

Aristotle's Views on Religion and his Idea of Secularism

Anna Makolkin¹

Abstrakt: The purpose of this article to tackle the current real danger of *cultural vandalism*, posed by radical Islam and the overall resurgence of the Religious in the modern notionally secular societies. The method of analysis used is Aristotle's semiotic theory, his classification of signs (false, belief-causing and knowledge-producing ones), and his idea of secularism as a prerequisite of civilized society.

Keywords: false, true, belief-causing and true signs, cultural detour, cultural foundation, cultural vandalism, cultural shift, cultural map of orientation, disorientation instrument, control, barbarism.

¹ University of Toronto, 563 Spadina Crescent, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2J7, Canada, anna.makolkin@utoronto.ca

Introduction

The towering figure of Aristotle (384-322 BC) still stands firmly and impressively in the history of human ideas and in the collective human memory of all civilized people. Despite the numerous scientific discoveries, technological inventions and the overall widening of human knowledge about the world, paradoxically, this ancient sage still could be our mentor, the confident guide for the all-knowing and arrogant modernity as far as philosophy, purpose of Being, and ethics in human private and public relations are concerned.

Despite the present heights of the technological inventions, progress in all sciences, both natural and exact, nearly 2 000 years after Aristotle, the navigating logic of humanity is still rather flawed, and numerous existential problems still remain unresolved, particularly those in the realm of religion. Observing the current religious renaissance and battles in the name of religion, one invariably turns to Aristotle for clarity and wisdom.

1. Why did Aristotle dismiss the Original Sacred Mythology?

To embark on the study of cosmos and primitive for that time ancient science, Aristotle first cleared the analytical space from the obscurantist doctrines of the ancients and, most importantly, from the religious mythology that had the tyrannical hold on Reason and posed an obstacle to Inquiry. In this respect, he was not a pioneer— a century before him, the pagan Greek martyr Protagoras (483- 410 BC) had been banished from Athens, with his books burnt publicly, solely for his refusal to accept the divine origins of the universe. Protagoras uttered the blasphemous lines in the presence of around 30 000 gods invented and worshiped by the Greeks, “ I am unable to arrive at a knowledge whether there are any gods” (1988:231). His contemporaries could not accept this idea, gods had been ruling their lives and were at the root of their collective consciousness. However, some wise men of antiquity dared to question the dogmatism of their tribe and the authority of their priests.

“All men desire understanding. This is gift of humans, who, unlike animals, live not only by experience, but by art and judgement,” proclaimed the Macedonian sage in his immortal *Metaphysics* (1966: 12) Aristotle’s views challenged the accepted tyrannical anti-cosmology that locked *homo sapiens* in the prison of dogma, myth and false perception, leaving Reason dormant. The wondrous mysterious nature, the beautiful Cosmos— all demanded Inquiry, and Aristotle widely reopened the door to the unhindered investigation. He defended the right to know while accepting the fact that “some people believe in the existence of gods,” but wise men, in his view, should be allowed not to believe” (*On the Heavens*, 1988, vol.1:450). Aristotle condemned blind belief, caused by the unquestioning mind and docility, unworthy of human beings who were born to think. The respect for man and his innate intelligence sustained Aristotle’s challenging stand against the stagnant tradition and cult of the Divine, holding back human inquiry and advancement.

2. Analytical Platform for Secularism

Aristotle’s fundamental arguments for secularism and scientific inquiry had emerged in the presence of the grand pantheon of 30 000 gods and highly oppressive theological pluralism. Unlike his predecessor Protagoras, who openly and defiantly doubted the religious mythology

and the divine explanations of the natural surroundings, Aristotle patiently developed his own analytical platform which he subtly expressed throughout the entire corpus of his works. He came to it via the seldom mentioned semiotic theory. In his less read and studied *Rhetoric to Alexander*, Aristotle wrote the following profound lines: “One sign causes Belief, another Knowledge” (1984, vol.2: 2287). This was his formula of the entire cultural production which included history, science, pseudoscience, divine mythology, politics and economics. There is not a single area of human activity, public or private that is not governed by this principal dichotomy, covering all basic concepts of Fact and Fiction. The idea of falsehood of religious beliefs or the dogmatic predominant world view came out of this grounding conceptual base. The idea of a **belief-producing sign**, elegantly covering the etiology of all human misconceptions, subtly contained the critique of the reductionist myth and false explanation of the mysterious Cosmos.

