

## The Invention Of Secularity In Aristophanes

Paul Epstein  
Oklahoma State University  
pde7229@okstate.edu

The last two plays of Aristophanes show a world that for the first time in the development of Western civilization can reasonably be called secular. The secularity of *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus* lies in their presenting human individuality as containing in its activity the various aspects of the life of the polis, more thoroughly than the gods who presided over them. The gods do not thereby vanish but are revealed as having no true self in comparison with men.<sup>1</sup> These plays complete the trajectory of his eleven plays, which began with five plays in which human subjectivity was not yet equalized with the divine life. In the plays of Aristophanes, equalization means that the human individual has as his sphere of activity the whole realm that the god presides over. Then in the sixth extant play, *Birds*, the human hero 'overthrows' even Zeus by experiencing more totally than even that great god the entire divine life, which is the effective rule of the Olympians over the Titanic gods. Three plays then follow in which human life is equalized with gods whose very existence consists in the communication of the life of the gods. Finally, in the last two plays the human subjectivity that the earlier plays had shown developing becomes itself the basis of human institutions and the gods themselves. In *Ecclesiazusae* no god is mentioned and it is humanity with its needs that defines the institutions of Family and State. The poet then posits Plutus as the chief god in the eponymous play, and this god has no other being than to encourage in humanity the private goods of virtue and wealth.

The peculiar character of Greek religion and its development at Athens make possible this conclusion. Aristophanes, moreover, is the last poet who presents the full content of this religion whose truest expression is through the forms of the beautiful, architecture, sculpture, and above all poetry. Poetry here is not the subjective expression of an individual but rather the inspired work of a man working under the influence of the gods. Homer, for example, appeals to the Muse to sing his tale, while both Comedy and Tragedy are presented under the aegis of Dionysus, who as the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, has in him the communication of the divine life to men. This poetical theology does not declare one creative God who presides over all things, both human and natural. Rather a history of the gods presents itself, in which out of chaos precede first the more natural gods, called Titans, then later the Olympians. No clear system unites the gods, although in general a natural and more abstract character adheres to the Titans,<sup>2</sup> while the Olympians are marked by a more spiritual and ethical character;<sup>3</sup> this enables

---

<sup>1</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind* (CC), VII, B, c. the spiritual work of art.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the Titanic powers have names identical with natural phenomena, e.g. Ouranos (sky) and Oceanus (ocean), while others are named after forces and tendencies, such as Nemesis, who brings low all beings who have risen too high.

<sup>3</sup> Every Olympian god presides over a sphere of existence in which man has elevated himself above the natural; altogether vanished is Egyptian zoolatry and that confusion of man and nature found in the Sphinx. Thus Artemis

the Olympians under Zeus to overthrow the Titans. This victory allows ethical human life in the *polis*, in which a different god presides as a subject, not an allegory or force, over a different sphere of life.<sup>4</sup> Each sphere moreover reflects the victory of Olympian reason over Titanic nature. Thus both Aphrodite and Hera preside over spheres of life in which the sexual instinct is civilized, Aphrodite over the immediate unity that mutual attractiveness in a man and woman produces, Hera over the deeper unity that makes the family possible. Athena presides over the life of a city as a whole, while Zeus rules over all the gods. Drama tends to unify the human hero with the polis and the gods; Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy tends to a unification under Zeus, Comedy to a unification within the human hero. This arises in Comedy because each drama begins with the ethical ruin of the City, and the consequent impossibility of the hero's making an aspect of the City's life and the god who presides over it the centre of his own being.

The comic hero thus begins his career from the standpoint of an a-political individuality. Expressed in religious terms, this means that he has returned to a pre-Olympian past, and the drama shows his search for a re-affirmation of an Olympian order. In many of the plays, this experience of the disestablishment of the Olympian order is through the institutional order but in others it is through the gods themselves. Strepsiades in *Clouds* experiences the pre-Olympian world by resolving to cheat his creditors and restore his solvency. In *Birds*, the heroes explicitly invent a natural religion of birds to overthrow the Olympian religion. In *Plutus* a god is posited who while not an Olympian, predates the rule of Zeus.

