Introduction

In the fourth century BC, the ubiquitous presence of religion in every civilization known to the Greek world was an observable fact. Greek *poleis*, in particular, invariably administered a wealth of religious practices, permeating virtually every facet of their citizens' lives. Festivals, sacrifices, libations, prayers, hymns, and statues in honor of the gods, as well as temples and altars operated by priests, civic and Panhellenic cults, divination, and oracles, were routine. Moreover, the divinities associated with these rituals and institutions had a central place in standard education (essentially covering epic poetry), cultural life (including the recitation of epic poems by rhapsodes and the performance of tragedies in a religious context and usually with plots involving myths about the gods), the visual arts, law, and politics. Judging by the words of the Athenian in Plato's *Laws*, depictions of the traditional gods, through storytelling and live shows, were in fact presented to (prospective) citizens already in infancy (X. 887d; cf. *Republic* 377a).

As such a regular and prominent political phenomenon, traditional religion does not, indeed could not, escape Aristotle's notice. Since he views the *polis* as existing "by nature" (φύσει: *Pol.* I. 2, 1252b30; 1253a2), and since, in his day, religion is embedded in the very fabric of the *polis*, without exception, Aristotle must account for the regular appearance of religion in political organization, either as a predictable, though in principle dispensable, concomitant, or else as serving some natural sociopolitical purpose. He seems to think that proper consideration of the natural functioning of the *polis* requires the second option, and describes the "supervision of religious matters" as a necessary task without which the *polis* simply cannot exist as such (VI. 8, 1322b18–22; VII. 8, 1328b2–13).

The attribution of a naturally necessary function to the institutions of traditional religion is striking given Aristotle's explicit criticisms of the purported uses of traditional religious practices. Divination by dreams is discredited so long as the gods are taken to be involved in it (*Div.* 462b20–2).

1

Prayers and offerings are deemed ineffective so long as they are expected to make a meaningful contribution to a god's life (*NE* VIII. 14, 1163b15–18). Even if such a contribution were possible, the nature of the gods that Aristotle argues are the only ones that exist denies them any interaction with human beings. These gods are incapable of returning a favor or loving anything or anyone (*MM* II. 11, 1208b26–31). They are denied all "bountiful deeds," and in fact any action whatsoever, save theoretical contemplation on the basis of metaphysical knowledge and understanding (*NE* X. 8, 1178b7–23).

In the absence of any "care for human affairs by the gods" (*NE* X. 8, 1179a24–5), traditional religion seems futile, and it is not at all obvious why Aristotle describes it as necessary, and whether he can in fact be committed to this description. It is no wonder, then, that no comprehensive account of the role of traditional religion in Aristotle's theory has been offered so far, except one that disregards Aristotle's criticisms of traditional religious ideas and practices already noted and ascribes to him the belief in the traditional Greek gods and their benevolent concern for human beings.[1]

Nevertheless, I claim, it is possible for Aristotle to consistently hold that traditional religion and its institutions have a positive role, and a necessary one, in the *polis*, while maintaining that the traditional gods, those that one worships with the hope of pleasing and gaining something in return, do not at all exist. The main aim of the present work is to provide, for the first time, a coherent account of the sociopolitical role Aristotle attributes to traditional religion despite his rejection of the existence of its gods. Ultimately, I shall argue that Aristotle views traditional religion as necessary in order for the *polis* to exist as such because an acquaintance with its (false) conceptions of divinity is a necessary condition for arriving at the knowledge of first philosophy, which must be provided for in any *polis* that

