23] Gods are thus not perceptible (or, if so, only indirectly) and so we can no longer make statements about them. In the same way, Thrasymachus doubted that the gods could have any influence upon the destiny and deeds of mortals.[24]

Proper behaviour towards the gods (εὐσεβεῖν – the correct observation of matters of cult and custom), was no longer entirely exempt from relativizing doubt, and was intensified by Greek contacts with members of other cultures. This is clear from a passage of Herodotus: King Darius summoned some Greeks and asked them if they would consent to eat the remains of their dead fathers in exchange for a royal reward. Each of them turned down the proposal. Then, he offered the same reward to a tribe of Indians named Kallatiai, if they would agree to burn their fathers, as the Greeks did. The Kallatiai rejected the mere mention of such words of impiety, since, according to Herodotus, they usually ate the bodies of their parents.[25] *Nomos* was not universal, and comparative analysis shows it to be a customary convention within a culturally defined social community.

Against this background, the Sophist Prodicus of Ceos, who had come to Athens as a *rhetor* at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, developed a rational explanation of the origins of religion, according to which forefathers accounted as gods the sun, moon or water, because they needed them. They then invoked Demeter and Dionysus, venerable symbols of bread and wine. Only common

people saw these forces as gods, given that Prodicus had himself rejected these popular beliefs.[26]

Critias, who is often associated with the Sophists,[27] took matters a step further. With his opinions on the origins of religion, he marked the climax of criticism of religion during the fifth century. He developed a thoroughly "atheistic" view of the gods, considering them to be merely the invention of a cunning and clever man (πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς ἀνήρ). He claimed that the "bogeyman" called "fear of gods" only serves to sanction the laws that were after all made by humans, with the empty threat of divine punishment if broken. It was only meant to scare the multitude in order to ensure domination over those who feared the gods. There is no guiding divinity behind human order (the *nomos*), since gods are a creation of man, and thus human laws cannot have a mandatory character. These were the ideas of Critias, who not only ended up as the accursed leader of the Thirty Tyrants, but who also seems to have expressed himself as dramatist; a fragment of the satyr play *Sisyphus* was first attributed to him by Wilamowitz.[28]

2.1.3 *The philosophy of nature and the Sophistic movement as an "Enlightenment"*

The "*révolution intellectuelle*"[29] of the fifth century has often been called an "Enlightenment" and has been seen to have something in common with the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, often thought to be an era of similar historical and spiritual change. "And as the Germans would scarcely have had a Kant without the Age of Enlightenment, so the Greeks would scarcely have had a Socrates and a Socratic philosophy without the Sophists."[30] The first Enlightenment – the ancient one – and the second – that of the eighteenth century – are spoken of as though the Sophists had been the encyclopaedists of the Periclean age.[31] It was for their critical views on religion that consensus made the Sophists into true Illuminists. "The liberation from superstition is called Enlightenment."[32] Sophistic philosophy could also be explained in this Kantian sense.

J. Burnet is the first to have expressed his doubts on putting the two currents in European intellectual history in the same box, beginning with the fundamental difference between the very individualistic Greek thinkers, and noting that it is difficult to find, in the absence of a homogenous "Sophist School", anything approaching a medium of a "Greek Enlightenment". Such a comparison seems hazardous, considering that the completely different premises and circumstances of the "Greek Enlightenment", and those of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, were totally ignored.[33]

In addition, the so-called "Greek Enlightenment" did not come into prominence through a growing popular movement, as was the case with its modern counterpart (which prepared the way for a widespread and unprecedented secularization).[34] On the contrary, the term had to be employed exclusively in its technical meaning: Enlightenment as the expression of rationalist thinkers and philosophers who were as impartial as possible, as the quest for knowledge, prepared, beyond