This re-appearance, as it were, of the Titanic pre-supposition of the Olympian order is by no means limited to Comedy. The Prometheus plays of Aeschylus show the passage from the old order to the new in the revolt of Prometheus against Zeus and his eventual return to that obedience. In the *Oedipus the King* of Sophocles, this natural pre-supposition appears in a very curious manner. Although the play begins with Oedipus already on the throne for many years, he recounts to his wife how he became king of Thebes. Having left Corinth in fear of the oracles about his mother and father, he became a wanderer. It was in this pre-political isolation that he killed his father.

The beginning alienation of the comic hero, in which he is always representative, in some way, of his fellow Athenians, means that he can have eventually a more comprehensive experience and activity than either any Olympian god, or pre-Olympian god who has now a place in the general system presided over by Zeus. When the Olympian gods defeated the Titans, this resulted in a certain fixity of character in the sphere that each presides over. While each god often has a variety of epithets, they all fall within a certain limit. Hera, as the wife of Zeus, for example presides over marital life and childbirth. She cannot become the goddess who presides over the attractiveness of men and women to each other, any more that Aphrodite can have a sudden conversion to 'family values' and give up encouraging women like Helen and men like Paris. Against this fixity, a human being can explore all the spheres presided over by the gods, take part one moment in the technology of Prometheus and in another the war-like strength of an Ares. In Comedy this expansiveness of character can extend even to the powers displaced by the Olympians. Thus when the human hero attempts in *Birds* to devise a religion and city of the

---

presides over the hunt, and Hephaistos over techné, the transformation of nature for human ends. Poseidon presides over the sea as a means of travel, and Zeus over the relations between strangers, host and guests

<sup>4</sup> One commonly speaks of Apollo, for example, as the god of prophecy. This implies that prophecy has a certain self-subsistence and that a god was then devised by self-conscious reason to symbolize it. The reality is quite otherwise. Apollo is a true individual, depicted in sculpture and poetry; he it is who gives reality to prophecy

birds, he has returned in imagination to the time of the Titans, which is of course different from being a Titan originally. No other spiritual being in the realm of the Olympian religion can so thoroughly escape the fixity that attaches to them.

The ruin of the polis that allows a 'return' to the pre-Olympian world is not a mere notion of the comic poet but what he sees before himself in the history of his own time. Although born in the glorious fifty years that followed the end of the Persian Wars, Aristophanes lived his poetical career in the midst of the Peloponnesian War and its difficult aftermath. This War spelled the ruin not only of Athens and Sparta but of the Hellenic world insofar as that world depended on the polis. Naturally enough the subjective principle of that world, an unreflective, pre-moral and thus ethical relation<sup>5</sup> to the great institutions of the polis, was ruined in that general collapse. The comic poet has thus the task before him of re-uniting this broken individual not only with the institutions of his state but also the gods who animate and preside over that world. The history of the plays is thus an account of the development of that reunification within poetical imagination and under the aegis of Dionysus, who presided over the drama, from the *Acharnians* of 428 to the *Plutus* of 388.

That the last play represents a deeper development than the first is partly our judgement in surveying the whole, but partly the poet's as well in his willingness to modify the Olympian religion beyond its original sense. Thus the positing of certain deity-like beings in the early plays is of a different order than *Plutus* in the last play. *Amphitheus* in *Acharnians* might be wholly factitious, but as the maker of peace amongst the Greek states, he falls within the Hellenic order and religion. Zeus presides over pan-Hellenic unity, and *Amphitheus* offers no challenge to his sovereignty. Yet *Plutus*, as Aristophanes presents him, represents a world that neither the polis nor the Olympian gods can contain. Classical philology has laboured in vain to discover in the tradition a god equal to the *Plutus* who can overthrow Zeus and who presides over both money and virtue. In short *Plutus* presides over a people who have deserted the way of life in the polis and substituted for that a world of private interests.

