The vast breadth of Roman Empire gave vast range of beliefs & non-beliefs. An age of Greek-inspired skepticism was burgeoning, a skeptical attitude about the gods and human invention of the gods that first came to popular awareness with Anaxagoras (5C BCE), who needed Pericles to keep him out of jail, that became more general with Euripides & Aristophanes, who were criticized, and became a deep enough concern of the authorities for them to condemn Socrates. Skepticism about the gods and secular thinking grew deeper and more general among educated classes in Hellenistic, then Roman times. Roman religion itself was about behavior and values more than believable divinities, though the state continued to proclaim and defend a state religion and its official divinities.

Lucian (2C CE), Greco-Roman comic satirist, made a career—lecturer, performer, writer—of lampooning the gods and those who believe in them, while flinging ridicule just as enthusiastically at secular thinkers, generally called “philosophers”. In Icaromenippus, Menippus, our fictional character, has been trying to find out what is the truth of the heavens, decides to ask “philosophers” (including whom we would call scientists), but finds them in total disagreement and confusion. In this excerpt, he is speaking to a friend:

*Menippus.* . . . . My greatest difficulty was that, though they differed among themselves, and all they said was full of inconsistency and contradiction, they expected me to believe them, each pulling me in his own direction.

*Friend.* How absurd that wise men should quarrel about facts, and hold different opinions on the same things!

*Menippus.* Ah, but keep your laughter till you have heard something of their pretentious mystifications. To begin with, their feet are on the ground; they are no taller than the rest of us 'men that walk the earth'; they are no sharper-sighted than their neighbours, some of them purblind, indeed, with age or indolence; and yet they say they can distinguish the limits of the sky, they measure the sun's circumference, take their walks in the supra-lunar regions, and specify the sizes and shapes of the stars as though they had just fallen from them; often one of them could not tell you correctly the number of miles from Megara to Athens, but has no hesitation about how many cubits from the sun to the moon. How high the atmosphere is, how deep the sea, how far it is round the earth--they have the figures for all that; and moreover, they have only to draw some circles, arrange a few triangles and squares, add certain complicated spheres, and lo, they have the cubic contents of Heaven.

Then, how reasonable and modest of them, dealing with subjects so debatable, to issue their views without a hint of uncertainty; thus it must be and it shall be; they will tell you on oath the sun is a
molten mass, the moon inhabited, and the stars drink water, and that the sun draws up the moisture from the sea, as with a well-rope, and distributes his draught over the whole creation?

How their theories conflict is soon apparent; next-door neighbors? no, they are miles apart. In the first place, their views of the world differ. Some say it had no beginning, and cannot end; others boldly talk of its creator and his procedure; what particularly entertained me was that these latter set up a creator of the universe, but fail to mention where he came from, or what he stood on while going about his elaborate task, though it is by no means obvious how there place or time could exist before the universe came into being.

Friend. You really do make them out very audacious conjurers.

Menippus. My dear fellow, I wish I could give you their lucubrations on ideas and incorporeals, on finite and infinite. Over that point, now, there is fierce battle; some circumscribe the All, others will have it unlimited. At the same time they declare for a plurality of worlds, and speak scornfully of others who make only one. And there is a bellicose person who maintains that war is the father of the universe¹.

As to Gods, I need hardly deal with that question. For some of them God is a number; some swear by dogs and geese and plane-trees.² Some again banish all other Gods, and attribute the control of the universe to a single one; I got rather depressed on learning how small the supply of divinity was. But I was comforted by the lavish souls who not only make many, but classify; there was a First God, and second and third classes of divinity. Yet again, some regard the divine nature as unsubstantial and without form, while others conceive it as a substance. Then they were not all disposed to recognize a Providence; some relieve the Gods of all care, as we relieve the senile of their civic duties; in fact, they treat them exactly like extras on the stage with no lines to speak. The last step is also taken, of saying that Gods do not exist at all, and leaving the world to drift along without a master or a guiding hand.

Well, when I heard all this, I dared not disbelieve people whose voices and beards were equally suggestive of Zeus. But I knew not where to turn for a theory that was not open to exception, nor combated by one as soon as propounded by another. I found myself in the state Homer has described; many a time I would vigorously start believing one of these gentlemen, “but then came second thoughts.”

trans. taken from H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, with some insertions from by Thomas Francklin, D.D.

Behind all this joking around, we get a sense of a Roman Empire where free thought goes on vigorously, of a widely felt impulse to understand the world in a way we would call scientifically theoretical, fruitfully speculative, combined with tremendous imagination. All of this even as religions and cults flourished around the Empire. The only ones consistently getting themselves into trouble with the authorities for their beliefs are the only ones who themselves have no tolerance for a multiplicity of belief: Christians. It was their insistence that they alone had the only Truth made them a visible irritant and easy scapegoat when times were uneasy.

¹ He means Heracleitus, for whom the only reality is change, the ceaseless contending of “Love” and “Strife”.
² Socrates, wryly, made a practice of substituting these for the names of the Gods in his oaths.