[1] R. Bodéüs, *Aristotle and the Theology of the Living Immortals*, trans. J. E. Garrett (Albany, 2000). In addition, two unpublished doctoral theses are devoted to related topics. H. S. Price, *The Philosophies of Religion of Plato and Aristotle* (PhD Dissertation, Swansea University, 1962), compares Aristotle to Plato on theological and religious issues, though he adopts the view that "Aristotle is not seriously concerned with religion as such, and is only interested in it so far as it seems to corroborate his philosophical views" (pp. 187–8). J. B. Rowland, *The Religion of Aristotle* (PhD Dissertation, Temple University, 1953), systematically compiles the relevant evidence for a thorough investigation of Aristotle's view of religion and helpfully points out the basic tension with which my project deals, namely that "Aristotle [a] was somewhat skeptical of [traditional religion] … [b] was conservative regarding its rites and practices … [c] had a high estimate of the utility and importance of religion to the state" (p. 191). Shorter works on related topics include W. J. Verdenius, "Traditional and Personal Elements in Aristotle's Religion," *Phronesis* 5.1 (1960), pp. 56–70 and J. K. Feibleman, "Aristotle's Religion," in ed. H. Cairns *The Two-Story World* (New York, 1966), pp. 126–34.

exists according to human nature and is hence directed at the flourishing lives of its individual citizens, in keeping with their potential.

However, a few preliminaries are in order. First, one may wonder whether we are entitled to attribute to Aristotle a criticism of the "traditional" conception of gods, as if there were such a unified entity as "traditional religion." It is precisely the salience of religion in every part and aspect of classical Greek culture that makes it difficult to demarcate it as an independent phenomenon. Indeed, it has been conjectured that it is because religion was "such an integrated part of Greek life that the Greeks lacked a separate word for [it]."[2] Scholars have gone as far as postulating a distinction between different types of Greek religion and Greek *gods*, based on the various cultural contexts in which gods are dealt with and represented, e.g., mythological poetry and cult rituals. Mikalson famously and forthrightly puts forth this view as follows:[3]

> The gods of cult and poetry shared names, and this of course suggests some identification, but, to put it simply, they shared first names only. We do not know whether an Athenian, as he made his morning offering at the little shrine of Zeus Ktesios in his house, thought of Homer's thunder-bearing, cloud-gathering Zeus. There is no evidence that he did, and the two deities, both named Zeus, are very different in both appearance and function.

There is an ongoing controversy among classicists, one that we need not go into in detail, about whether or not this way of viewing the relation between Greek poetry and practiced religion is the correct one.[4] For our present purposes it suffices to say that, even if we allow for the radical differentiation between these systems and the gods they refer to, they share enough in common in order to evaluate them under one heading.

The common denominator between the various forms of (what I shall henceforth call) traditional Greek religion is the anthropomorphic depiction of gods, and Aristotle's criticism applies to all such forms insofar as it is directed at this feature. Let us grant, à la Mikalson, that when Aristotle criticizes the depiction of Zeus as king (or lord, or father) of the gods for its obvious underlying anthropomorphism (*Pol.* I. 2, 1252b24–7), he has the Homeric or Hesiodic Zeus exclusively in mind. Still, the same argument is just as effective, and on the same grounds, considered as mounted against

---

[2] J. N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 2.
[3] J. D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods* (Chapel Hill, 1991), p. 4.
[4] However, see C. Sourvinou-Inwood, "Tragedy and Religion: Constructs and Readings," in C. B. R. Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 161–86, for a persuasive rebuttal of Mikalson's theory.

the many manifestations and epithets of Zeus in cult practices. To take the example already used, Zeus Ktēsios ("Zeus [the protector] of property"), worshipped in domestic settings and symbolized by the kadiskos, a small urn, was prayed to with anticipation of being granted "good health and good property" by him (Isaeus, *De cirone*, 16. 3–8).