From the beginning of the poet's career, then, each play is a certain presentation of secularity, in so far as the primary question of each play is how the representative Athenian can find self-realization in an ethically ruined world. What makes each play not simply a presentation of a complete secularity but rather a movement toward it, is the dependence of each hero upon the shapes and forms of Athenian political and religious life for this self-realization, both in its initial and final stages. Thus in *Acharnians*, the very first play, the hero is weary of the Peloponnesian War and in the face of indifference and opposition from the established political authority of the Assembly, determines on making a private peace with the Spartans. Even a private peace, however, cannot occur outside the general forms of Hellenic life, and that in two ways. The man, facetiously *Just City*, who desires the peace is none other than the comic poet himself, and the mediator of the peace is the junior god named *Amphitheus*. The post-modern might view the presence of the poet in his own play as a triumph of self-referentiality but this is really to miss the point. The poet is not the 'creator' of his play any more than the Muses who inspire it or the god Dionysus who presides over it. In the last extant play, *Plutus*, the criterion for the striving individual is still an Olympian god, but an Olympian god who has been modified

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Ethical' here means an habitual and unquestioning adherence to the established institutions of the polis and the performance of all the duties associated with it. 'Moral' means a thinking adherence to rules of behaviour and institutions known to be rational.

in a subjective direction. That is to say, the god Plutus has become the object of human worship. He rewards the virtuous with wealth, and of course no such god has ever existed in the Olympian religion in that form. A god of the same name exists, but he never had the centrality that the Plutus of Aristophanes has. In the play the god says of himself that he preceded Zeus, but that the latter out of jealousy has blinded him. The god is a somewhat ridiculous figure, and only human desire is the moving agency in transforming him from being a nonentity to the position of supreme god. Thus, even when secularity is achieved, it is mediated through the old Olympian religion. Secularity is indeed achieved in this latter example because the object of worship is nothing other than the reality of human well-being given divine form.

The form of human subjectivity with which each play ends is the measure of that play's secularity; it depends on the way in which the hero integrates the topical element with the forms of polis-life and the gods who preside over them. The first five plays show the comic hero and his topical concern as contained within the life of the polis and the Olympian religion. *Birds* then shows the comic hero as opposed to the Olympian religion, and this can end only with his inheriting the full substance of this religion by having experienced it. Then three plays show the human subject as equalized with the polis and the gods who animate it. Finally, in *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus*, human subjectivity as formed by the Olympian order, has exceeded the gods, who are now in no way a force beyond the activity of men and women. This announces the presence of Western civilization's first secularity, in which by imitating the gods the human individual has made their substance their own.

In the first five plays, human subjectivity exceeds the gods in point of activity, but not of content. For example, in *Acharnians*, the hero makes a pre-Olympian standpoint, his own pleasure, his goal, and in order to attain it, he must disregard and almost undo his membership in the State in a search for a more personal and natural standpoint. The hero thus first makes a private peace with Sparta through a minor god, then celebrates a City festival as a family festival, and finally establishes a trading-mart with all Greeks. His progress is thus from the political to the familial to the realm of techné and money-making. This standpoint falls within the pan-Hellenic order and its religion but it does not describe its fullness. Hereafter, the hero turns away from this limited point and moves toward the deeper ground of his enjoyment. His refusing to share his peace with a farmer but agreeing to do so with a new bride shows that peace and enjoyment are not to be found in the realm of techné but more in the realm of married life. Finally, he can find complete enjoyment only in a City festival, the Dionysian festival of pitchers. Thus the hero has made a full circle within the life of the City. He has been presented with a War fought for private and not truly city interests. Initially, he deepens this fault in his own situation, looking for a solution in the less comprehensive realms of the commonwealth, that is the family and business. For this play, international business represents that least comprehensive realm. Thereafter, he returns to the comprehensiveness of the State by again experiencing the realms of techné and family, this time as less comprehensive than the State. By experiencing these realms he has a more extensive experience than any god, whose situation is more fixed. However, the extent of his 'revolt' has been limited to the pre-political standpoint of barter. While no Olympian god presides over barter, neither is it an activity that belongs to a Titanic god or to the titanic world. Rather, it is a less than political activity that obtains amongst the various Greek states; it is readily contained within the Olympian order.

The sixth extant play *Birds* is the turning point in the series of plays. Here the main character is so disgusted with life in Athens that he wishes to found a city and religion of the

birds. As in the previous plays, there is then a turning away from this, and a discovery that the true meaning of being a bird is rather the exercise of the mind. This discovery means that the comic hero has in his own experience lived out the return to the Titanic order, and then the overthrow of that Titanic order. He has thus unified in himself what the older religion has depicted as two separate orders of gods, the Titans and the Olympians. This means that Zeus has effectively been overthrown, since he has not in his own being experienced the transition from the Titanic to the Olympian.

