Introduction

> What *is* Greek religion? What is religion *tout court*? Is there such a thing as '(Greek) religion'?
>
> Richard Buxton[1]

> The *polis* anchored, legitimated, and mediated all religious activity . . .
>
> . . . *polis* religion encompassed all religious discourse within it.
>
> Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood[2]

Even a cursory glance at one of the many handbooks and monographs published in what is now a popular and dynamic area of study (Greek religion) will reveal much information on the intricate links between religion and society. Who marched in a religious procession (*pompē*) and why?[3] What can the way in which new cults were introduced to the existing polytheistic pantheon of Athens reveal about her 'collective religious mentality' during the fifth century BC?[4] And how are blood sacrifice and the subsequent communal feasting related to the socio-political structures of the Greek city?[5] These are the kinds of questions that reverberate among scholars in the field. Indeed, religious practice, control and power have featured prominently in debates on ancient Greek religion.[6] The main aim of much productive work done in this area is to demonstrate the various ways in which religion maps on to the socio-political structures of Greek society.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with this aim. At the same time, however, there are also a few obvious omissions in the picture of the religious dimension of ancient Greece that emerges from this research. For

[1] Buxton 2000: 8. [2] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 15, 24 respectively.
[3] E.g., Motte 1987; van Straten 1995; Neils 1996a; Maurizio 1998.
[4] Garland 1992: viii. [5] Schmitt Pantel 1992; Evans 2010: 58–62.
[6] See, e.g., Beard and North 1990; Garland 1996; Alroth and Hellström 1996.

example, we find very little on religious beliefs and religious discourse.[7] Neither does individual engagement with the supernatural about private concerns ('personal religion') feature largely.[8] Moreover, there are various religious phenomena and institutions, such as beliefs and practices labelled 'magic' and mystery religions, which are partly or wholly outside the scope of communal and authorised religious practices and which are therefore frequently presented as merely peripheral to our understanding of ancient Greek religion.[9]

What has shaped this picture of ancient Greek religion? One way of answering would be to argue that this representation reflects the realities of life in the ancient Greek city. Another response would be to point to the ancient evidence, which frequently (but not always) supports the polis-centred perspective. Both suggestions would not be entirely misleading, but they would also not tell the whole story. The real answer to the question of what has shaped this picture of the religious in ancient Greece lies in the history of scholarship on ancient Greek religion. The current emphasis on the centrality of Greek religion to Greek politics and society is, in many ways, a response to older scholarship.

Not so long ago, ancient Greek religion was regarded as a marginal topic, far removed from the 'hard surfaces' of Greek life, Greek politics and society.[10] In particular, older scholarship at the beginning of the twentieth century propagated an image of ancient Greek religion that was more concerned with fertility rites and with tracing earlier layers of the Greek religious experience than with the structures and relationships in and of Greek polis society.[11] In the works of Jane Ellen Harrison, for example, there is much on agricultural cycles and their reflection in ancient Greek mythology and ritual, and very little on the place of the religious in politics and society.[12]

Since the days of Harrison, however, we seem to have come full circle. Religion is now generally considered to be absolutely fundamental to our

[7] Some scholars even argue that the category of belief was fully absent from the religious dimension of ancient Greece and that ancient Greek religion was all about doing things (ritual). E.g., Burkert 1985: 8; Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992: 27; Price 1999: 3. For a discussion of the conception of belief and its applicability to the religions of Greece and Rome see Harrison 2000: 20–3; Feeney 1998: 12–46.

[8] For a succinct definition of Greek personal religion see also Instone 2009: 1.

[9] The almost entire absence of magical practices from Burkert's *Greek Religion* is a good example. See Burkert 1985 and my discussion of it in ch. 4. On mystery religions see ch. 1.

[10] See Morris 1993: 32.

[11] E.g., Rohde 1972 (1890/1894) and the works of the so-called 'Cambridge Ritualists': Harrison 1903; 1912; Cornford 1914; Murray 1925.

[12] E.g., Harrison 1912.

understanding of ancient Greek politics and society. What brought about this change in paradigm, however, is first and foremost what scholars have come to refer to as the model of polis religion. Polis religion has moved the study of ancient Greek religion towards the centre of classical studies and turned a once-marginal subject into a central focus of classical scholarship.

Polis religion found its most succinct and prominent formulation in two articles by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, dating from 1988 and 1990 but republished together in a more accessible collection of essays in 2000.[13] In its most general conception by Sourvinou-Inwood, the model propagates the primacy of the polis as the dominant worshipping group in ancient Greece.[14] It relies on the notion that the most significant discourse of power relevant for the study of ancient Greek religion is the one 'embraced', 'contained' and 'mediated' by the socio-political institutions of the polis.[15] Numerous studies since then have elaborated the link between Greek politics and society on the one hand and Greek religion on the other, along the lines described above.