But, as we shall see in detail in Chapter 1, the divine beneficence or providence underlying that anticipation is strictly rejected by Aristotle, as it rests, again, on the attribution to divinity of specifically human features, such as the ability to perform altruistic deeds or to form friendly or reciprocal relationships with human beings. Thus, even if the gods possessing such features need not be literally man-shaped, or even bring to mind such man-shaped gods (implausible though this may be), Aristotle still would, and does, charge them with obvious and unjustified anthropomorphism, to be contrasted with his own conception of divinity, lacking all properties attributable to human beings, with the exception of the intellect.[5]

Hence, it is the anthropomorphizing of divinity, broadly construed, that separates Aristotle's own view of (what he takes to be) the true gods from the content of what we have termed "traditional religion," a content whose truth Aristotle rejects, whether it appears in Homer, Euripides, Plato, in a public sanctuary, or in the privacy of a household shrine. That anthropomorphic gods are to be reliably found in popular religions, perhaps as an essential component, is supported by modern research in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and classics, *inter alia*.[6] Aristotle's recognition, and systematic criticism, of the anthropomorphism underlying all traditional religion, though preceded by the remarks of earlier thinkers such as Xenophanes, should in itself be viewed as a major contribution to post-Greek culture and thought, especially if one takes into account the extent to which Aristotelian philosophy helped shape (say) medieval Jewish and Muslim theology, with their emphasis and insistence on the entirely non-anthropomorphic nature of God. However, Aristotle goes further. As mentioned earlier, he argues that the same traditional religion whose content he rejects is useful, indeed necessary, for completely

---

[5] And perhaps sense perception in the case of some gods, viz. the celestial bodies, as we shall see in Chapter 3, pp. 98 ff.

[6] S. E. Guthrie refers to a long list of relevant scholars on this point, from Edward Tylor, Robin Horton, Franz Boas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Gilbert Murray to Sigmund Freud: *Faces in the Clouds* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 178–9. Guthrie himself argues, more radically, that religion just is (a species of) anthropomorphism, ibid. p. 185.

legitimate political purposes.[7] It is this view, primarily, that the present work aims to elucidate.

As a second preliminary, then, we might do well to explain what a natural, necessary political function is, in Aristotle's theory, so that we would know what to expect him to mean by attributing such a thing to the institutions and practices of traditional religion. Every *polis*, in Aristotle's theory, comes to be (gradually and naturally, out of more basic forms of community [κοινωνία] including the household and the village) "for the sake of living," but remains in existence for the sake of "living well" (*Politics* I. 2, 1252b29–30). Political organization, if it is to function correctly and naturally, must not simply secure the continued existence of its citizens, or even merely their safety or decent living conditions, but must, in addition, ensure that they are capable of leading flourishing lives, in accordance with their individual potentials.[8]

If that were not the case – that is to say, if a community could count as a *polis*, in the full sense of the word just explicated, simply by making sure that its members are healthy and secure – then, Aristotle says, we could have equally talked about "a *polis* of slaves or of the other animals; but, now, such a thing does not exist, because these share neither in flourishing (*eudaimonia*) nor in a life determined by rational choice" (III. 9, 1280a32–4). Since a community that is "slavish" cannot even be *called* a *polis* (IV. 4, 1291a8–10), every institution in the *polis* that is necessary for enabling the citizens to escape "slavishness" by realizing their potential and living self-sufficiently or flourishingly must count as serving a necessary function in the *polis*, and every *polis* must have such institutions as natural parts.

As I alluded to at the beginning, Aristotle views traditional religion, along with its practices, institutions, and the class of citizens maintaining them, as such indispensable natural parts of any correctly organized *polis*. Based on what we have just seen, this does not commit Aristotle to viewing traditional religion as necessary for maintaining the lives of the citizens in the *polis*. Traditional religion may be necessary for any *polis* to exist as such, in his view, because it has some crucial contribution to make to the *flourishing* lives of the citizens without the ability to enable which no *polis*

---

[7] In this, too, he is followed by some prominent medieval philosophers and theologians, as we shall see when we compare Aristotle to Maimonides in Chapter 2, pp. 83 ff. and later on in Chapter 5.