Aristotle, a physician, discovered the etiology of religion amidst all other harmful **dominant false signs**, precluding human reason from natural functioning. He exposed the obscurantist essence of religion, standing in a way of human exploration of Cosmos and oneself, and limiting the innate human impulse to know and exercise one’s reason. He confronted the predominant cultural ethos and the religious institutions with the logic of his invincible **semiosis** and classification of signs. His critique of the sacred mythology was not obvious and remained undetected by the priests and most of the society.

3. Aristotle’s Definition of Religion

Aristotle subtly denounced religion, having defined it as a **false sign** that people are entitled to produce on their will or by tradition, but also have a right to disregard. Arguing for secularism and free inquiry, he appeals to the sense of “ancient modernity”, i.e. his contemporaries whom he is asking to see the temporal gap between the time of early civilization and contemporary to him culture of 400-300 BC. Aristotle engages his contemporaries into the historical gaze and analysis of their own culture. In his essay “the Heavens,” he wrote, for example, “The ancients gave the Gods the heaven or upper place” (1984, vol. I: 470). Here, he asked his audience to see the difference between the antiquated perceptions, the ancient view of the world, i.e long before the 350-380 BC, and that of his contemporaries. Aristotle invites to chart the map of advancement in the construction of knowledge through the ages, appealing to the temporal ego of his contemporaries who should strive for new ideas, new discoveries, new vision of the world.

In his treatise, “On the Universe,” Aristotle stated:

*The old explanations which we have inherited
from our fathers, is that all things are from God
and were framed by God
(1984, vol . I: 635).*

He hints here that the sons have to question the ideas of his fathers who were not always right. Unhappy with the word of the fathers, Aristotle asks to question their authority, arguing that “Nature is mysterious though not divine” (“ On Divination in Sleep,” 1984, vol .I :737). Aristotle indirectly defines religion as an obscurantist idea of the fathers, the legacy of the

cultural past to be re-constructed and revised in the name of human advancement, progress in which he believes.

4. Causes of Religion

Aristotle removed the crown of solemnity and sacredness from the traditional divine mythology with his “semiotic knife”. Interested in the causes, he treated the centuries-old universe of false signs as **malignant cultural space** to be approached logically and analytically. In his view, the traditional worship of the unknown invisible and unverifiable deity may have started at the harvest time when grateful crop gatherers wished to express their gratitude for the bounty received. The ancient man was grateful but not curious. Curiosity and with it, eventually, science came much later. The initial desire to survive, live and celebrate life, the joy of Being and communion with others and with Nature, the instinct for carnival and feast— all were part and parcel of the ancient proto-religious rituals.

It is interesting that Aristotle in his works never dwells on fear of gods and their power, this apparently, was a much later, modern explanation. Aristotle’s forefathers were happy creatures, joyful rather than fearful, seeking entertainment, companionship and joy, and the proto-religious worship provided precisely that. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle alluded to the essence of the ancient proto-religious worship as a form of ordinary natural conviviality,” offering sacrifices and arranging honors to the gods while providing pleasant relaxations” (1984, vol. I-1835). Aristotle, a physician, finds a therapeutic effect in the rituals, a form of necessary rest and relaxation in the proto-religious ritual, a diversion from labor that so healthy and needed for man:

Man desires society of another as a social animal, not god who cannot be a friend
(*Eudemian Ethics*, (1984: vol .II: b2).

And the religious rituals satisfied this innate desire, the craving for socializing. A man of late antiquity, Aristotle revived the world view and spirit of the distant and unknown to him Sumerians who had a rather flippant view of gods whom they jokingly dismissed as inebriated individuals with impaired judgement. Aristotle launches the Age of ancient enlightenment when Man rather than God came to be at the centre of being and Cosmos.” Man is born to live first and love things with life,” but not have love towards invisible God(s), he alluded in *Magna Moralia* (1984, vol. II: 1913). This is a message to the future monastic orders, celibate catholic priests of modernity, protestant ethics and pleasure-denying ideology of all sects and religious denominations of the future.

Observing the excessive opulence of the religious worship in his own time, Aristotle dismissed them as expressions of class distinction— “ Poor man has no means to be magnificent, but “ magnificence is an attribute of expenditures of the kind which we call honorable, e.g. those connected with gods,” he wrote in his *Nicomachean Ethics*,”(1984, vol. II: 1772). Only wealthy can build temples, donate money and objects in the honor of gods. Only wealthy need the symbolic attributes in society to justify their wealth and power. It is from this Aristotelian argument there would eventually arise the daring modern Marxist definition of religion as

“opium of the people”. Aristotle did not produce a single anti-religious treatise but he wisely scattered all his anti-deistic arguments around the entire corpus of his works. It is between *Magna Moralia*, *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, *Politics* and the essays *On Heaven* and *On the Universe*, that one finds out about Aristotle’s secularism and his main commandment “Know Thyself” as the goal of human inquiry that should not be all about God but about Man and Cosmos. He wondered why God, the symbolic ultimate, does not honor the wise man but “ is frequently punished for [his wisdom] (1988:1862-3).

