

Giovanni Giorgini | Elena Irrera [Eds.]

God, Religion and Society in Ancient Thought



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Collegium Politicum

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Cover picture: Judges of the Dead - Rhadamanthys, Minos & Aeacus,
Apulian red-figure krater Ca4th B.C, Inv. 3296

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Foreword

The frequent employment of words like “god” (Greek *theos*; Latin *deus*), “the gods” (Greek *hoi theoi*; Latin *dei/dī*), and “the divine” (Greek *to theion*; Latin *divinum*) in several works of ancient Greek and Roman thought elicits a wide variety of philosophically problematic questions. In the first place, it is not entirely clear whether the theoretical accounts produced by poets and philosophers on the nature of the divine realm and its implications in the human world could be regarded as integral parts of a religious experience (either individual or collective). In the second place, it might be wondered whether it makes sense to speak of Greek and Roman religion as homogeneous and unitary phenomena and, if so, what their definitory traits would be. If we provisionally assume that religion involves a set of institutionalised practices, well-entrenched human attitudes, and recognition (intellectual, as well as attitudinal) of a non-human power, we might also ask how and to what extent these featuring elements could be either theoretically justified or, by contrast, critically challenged, by philosophical endeavours.

One last issue concerns the possibility for ancient works of natural theology and metaphysics to affect and shape – in virtue of the paradigms of divine perfection they offer – the underlying values of an ethically appropriate conduct in general, as well as those at the basis of wise legislative activity. In this regard, three main questions might be advanced: (1) how and on what grounds can gods and/or an abstract idea of the divine be viewed as paradigms of ethical (and not simply ontological) perfection? (2) How can a philosophical understanding of the divine be employed in the elaboration of specific institutional arrangements? (3) How can belief in the divine represent a guarantee of order and stability for the members of a political community?

The present collection of essays aims to investigate the interplay between philosophy, religion and society in the ancient world by examining how social structures and political institutions reacted to philosophical criticism. It spans from the ‘rationalization’ of the divine operated by early Greek philosophers to the notion of toleration one may find in Augustine. It features such authors as Plato (who uses for the first time in history the words ‘theology’ and ‘atheism’), and Aristotle, with his intellectualist view of god. The volume tries to show that, in Greek and Roman world, philosophical reflection in the domains of natural philosophy and

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theology can offer a promising approach towards a critical understanding of concrete political phenomena, religious institutions, and conceptions on virtuous political activity. From a purely disciplinary point of view, it hopes to contribute to a problematization of aims and methods of political philosophy in ancient times.

The project of a co-edited volume on the philosophical relationships between the divine, religion, and society has developed within the framework of a series of activities pursued by the members of the *Collegium Politicum*, an international research network for ancient political theory. The annual meeting of the *Collegium* organized in Bologna in May 2018 has represented a fruitful opportunity for a joint reflection on the topic. However, only some of the essays included in this book have been presented and discussed at the meeting, and an invitation to contribute to a written volume has been extended also to non-members of the *Collegium Politicum* with recognised expertise in the field.

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Bologna, 8th September 2022

Giovanni Giorgini and Elena Irrera