[8] "Living-well" (εὖ ζῆν) and "flourishing" or "happiness" (εὐδαιμονία), in this context, are closely connected and perhaps interchangeable. Aristotle uses them as such, e.g., in VII. 2, 1324a5–13. In III. 9, during a discussion echoing the one surrounding I. 2, 1252b29–30, he again closely associates both terms, this time along with "self-sufficiency" (αὐτάρκεια) (1280b29–1281a2).

can be truly deserving of the title. Now, *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing or happiness, as we learn from the concluding book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), consists primarily in a life of theoretical contemplation based on knowledge or understanding of the first principles of being as such (8, 1178b7–ff.). And so, Aristotle's account of the *polis*, whose staying in existence is for the sake of the flourishing lives of its citizens, "must," in the words of J. M. Cooper, "include the provision that among [its people] will be a group of citizens who live the contemplative life (and so are provided an education that will enable them to live that way)."[9]

It is precisely in the educational program that would enable those citizens who are intellectually capable of it to live contemplative lives of the highest achievable kind that I locate, in what follows, the necessary natural political function of traditional religion in Aristotle's theory. Specifically, I shall argue that traditional religion is necessary for any *polis* to exist as such because it secures the existence in the *polis* of the practice of "first philosophy," the science dealing with the gods of Aristotle's metaphysics (primarily the unmoved movers of the heavenly bodies and spheres, which are of course quite different from the gods of traditional religion). Aristotle considers these gods the most honorable and best beings, and knowing or understanding them is therefore, in his view, the topmost intellectual achievement, and *ipso facto* the top human good, which, to repeat, is precisely what any correctly organized *polis* is naturally aimed at achieving for its citizens.

Apart from the obvious advantage of providing, for the first time, a unified, comprehensive, and hopefully correct account of the role of traditional religion in Aristotle's theory, this book has several additional benefits to offer. First, the function that Aristotle attributes to traditional religion, in my interpretation, makes it clear that his project in the *Politics* is intimately connected to his projects in the *Ethics* and the *Metaphysics*. In particular, the place of traditional religion in Aristotle's political theory sheds light on the fact that he views the primary goal of political organizations (ones that function correctly and naturally, at least) as being theoretical contemplation on the basis of full metaphysical knowledge and understanding, in the manner of the explication of *eudaimonia* in book X of the *NE* and the descriptions of "first philosophy" in the *Metaphysics*. This is not always taken for granted, as scholars often take the (admittedly

---

[9] J. M. Cooper, "Political Community and the Highest Good," in *Being, Nature and Life in Aristotle* (eds. J. G. Lennox and R. Bolton) (Cambridge, 2010), p. 241, n. 40.

few) explicit references to "philosophy" in the *Politics* to signify a broader notion of musical education, which would be the "political analogue of and substitute for contemplation proper, which they presume to be politically inaccessible, even in a best regime."[10] But the role of traditional religion in Aristotle as I present it in what follows should count as evidence against these views, since it shows that *poleis*, if they are to count as such, in Aristotle's view, must make use of traditional religion precisely for the sake of enabling their citizens to engage in theoretical contemplation "proper," as far as they are able.

Second, the role of traditional religion in Aristotle, as I interpret it, shows that Aristotle prefigures and sometimes directly influences theories of theologians and philosophers of religion prevalent from the Middle Ages onward. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the criticism of anthropomorphisms with regard to the gods, with the apprehension that such depictions might nevertheless be useful for arriving at knowledge of *the true* God or gods (whatever their nature might be and however adequately we may be able to grasp it), can be found in the writings of Moses Maimonides and Albertus Magnus, with Aristotle as the clear origin. Through these figures these ideas have had a lasting influence.