5. Aristotelian Stand Revived

The Romans, the creators of the ideal secular pagan republic in the Aristotelian fashion, had a very dismissive attitude towards religion, keeping gods on the margins of society as atavistic relics of the primitive past that might help to maintain stability and normal functioning of state and legal institutions. The Romans tolerated Belief as a given but made sure that gods did not interfere into the affairs of the state. They understood the potential harmful role of religions and their destructive impact on politics. A daring Roman poet Lucretius (99-55 BC) witnessed the decline of secularism and the Romano-Judean conflict, and the negative results of the move towards the Religious, having publicly exposed religion in grand poem *De Rerum Natura*. This longest in the entire European literary history poem was a Roman requiem to Aristotle:

Religion

breeds wickedness and has given

rise to wrongful deeds

(2007, B.I: 4).

In his lifetime, Lucretius observed the regrettable **cultural shift** from secularism and Greek materialism towards the triumph of the Religious. This would regrettably last for millennia afterwards. Lucretius feared that the inquisitive, creative, joyful and knowledge-seeking Roman *homo-ludens* be destroyed by the dogmatic theology and infectious myth making, and that the Aristotelian wise man be punished for one’s own wisdom again, just like millennia prior in distant antiquity. Lucretius rightfully anticipated the rise of religion and expressed his justifiable “fear and trembling” over the coming defeat of the Secular:

When man’s life upon Earth [lay} in base dismay,

crushed by the burden of religion,

whose face hung one Greek man.

His spirit’s valiance, till he longed the gate

To burst of this low prison of man’s fate

And this the living ardor of his Mind conquered

(E. Bevan, ed. 1927:52).

Lucretius, the Roman poet became a secular prophet who correctly anticipated the long cycle in human civilization when Mind be conquered by the obscurantist Belief. Lucretius foresaw the long **cultural detour** of the rising European civilization. He continued where Aristotle stopped.

6. The Revived Cycle of False Signs

From the 4th up to the 17th century, Europe would be under the yoke of the dark forces of religion when any impulse to know, reason and judge would be controlled by the Church. There would be attempts to rebel and change the predominantly religious paradigm — one may recall the fate of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) or Galileo Galilei (1564-1648) or that of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), a century prior. Machiavelli vehemently opposed the Church, having exposed the falsehood and harm of religious Belief. He treated the fact of adoption of Christianity in Europe as a **dangerous cultural detour**, the cause of decline of the Western civilization that he observed, the process of undermining of the Graeco-Roman secular base, obvious even in his life time, during the glorious Renaissance.. Machiavelli was convinced that eventually the **cultural foundation** of Europe would be restored and the cycle of Christian/religious delusion be broken in order to recover the wisdom of antiquity. He courageously attacked Christianity for being the most oppressive cultural force and ideology, the sect of the deluded which

*had persecuted the free thinkers, suppressed the memories
of the pagan ancient past, burning the works of poets and historians,
having ruined many works of art and spoiled every other thing which
might convey some sign of antiquity (1996, B .II :5.1)*

Victimized by the religion-dominated society and punched by the Church, Machiavelli surpassed Aristotle and even Lucretius in his critique of religion. The pagan polytheistic world of Aristotle had more room for debate than the Renaissance Florence in Machiavelli's time. Aristotle regarded religion as a stumbling block on the way to Inquiry, an obstacle in the development of science, while Machiavelli condemned it as an absolute destructive power, capable of harming humans and distorting their existential destiny.

7. The Religious Renaissance of Post Modernity.

Aristotle pondered over the power of religion in the hands of rulers. In his view, the wealthy are able to identify and follow the religious rituals for their own benefit, and thus are interested in making them more opulent, impressive and effectual in society. The most magnificent cathedrals, mosques would be, indeed, built by the wealthiest men. Kings needed God(s) in their lives to justify their rule on Earth. The battles in the name of religion have always been essentially the battles for political power. The cycles of the secular and the periods when the forces of the reasonable were in power had been always short-lived, only to be succeeded by the eternal long revivals of the Religious. The battles for the souls and minds still go on even in the 21st century, even in the face of triumphant science and technology and the defeated divine explanations of the origins of cosmos. Paradoxically, as it may seem, the more obvious

the battles for Belief are, the more intense are the claims of their participants and defenders. Our is, indeed, the age of the triumph of the **false signs**, aggravated by violence, aggression and persecution of those who think differently.