In her articles Sourvinou-Inwood synthesised a perspective towards ancient Greek religion that had taken shape much earlier. The idea of polis religion first emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, most notably, perhaps, in the works of Walter Burkert and the so-called Paris School.[16] The simultaneous 'discovery' of ancient Greek blood sacrifice by Burkert and Vernant instigated a much broader 'pragmatic turn' within the study of ancient Greek religion, putting the focus distinctly on religious practices, and on ritual in particular.[17] More importantly, perhaps, both Burkert and the scholars around Jean-Pierre Vernant explained the principles and practices of ancient Greek religion by referring to an internally coherent cultural system, conceived as the archaic and classical Greek polis.[18]

The emergence of polis religion therefore coincided with the adoption of what Kostas Vlassopoulos has referred to as the 'polis approach' to the

[13] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; 2000b.

[14] The intellectual roots of polis religion reach far back into the history of scholarship on ancient Greek religion, to Emile Durkheim's sociology of religion (as influenced by his teacher Fustel de Coulanges, who had himself a special interest in the ancient Greek city) and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. See Fustel de Coulanges 1864; Durkheim 1995 (1912). See also ch. 1 for more detail.

[15] See Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 20.

[16] For an early formulation of polis religion see Ehrenberg 1960.

[17] Burkert 1983a; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988; Detienne and Vernant 1989. For a more extensive discussion of the history of scholarship on ancient Greek religion, in particular the opposing positions of Burkert and Vernant, see Kindt 2009: 368–71.

[18] E.g., Vernant 1980; Burkert 1985; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988; Bérard and Bron 1989; Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992.

study of ancient Greek history.[19] The polis approach, as developed during the 1960s and 1970s, posited the existence of the polis as a 'unitary entity and the uniting factor behind Greek history'.[20] Within this perspective, the polis was seen as a quasi-organic entity with a life of its very own: it emerged during the archaic period, saw its climax in fifth-century BC Athens and subsequently declined during the fourth century BC with the loss of Greek independence after the Battle of Chaironeia.[21] The reason for this was that the polis was also seen as 'a solitary entity' with a set of features (an essence) typical to it, one of these being its (striving for) *autonomia*.[22]

It was precisely this conception of *the* Greek polis that allowed Walter Burkert to draw on information from a wide range of sources derived from a wide array of poleis and to present this information in the form of a unified, coherent and authoritative account of archaic and classical Greek religion as such.[23] In Burkert's *Greek Religion*, as in Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel's *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, the focus is on the religious structures of the Greek city-state of the archaic and classical periods.[24] The 'polis' of polis religion has a homogeneous body of citizens and a cohesive culture.[25]

However, polis religion did not just borrow the conception of the polis from the polis approach as it came to shape the study of Greek history from the 1960s onwards. In fact, polis religion is central to the polis approach insofar as it underpins the assumption of the Greek city-state as a coherent and stable system maintained and articulated in collective ritual practices.

Since the 1990s, however, classical scholars have started to express their dissatisfaction with this narrow and idealising conception of the Greek polis.[26] It was observed that not all poleis looked the same and that there were significant differences in their social, political and, indeed, religious make-up.[27] The scholars of the Copenhagen Polis Centre in particular have pointed out (rightly I believe) that the history of the Greek poleis continued far into the Hellenistic and Roman periods – an issue that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.[28] The extended temporal focus, however, has made it necessary to accommodate a variety of new social,

[19] Here and below see Vlassopoulos 2007: 52–63. [20] Vlassopoulos 2007: 55.
[21] See ch. 1 in more detail. [22] Vlassopoulos 2007: 55. [23] Burkert 1985. See ch. 1 in more detail.
[24] Burkert 1985; Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992.
[25] A succinct description of the polis approach: Vlassopoulos 2007: 55–63.
[26] The debate is succinctly synthesised in Vlassopoulos 2007: 63–7.
[27] E.g., Gehrke 1986; Hansen and Nielsen 2004.
[28] E.g., Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 16–22; Hansen 2006: 48–50. See also Vlassopoulos 2007: 64–5 for a critical assessment of the significance of the work of the Copenhagen Polis Centre for recent debates about the meaning of the polis as the fundamental structuring principle of ancient Greek history.

political and religious institutions, which coexisted alongside traditional ones. While only a few scholars would go so far as to suggest that we should find another structuring principle for the study of Greek history altogether, there is now growing debate about what we mean by the polis and when we assume it came to an end.[29]

In the field of ancient Greek religion some scholars have responded to such concerns of definition with regard to the underlying model of the Greek city-state, for example, by speaking of Greek religions rather than Greek religion.[30] Moreover, despite the ongoing interpretative appeal of the model, some scholars have also started to pursue an alternative conception of the religious. In particular, those aspects of ancient Greek religion which are not directly bound up in human agency (which is always in one way or the other related to the polis as the primary social, political and cultural unit of Greek life) seem to reveal a dimension which is not, or at least not always, related to the polis. Religious concepts such as death, prayer, sacrifice, *daimones* and *eusebeia* in many ways transcend the polis orientation in current scholarship in the field and offer a more versatile understanding of the religious that is not always and necessarily bound up in the socio-political discourse of the polis.[31] There is also renewed and sustained interest in the personal dimension of ancient Greek religion.[32] Such works have raised the question of whether there might not be more to ancient Greek religion than can (and should) be accounted for in the model of polis religion.