Third, Aristotle's view of traditional religion may be of interest to a general audience as well. It exemplifies the possibility of learning certain truths even, and in some cases perhaps exclusively, on the basis of falsehoods, a possibility that is both intriguing and easily ignored. We may also learn from this view, quite generally, to look attentively for the usefulness in regularities, as Aristotle does. Even when the prospect does not seem promising, we may stumble, again as Aristotle often does, on fascinating and surprising results.[11]

There is no extant treatise by Aristotle dedicated to a systematic discussion of traditional religion. The list of Aristotle's works in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* includes titles of works on relevant topics, including *On Prayer*, *Concerning the Mythological Animals*, and *Homeric Puzzles*. Hesychius' list adds to these a work on *Hesiodic Puzzles* and, perhaps most relevant of all, a work on *Puzzles Pertaining to Divine Things*

---

[10] D. J. DePew, "Politics, Music and Education in Aristotle's Best State," *A Companion to Aristotle's* Politics, ed. D. Keyt and F. D. Miller (London, 1991), pp. 346–80, at n. 2. DePew rejects this position. We shall return to this controversy in Section 6.2.

[11] One example is Aristotle's theory of dreams, which I have dealt with *in extenso* elsewhere, see M. Segev, "The Teleological Significance of Dreaming in Aristotle," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 43 (2012), pp. 107–41.

(ἀπορημάτων θείων). Quite clearly, based on surviving fragments, the lost dialogue *De philosophia*, though of course primarily dealing with philosophy, was also imbued with discussions comparing and contrasting philosophical traditions with religious ones. Of the work *On Prayer* we have one surviving fragment, quoted directly and referred to by name in Simplicius' commentary on *De caelo* (485.19–22=*On Prayer*, Fr. 1, Ross). The fragment states, rather cryptically, only that "God either is intellect (νοῦς) or is something beyond." The task of reconstructing Aristotle's view of traditional religion, therefore, largely depends on examining his various remarks on the phenomenon in the context of discussing other matters.

In Chapter 1, I show that Aristotle does not – and, given his philosophical commitments, cannot – countenance the existence of traditional, anthropomorphic gods. Indeed, Aristotle does not object merely to the depiction of gods as having human shapes or living in political communities. He rejects in principle any characterization of the gods as capable of intention, deliberation, communication, or providence. It is true that Aristotle speaks (in the *NE* and *Topics*) of the importance of honoring the gods, and compares our relation to the gods to our relation to our parents (in the *Ethics*). But honoring the gods may well be important without there being any gods capable of acknowledging the honor. As for our friendship (*philia*) toward the gods, Aristotle in fact thinks it remains unreciprocated. Accordingly, we see that Aristotle wishes to replace existing traditional explanations of phenomena such as divination through dreams (in *Div.*) or good luck (in *EE*), normally appealing to divine intervention, with naturalistic accounts.

In addition to criticizing the belief in anthropomorphic and providential gods, Aristotle also provides a critical account of a major line of reasoning leading to such a belief. In his version of Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Cicero *N.D.* II. 37. 95–6=*De phil.* Fr. 13a Ross), Aristotle presents a double criticism of Plato's theory of Forms and the teleological argument (or "argument from design") for the existence of god(s). Aristotle thinks Plato illegitimately infers the existence of separable Forms from mathematical objects similar but inferior to them and from perceptible objects similar but inferior to both. Aristotle thinks there is an analogy to be made between Plato's fallacy and the "teleological argument," which infers the existence of intelligent benevolent gods from the natural world presumed to be created by them and from artifacts created by human artisans.

Despite explicitly rejecting the content of traditional religion, Aristotle allows for the possibility that traditional religion employing just that content might nevertheless be useful. In fact, his view is that traditional