If, for centuries, some sections of the Church were on a noble mission of educating the poor, providing schooling and spreading culture, having compromise with the secular state, at present, the Religious boldly defies it and has a mission of undermining all the cultural achievements of the past, and even destroying the very foundations of civilization as we know it. The postmodern resurgence of the religious is happening due to the increasing influence of Islam, the fastest growing religion of today, having millions of followers across the globe. Its resurgence and popularity are highly paradoxical— in the age of space explorations and triumphs of science, the debate over the right worship, religious ritual and place of religion in society is more intense than ever before. The once small sect of 70 in the times of Muhammad would eventually have spread around the globe, having left Saudi Arabia, its original cradle, to captivate millions in Asia, North America, South Pacific and Malay Archipelago, having gradually evolved into a powerful global ideological force of post-modernity. The secret of popularity of Islam lies in its liberal sexual politics. According to Edward Westermarck, the author of the *History of Marriage*, Mecca was originally a place where people flocked to form and resolve sexual unions in 24 hours, but Muhammad changed all that sexual liberalism by imposing a four-wife limit in the society, governed by “sexual communism,” and this was obvious step forward. However, this ethical imperative was a total contrast to the monogamy, preached and practiced by Judeo-Christian societies. The seductive sexual politics of Islam— right and access to polygamy— secured its wide popularity and attraction in history, and during modernity when numerous Westerners converted and continue to convert to Islam.

The ideological base of the neo-barbarians in the face of ISIS and other radical Islamic militant groups has their ultimate goal in turning the clock of history back to the Stone Ages, dismantling everything that had been built by humans over millennia, restoring “**sexual communism**,” total barbarism and establishing the powerful global Arabic Caliphate. Ours is the new Dark Age of new Moslem crusades or jihad against the West, when the fanatical desire to restore the barbaric past prevails over reality, history and reason. The present Moslem delusions are driven by the nostalgia of the alleged past Moslem glory and the desire to turn the clock of history back to 700 AD, to the birth date of Muhammad and the fictional time of the alleged Arabic and Moslem glory (A. Makolkin, 2009). Wherever Moslems went since the birth of the new religion and their ideology, they imposed polygamy, mistreatment of women and female children and simply borrowed the cultural achievements of the conquered, be it Spain, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, or Uzbekistan, among others. In fact, throughout history, the Arab invasions and impositions of Islam in the world were associated with **the cultural detour** or a step back for those countries. The achievements in mathematics, medicine and sciences, ascribed to the Arabs, were, in fact, appropriated by them and represent the knowledge, transmitted by the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks and Persians, but the myth about Arabic/Moslem achievements is still alive, spreading among the oblivious of history post moderns and feeding the radical Moslems. They wish to re-carve the global 21st-century maps, restoring the 7th-century Moslem domination and rule in the world. The post-modern Moslems are possessed by the fanatical desire to impose their, allegedly proper, system of beliefs, antiquated, barbaric existential code upon the entire world while destroying also the traces of the pre-Islamic civilization (A. Makolkin, 2014:98-99). The adoption or imposition of Islam since the 700 AD caused a real cultural detour— Egypt was forced to “forget” its language and culture, so did

Syria, Iraq and Persia; the great Egyptian, Phoenician, Sumerian and Persian civilizations perished under the weight of the less advanced Arabic cultural layer. The polygamy-based and gender oppressive system had been imposed, having created a cultural wall between the pre-Arabic Mediterranean, Asian and European Judeo-Christian civilizations. The seductive power of Islam may be partly explained by its liberal sexual politics, favoring and privileging the man.

After the tragic events of 2015, in January and November, that occurred in the heart of Europe, representing the cynical assault on the Western civilization and entire humanity, when Paris faced the climax of the post-modern Islamic jihad, the steady brutal intent of the Muhammadans became clear — to move humanity towards barbarism, polygamy, if not “the sexual communism- stage,” enslaving women and female children, i.e. the half of humanity. Regrettably, all the debates on the interfaith relationships fail to pinpoint the fundamental ethical differences between the three main religions and the ultimate intent of the followers of Islam. According to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), “religion is the earliest form of self-knowledge” from which science would evolve and knowledge about cosmos. The scientific view of the world took away the mystery of being and undermined its sacredness. Scientist understood some phenomena about Nature that took away some mystery, having undermined the authority of the priests and the myth of the divine design of Nature.

