

the  
**BENEFIT**  
of the  
**DOUBT**

öffentlicher Vortrag

BETWEEN SKEPTICISM AND GODLESSNESS, CRITIQUE  
OR INDIFFERENCE IN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF THE  
ANCIENT WORLD

veranstaltet von  
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**Doubting vs. Explaining Religion:  
From 'Atheism' to Theorizing about Religion in Antiquity**

In 2015, Tim Whitmarsh's book *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* hit the shelves. Its thesis is quite straightforward: atheism is as old as religion and should not be seen as an intellectual movement stemming from the Enlightenment onwards, nor as a response merely to theism, admittedly a monotheistic, Judeo-Christian infused and informed worldview. Although Whitmarsh's argument has a lot of merit and, thus, must be taken seriously, in this paper I take a slightly different path. Rather than seeing criticism of religion (or alleged 'atheism' as a result of such a criticism) as an instance of non-religion or deconstruction and denial of religious norms in the ancient world, I argue that religious critics embarked on a journey of explanation rather than evaluation of, or an attempt to 'explain away', religion. Theorizing about religion, as I will argue, is more often than not seen as an attempt to either eradicate religion or refuse its 'reality' for its adherents and thus easily classified as an atheistic rebuttal of religion. But as some social scientific theories of religion, as well as the religionist theories of religion, have shown, explaining religion is not a synonym of explaining away religion. In my approach, I will take certain such 'atheists' of religion from the ancient world and re-assess them as theorists of ancient religion. In this respect, I will attempt to demonstrate that non-religion, atheism, or anti-theism/religion is not necessary a valid observation for ancient thinkers. In this respect, rather than struggling with terminological jargon we might be able to re-classify our ancient 'atheists' as theoreticians that did not necessarily theorize about religion with the aim of imposing or suggesting an atheistic worldview per se.

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18.30 Uhr