

Criticism of religion – origins

Criticism of religion is considered something modern. It is usually associated with the Enlightenment. Names like Feuerbach, Marx, Freud at least come to mind – the classics of modern criticism of religion:

- Religion as the false self-understanding of man
- Religion as a disguise for unjust social conditions
- Religion as the manifestation of a misguided ego-consciousness.

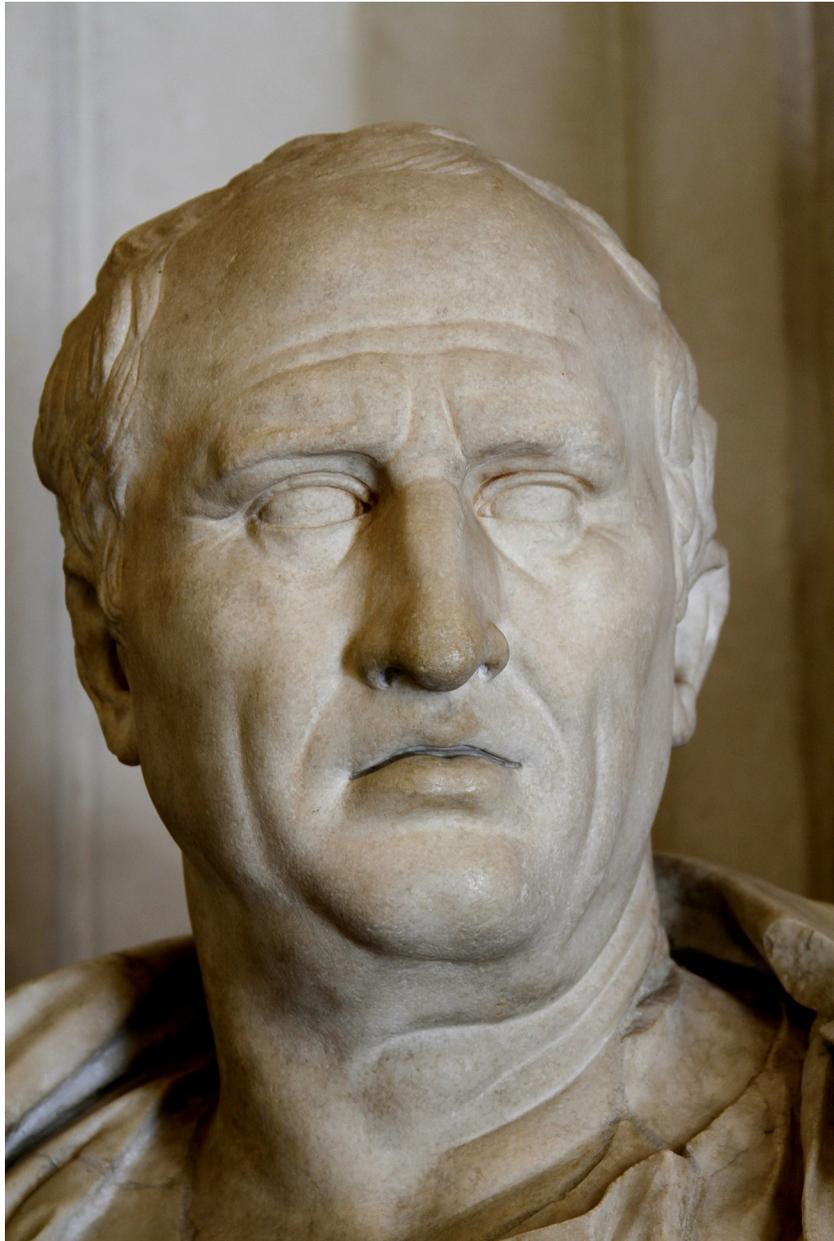
Feuerbach sketched the insight of the Enlightenment thus: God did not create man in his image (Bible), but man created the gods in his image, as his inverted and distorted mirror image. „God is the revealed interior, the expressed self of man.“ His language – and that of his followers – is debunking: God or the divine are „nothing but“ human desires, dreams, hopes, constructions with specific purposes. This unmasking of a false, superfluous self-assurance to be replaced by reason or feeling and anthropological ‚wholeness‘ also shapes many forms of contemporary self-understanding, which can express itself both religiously and non-religiously. It has centuries-old antecedents.