Religion as a **cultural map of orientation** in the world had been already dismissed by the ancient Greeks and Romans, displaced by the reasonable men of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment who saw it as a disorienting device and a flawed compass. Aristotle used to point out the analogical method of constructing religion- God is man-made and imagined to be like man, not vice versa, therefore, the goal was to know oneself rather than god. Already in antiquity, mind had been transformed from being non-speculative, uncritical and passive to being logical, seeking truth and knowledge.

The 20th-century excessive and aggressive conquest and manipulation of Nature may partly explain the post-modern rise of the Religious. But it was not only science that triggered the post-modern religious renaissance. Religion has been the permanent political instrument of control right from the start. The transition from polytheism to monotheism went parallel with the rise of tyranny — the single god was more compatible with the single ruler. For the past two millennia, the State and Church have established a working symbiotic relationship of great intensity. Up to the 16th century AD, the Church had censored art, literature, music and aided politics. After the Enlightenment, many European states constructed a separate channel for the Religious to diminish its power. However, this attempt was not sufficiently intense as the post modern reality would eventually demonstrate.

Much like Christianity in the past, the currently influential, popular and menacing Islam tends to assert itself in the new post-modern circumstances. The difference is that there is a precise awareness of the danger of this movement. The archaic and antiquated world view represented by Islam is even more obvious than the dangers of Christianity in the past. The tenets of Islam undermine and dismiss all the historic achievements of the West, the cultural edifice, constructed over the millennia of trial and error. To be civilized or not — this is the ultimate question of modernity, endangered by the virulent Islam. There is a danger of legitimizing polygamy, massive illiteracy and **cultural vandalism** worldwide. The radicalization of Moslems is the revived cycle of barbarism. The intensity of violence exposes the degree of despair. Like in the past, religious fanaticism and cruel politics go hand in hand. Today there is test how thick is the veneer of human civilization and how sound is its cultural foundation? Will it withstand the current attack on the Secular or the false sign will prevail? Today, to be or not

to be IS THE QUESTION, facing both the secular and religious. The Kierkegaardian either/or-paradigm has acquired a new menacing meaning and urgency.

Conclusions

The present rise of the religious could be partly explained by the weakened immunity of the human civilization, undermined by its own tolerance of otherness and the abandonment of the Aristotelian ancient secularism. The belief-causing signs managed to invade our cultural space, exploiting our own principles of freedom and democracy while even Aristotle taught that “extreme democracy” could be harmful for society.

References

- Aristotle. “On Heavens” in *Complete Works*, 2 vols ed. J.Barnes, tr by J.L Storks, vol.1, pp 447-511, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Aristotle. ”Rhetoric to Alexander” in *Complete Works*, *ibid.*, tr by E.S. Forster & J. Barnes. Vol.2, pp. 2270-2315.
- Aristotle. On Divination in Sleep” in *ibid.*,vol. I, tr. by J.I.Bear, pp. 736-739.
- Aristotle. *Eudemian Ethics*, in *ibid.*,vol. II, tr. by J. Solomon, pp. 1922-1981.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*,in *ibid.*, tr. by W.Ross, vol.2, pp. 1729-1867.
- Aristotle. *Magna Moralia*, in *ibid.*, tr. By E. S. Forster, vol. I, pp.626-640.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Tr with commentary by Hippocrates G.Apostle. Grindell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1966.
- Bevan, Edward, ed. *Early Greek Religion*. London: Dent Co.,1927.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity (Sushchnost’ kapitalisma)*.Moscow: Gospolisdat, 1955.
- Lucretius. *Re Rerum Natura*. Tr. by A.E. Stalling, London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Prince & Discoveries*. Int. By Max Lerner. New Random House, 1956.
- Makolkin, Anna. *Paradoxes of the 20th Century and Cultural Crusades*. Toronto:Anik Press, 2014.
- Makolkin, Anna. “Aristotle’s and Lucretius’ Cosmology” in *Biocosmology and Neo-Aristotelism*, vol.2, N.1&2, Spring 2012, pp. 15-26.
- Makolkin, Anna. ”Aristotle’s False and Dangerous Signs” in *Biocosmology and Neo-Aristotelism*, vol. 1, N.4, 2012, pp. 395-406.
- Makolkin, Anna. “Machiavelli and His Critique of Christianity” in E-LOGOS.
- Makolkin, Anna. *Wisdom and Happiness, with or without God*. Toronto: Anik Press, 2009.
- Makolkin, Anna. “Romantic Ruminations about Judaism, Christianity & Islam “ in Salvatore Bankeri, ed. *Manzoni and Historical Novel*, Ottawa: Legas, 2009, pp. 179-199.
- Randall, J. *Aristotle*. New York: Random House, 1980.