It might seem impossible to continue writing comedies after one has described a human individuality that can overthrow even Zeus. Yet it belonged to the poetic tradition that Zeus might be displaced (one sees this in the Prometheus myth) and the comic poet, as the argument has shown, cannot imagine a world without gods. They must come first, and human individuality be formed in the making actual of their nature. Various gods in the tradition have as their very being the communication of the divine life to men. In the next three plays, the poet finds these gods successively in Athena, the Thesmophoroi and Dionysus. In *Lysistrata* the women of both Sparta and Athens eventually become true imitators of Athena, goddess of the whole city; they enter political life and impose peace upon the warring men, to end the Peloponnesian War. They have, however, begun in a radically different mode; they have asserted their desperate need for sexual satisfaction, which the war has deprived them of by removing their husbands and lovers. To desire sexual satisfaction is something radically alien to Athena, the virgin goddess, who sprang from Zeus's head. After this initial turn to the natural, they discover that to secure this end, they must become political and subordinate their natural desires to the restoration of both the Family and the State. The end of the play shows a humanity that has equaled the goddess in point of content and exceeded her in totality of experience.

*Lysistrata* has shown the human imitation of Athena. In *Thesmophoriazusae* one sees the human corruption of religious festivals in which the true content consists in the presentation and celebration of the Thesmophoroi, those gods who have given marriage to humanity. By the end of the play, the nature of two festivals in relation to the Thesmophoroi has been clarified, Tragedy and the Thesmophoria. The poet Euripides has learnt that he must not present corrupt women on the stage but virtuous women who encourage heroic men, that is women and men fit for matrimony. The women have learnt that the Thesmophoria consists of the proper praise of the goddesses. Earlier they had turned their festival into a women's caucus to plot revenge on Euripides for depicting them badly in his plays. The poet had then perverted his art into a mechanism for protecting himself from the women. Thus even the proper celebration of religious festivals depends on human knowledge that arises from human activity.

In *Frogs*, the divine-human patron of drama is educated about the true end of drama. Dionysus initially wishes to journey to Hades so that he can bring back Euripides, the tragedian who pleases him most. This journey then indicates that the god can imitate everything from the heroic Heracles to the basest slave. Thus he has in himself that which Hades embodies, a potentiality for all things. While In Hades, Dionysus is asked to judge a 'best-tragedian' contest between Aeschylus and Euripides. He finally chooses Aeschylus because he can give the best advice to Athens, and the god returns to the upper world together with the poet. The god's nature, then, as patron of Tragedy consists in his political education of the City.

His human capacity for mimesis and change has made possible the proper education of the god-man Dionysus in the realm over which he presides. Thus even this universal art that can present to the spectator's view all spiritual beings, from god to slave, is best fulfilled in

humanity. This is the farthest Comedy can go, in illuminating the Olympian religion as the poet had received it.

Thus the last two plays are in a certain way beyond the Olympian religion and the social order that it animates. In *Ecclesiazusae* an experiment in a community of wives and property ends rather with the reverse. The individual family is the best medium through which universal human needs are met, and the social order is grounded not in deities who preside over it, but in the difference in man between general and particular.

Finally in *Plutus*, the action has moved beyond institutions to the motives of the private individual. It begins with a father's concern about how his son can make his way in the world without becoming as crooked as the world is. This leads to the discovery of the ancient and forgotten god Plutus, whom Zeus had blinded. This god rewards virtue with wealth, and only human ingenuity persuades him to have his sight restored. He so draws the citizens of the Athens to himself that he displaces Zeus as the chief god of the city. Thus religion takes its shape from the desire of the human soul.

The spiritual distance covered in the plays of Aristophanes from 427 to 388 is immense. He begins with a world in which even an alienated man can rediscover a place within the Olympian order. He ends with a humanity that reshapes its divinity to reflect its own private interests. He has laughed the gods of the old order not into non-existence but irrelevance, for under their aegis he has discovered a humanity that can radically make their substance its own.