In this sense, the Roman [Marcus Tullius Cicero](#) († 43 BC) can be called a „classic“ of religious criticism. In 44 BC, he wrote three writings on religion that build on each other: *De Natura Deorum* – On the Nature of the Gods; *De Divinatione* – On Divination; *De Fato* – On Fate. In them, he enters into an argument with the main philosophical currents of his time, Epicureanism, the Stoa and the 'new academy', i.e. sceptical Platonism. These writings, which have come down to us almost in their entirety (with limitations in *De Fato*), represent a kind of compendium of religious criticism as it was evidently known and advocated at many times and for a millennium and a half before the Enlightenment. Cicero is an influential politician with a very chequered history; only one year later, in 43 BC, he was assassinated by political opponents. As a staunch representative of the ‚old‘ republican Rome, he left no doubt that the Roman state cult with temples, images of the gods, sacrifices and divination had to be maintained and defended at all costs.*) In his opinion, the continued existence of Rome also depended on this adherence to the ‚fathers‘ custom‘ (*mos maiorum*). That is why he distinguished three types of religion (according to Varro, *religio tripartita*): the *religio civilis*, best translated as 'state cult', the *religio poetica* of the poets and poets, and the *religio physikalisch or naturalis*, i.e. the philosophical investigation of natural religion with reasons of reason. As a statesman, Cicero held the public and private practice of sacrifices and cults in the highest esteem; as a philosopher, he could criticise the religion and philosophy of his time in the harshest terms.

However, Cicero did this in a „dialectical“ way of speech and counter-speech, – as in a trial. In the end, he left the judgement of who was most likely to be right to the reader. In **De Natura Deorum**, the convincing representative of the rational critique of both Epicureanism and the Stoa is his friend Cotta. In **De Divinatione**, Cicero presents a conversation between his brother Quintus and himself, with Quintus defending divination and Cicero exposing the criticism of any divination as superstition – is this Cicero's actual position? At least it is presented in an argumentatively very strong and convincing way, although the final judgement is left to the reader. In **De Fato**, the dialogue structure is hardly maintained. Although the preserved part of the writing begins with a conversation between the author („I“) and a Hirtius, it is in fact a

continuous treatise on freedom and necessity, responsibility and fate, which very astutely weighs up and discusses the different philosophical positions on this – not an easy read. Cicero advocates freedom of will and action because consistent determinism is illogical and pure dependence on fate makes any responsibility (ethics) impossible for man.

Thus, the topics and questions that Cicero discusses philosophically in these three writings also seem modern – at the height of his time, but also very fundamental and problem-related for all times. Some arguments from Cotta's critical response to religion in the 3rd book of *De Natura Deorum* will be outlined here.



Cicero (1st-cent._BC) - Palazzo Nuovo - Musei Capitolini - Rome 2016

The Stoic position had been advocated by Balbus, who set out in four lines of thought a) that gods exist, b) what properties they have, c) that they govern the universe, d) that they care for human beings. The latter had already been disputed by the Epicureans, who placed the gods far from the world in an „intermediate world“ (intermundium). Cicero takes a more fundamental

approach with Cotta's argumentation. He is philosophically concerned not with traditions, traditions, however venerable they may be, but with reasons, arguments, rationes. And Cotta misses these in all the references to the fact that gods exist as a matter of course because the world has reckoned with them since time immemorial. „With rumours you fight against me, my Balbus, but I ask you for proofs – *Rumoribus mecum pugnas, Balbus, ego autem a te rationes requiro.*“ (Section 13) The existence of the gods (a) cannot simply be presupposed and asserted.

It is even more difficult with the asserted qualities (b); the traditions, especially of the poets, are contradictory, the genealogies of the dynasties of the gods boundless. In contrast, Cotta: what is deified are rather natural forces and natural events: „*naturae ista sunt ... omnia cientis et agitantis motibus et mutationibus suis* – nature, which with its movements and changes drives and sets everything in motion“ (27) „*eos enim qui di appellantur rerum naturas esse non figuras deorum* – those who are called gods are only the essence of things, not images of gods.“ (63). So there are no reasonable grounds for the existence and essence of the gods.