religion is not only useful but politically necessary. I deal with that view in Chapter 2. In the *Politics*, Aristotle is committed to viewing the "supervision of matters pertaining to divinity" and the class of citizens maintaining it, namely priests, as necessary in order for any city to exist as such, including the ideal *polis* of books VII–VIII. The religion that Aristotle retains even in the "city of our prayers" is clearly an unrevised form of the traditional religion of his day, whose content, involving the anthropomorphic and mythical depictions of gods, he rejects. Traditional religion is kept, I argue, because it serves a necessary function. As I have said, it prepares the ground for what Aristotle considers the pinnacle of human endeavor: attaining the knowledge that constitutes first philosophy. Religion performs this function by exposing citizens to the traditional depictions of divinity. These, in turn, generate in the citizens with the right potential the sense of "wonder" (*thaumazein*) at the gods that guides them from such mythological conceptions to an inquiry into the nature of the true god(s) of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The content of traditional religion, then, is naturally used by the *polis* via its religious institutions for the attainment of a beneficial (albeit rare) outcome, even though that content is conventional and unnatural (not to mention false). There are parallels to that phenomenon. Aristotle views money, for instance, as having an integral role in a natural (albeit rare) sociopolitical process, namely natural wealth acquisition, though it is an unnatural and intrinsically valueless convention. Finally, though Aristotle does view traditional religion as useful for maintaining social stability, and possibly also for basic moral education, these uses cannot exhaust the natural function of the phenomenon in his theory.

The true gods of Aristotle's metaphysics, i.e., the unmoved movers, share something significant in common with humans, insofar as the latter may engage in, and the former in fact consist of, intellectual contemplative activity. Thus, gods are not merely the objects of the highest science; they are also the paradigms for human action. Reflecting on them is simultaneously both the topmost intellectual achievement and an assimilation of their very condition. Chapter 3 aims to elucidate both of these facts, and to explain why the gods of traditional religion are the proper tools for motivating people to learn them. Traditional gods are the appropriate type of thing to lead one toward an inquiry into the nature of true gods because they are easy to identify with and in fact share in the definition of "god" along with true gods such as the unmoved mover(s) of the heavens and the celestial bodies. Since traditional gods also share in the definition of "human being," and since, though powerful and everlasting, they also lead political and social lives and are therefore not, strictly

speaking, self-sufficient, as true gods should be, they are effective in raising the question of how and to what extent, being human, one might imitate the activity characteristic of gods – that is to say, theoretical contemplation on the basis of knowledge and understanding (preferably with the gods as its objects).

Aristotle thinks that we may imitate the divine activity in question only by coming to know ourselves. This may appear paradoxical, until we take into consideration the fact that human beings, in his theory, essentially consist in intellect, which is divine. By learning of our own selves (which requires friendship), first by becoming aware of our particular personality and characteristics, we gradually progress toward the apprehension of our true nature – our intellect. Fully knowing this true nature, namely the intellect, involves knowing its best possible application, and that is in turn tantamount to knowing the nature of the gods. By *activating* this knowledge, finally, we approximate the condition of these gods, albeit necessarily only temporarily and imperfectly.

In Chapter 4, I go on to survey and analyze Aristotle's discussions of particular religious myths. Aristotle's various references to the myths of traditional Greek religion, especially as related in Homer and Hesiod, permeate his writings. They appear in his discussions of topics as diverse as metaphysics, ethics, politics, and music. Aristotle is as likely to use such myths as evidence for his own theories as he is to rebut the accounts they seem to express. Hence, it is sometimes said that the only criterion by which Aristotle decides to "approve of one of these ancient accounts and reject the other … appears to be simply that underlying one account he detects a view in agreement with his own, while underlying the other he discerns a view that he wants to reject."[12]

However, the uses that Aristotle himself ascribes to myths in general, as analyzed in Chapters 1–3, shed light on his positive reasons for dismissing the content of certain myths. Aristotle thinks that myths are useful for social stability and moral habituation. In addition, he thinks that some myths usefully reflect the norms and practices of the past. I argue that when Aristotle is willing to consider the content of myths, he generally has these uses in mind. Some myths are too unclear to be taken seriously,[13] and others are merely coincidental results from other myths. Nevertheless, whenever a myth is both independent and intelligible, but turns out not

[12] Palmer, J., "Aristotle on the Ancient Theologians," *Apeiron* 33.3 (2000), pp. 181–205, at p. 201.
[13] Ibid., pp. 182–91.