Finally, it is c) about the wise guidance of the world as a whole and d) about the care for the individual, „that the gods take care of us.“ Cotta had already explained the regular movements in the cosmos as being founded in the forces of nature. Now it is a question of the rule of wisdom and reason, which the gods would have given to man, and here Cotta falls into the greatest doubt in view of the prevailing wickedness and unreason. „*Hanc igitur tantam a dis immortalibus arbitrarmur malorum sementim esse factam* – This mighty seed of evils, then, shall we take for the work of the immortal gods?“ (75) If the mind came from the gods, whence so much wickedness caused thereby? And the gods can hardly care for the individual human being either; experience speaks against it. With Ennius: „*Nam si curent, bene bonis sit, male malis quod nunc abest* – For if they [the gods] cared, the good would be well, the bad bad; which is not true.“ (79) It is the problem of theodicy that Cicero addresses here when he has Cotta use examples (the nefariously successful tyrant Dionysius) to raise the question of the manifest triumph of evil. „*Sic mundi divina in homines moderatio profecto nulla est si in ea discrimen nullum est bonorum et malorum* – so there is no divine guidance in the world that includes human beings, if in the process there is no distinction between good and evil.“ (85) The well-being and happiness of evil men thus refute all the power and influence of the gods (88) Divine power, or rather nature as such, „does not care for individual men – *non curat singulos homines*“ (93). And Cotta, despite the devastating argumentation, still concludes quite cautiously: „*Haec fere dicere habui de natura deorum, non ut eam tollerem, sed ut intellegeretis quam esset obscura et quam difficiles explicatus haberet.* – This, roughly, I would have to say about the nature of the gods, not to cancel it out, but to show you how obscure it is and difficult to explain.“ (93) Cicero leaves the final judgement to the reader.

Let me summarise: Philosophically and thus rationally understood, the existence of God or gods cannot simply be assumed; it would have to be justified. Cicero lacks such a comprehensible justification (*rationes*), there are only opinions (*rumores*). In the 11th century, Anselm of Canterbury established the sentence „*fides quaerens intellectum*“ for Western Christianity, which means that a rational knowledge of God cannot be presupposed if it does not already proceed from faith: reason follows faith, faith seeks reason afterwards. This is the Christian dogmatic reversal of the path of knowledge of philosophy.

Cicero recognises the nature and properties of the gods as personifications of natural forces, as the interrelated events of nature as a whole. God is 'nothing else' than the *vis naturae*, the force of nature, he could say like Feuerbach. It is impressive how consistently a sceptical rationalism (following the Middle Platonic academic scepticism) breaks through in Cicero. In *De Natura Deorum*, he only barely touches on the question of the role of fate and the unbroken causal link between past, present and future („like a rope unwinding from a spool“), as advocated

by the Stoics. He comments on this in detail in the writing *De Fato* – still highly topical on the subject of freedom and determinism.

Finally, reason and fate as a gift of the gods. Cicero can despair of this, for the outflow of reason can be both good and much more bad, malicious. And that the good are rewarded and the bad punished is obviously a fairy tale. Here, a social and individual realism is expressed that has experienced a great deal of the vicissitudes of life itself, quite independently of virtue or wickedness – and which considers a doctrine of virtue, such as Cicero presented, to be all the more important. As a question of „theodicy“, it can only be taken in Christian terms: „How can God allow this?“ The question presupposes God’s existence. More soberly and more fundamentally, Cicero states: „The absence of a balancing justice that assigns good to the good and evil to the evil is the most convincing proof that there are no gods, certainly not with an assumed care for the individual. No one in the cosmos cares about them – perhaps the harshest criticism of religion.

Throughout his life and also in these writings on religion, Cicero always professed a cautious restraint; he expressly approved of and supported the official religious cults in state and family. His critical position is always only a counter-position in a dialectical debate. One can therefore read and understand Cicero either way. Wilfried Stroh sees him as a convinced follower of the Roman religion who engages in more intellectual musings in his philosophical expositions. Augustine clearly understood Cicero as an atheist who only refused to take an unequivocal stand out of reasons of state and for the sake of his own security. There is much to be said for this last view, for example the stringency of the argumentation. In any case, Cicero summarised and cited with rare, classical clarity and explicitness all that later rationalist critics of religion have repeated and supplemented. The religious critique of the Enlightenment up to the naturalistic worldview in today’s natural sciences can also see themselves in the succession of Cicero – after all, more than 2000 years later.

Note:

*) Cotta introduces himself at the beginning of his astute critique of religion as the reigning Pontifex Maximus with a confession that might characterise Cicero himself:

This is to say that it is my duty to defend the views handed down to us by the ancestors concerning the immortal gods, shrines, worship and reverence for the gods. I shall indeed always defend them, and have always defended them, and in that conviction which I have received from the ancestors concerning the service of the immortal gods, no speech of scholar or unscholar will ever be able to shake me. ... So now you know, Balbus, what I think as Cotta and as Pontifex. Now it is important that I understand what you think. For from you as a philosopher I demand the justification of the belief in the gods; our ancestors, on the other hand, I am ready to believe even without any justification.

De Natura Deorum, 3. Buch (5)

[back](#)

Literature references:

Cicero’s three writings on the gods, religion and fate are available bilingually from [Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics](#); there are free online resources as well.

Wilfried Stroh, [Cicero and Roman Religion](#) 2008 (German)

The article will be available in PDF format.

English Version of "Religionskritik - klassisch" <https://phomi.de/?p=4449>

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