To be fair, not all the questions and problems that emerge from the primacy of the model of polis religion can be laid at the doorstep of those scholars who helped develop it. The impact of the model, the enthusiasm with which it was embraced, and the profound way in which it has shaped current concepts and conceptions of the religious in the ancient world have almost certainly exceeded the expectations of its most fervent advocates. The model, in its original formulation at least, was never meant to be a 'theory of everything', to borrow the physicists' term. In some scholarship, however, it has acquired an all-embracing quality, as in those works that

[29] A call to move towards alternative ways to structure ancient Greek history: Vlassopoulos 2007: 221–40. Debates about the meaning and end of the polis: Hansen 2000: 11–34; Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 39–46.

[30] Price 1999, as discussed in ch. 1.

[31] E.g., Jeanmaire 1951; Lloyd-Jones 1971; Gladigow 1979; Pulleyn 1997; Bruit Zaidman 2001.

[32] As for example reflected in recent sourcebooks: Instone 2009; Kearns 2010: 45–141. Greek personal religion is also at the heart of recent studies on oracles and curses: e.g., Eidinow 2007a: 42–55, 125–38, 206–24. Greek personal religion and mystery religions: e.g., Graf and Johnston 2007; Bowden 2010.

focus almost exclusively on the civic and communal dimensions of ancient Greek religion.[33]

This book sets out to explore ancient Greek religion 'beyond the polis'. At the same time it aims to give more than a straightforward account of what is wrong with polis religion. Its individual chapters are much more loosely connected and revolve around two separate but intrinsically related questions. First, the book investigates those dimensions of the Greek religious experience that polis religion cannot explain. Second, it explores in what aspects polis religion renders Greek religion less intelligible than it should be.

While the aim of overcoming problems resulting from an excessively narrow focus on official (polis) religion is the leading investigative focus, I endeavour to illustrate the productivity of a perspective that explores some of the deeper consequences of too narrow a focus on official Greek religion. The goal is to challenge current interpretative models and also to identify those areas of ancient Greek religion that should be preserved and situated within a wider framework of study. For there are some areas which polis religion reveals rather well, and these need to be integrated into a more comprehensive conception of the religious. What we need in particular is a different notion of culture, in which religion is not merely part of a single hegemonic discourse but rather a vibrant symbolic medium for different and competing (power-) discourses, including, though not limited to, the discourse of the official polis institutions. In sum, this book does not intend to replace the conception of polis religion. Instead, individual chapters look at Greek religious beliefs and practices through different lenses, to illuminate those aspects of the religious in ancient Greece that cannot be explained by the model of polis religion.

Rethinking Greek Religion attempts to move current debates forward by highlighting problems in contemporary scholarship, by synthesising existing positions and by identifying promising areas of further debate. The book is meant to serve as a guide to what is interesting about Greek relations with the supernatural beyond the polis paradigm and to what scholars have said about the questions and issues emerging from such a perspective. Its chapters illustrate the exemplary and develop particular areas of Greek religion beyond the polis. This focus is intended to make the whole more accessible and to ground the general, conceptual argument as developed in particular in Chapter 1 in tangible examples and problems. However, the individual chapters also stand in their own right as contributions to

[33] See most recently Evans 2010.

the study of particular areas within ancient Greek religion. Chapter 2, for example, contributes to the ongoing discussion about the nature of religious visuality by Elsner and others.[34] Chapter 4 participates in the debate on the relationship between magic and religion, and Chapter 6 raises the question of a theology (or theologies) of ancient Greek religion.

The book gives examples of how methodological perspectives from different, neighbouring disciplines can shed new light on well-known aspects of ancient Greek religion. It invites the reader to embark on an interdisciplinary journey leading from classical scholarship to social anthropology and *Religionswissenschaft* (the comparative study of religions). All chapters combine a rigorous reading of primary sources – be they historiographic, epigraphic, literary, or material in nature – with a discussion of the larger conceptual and methodological issues arising from them. This reflects the fact that the sources available to the student of ancient Greek religion transcend all areas of academic compartmentalisation and expertise. Because ancient Greek religion was not abstract but 'embedded' in all areas of life (see 'embeddedness' in Chapter 1), there is hardly any type of evidence or any genre of Greek literature from which religion is entirely absent. Religious beliefs and practices transcend the literary and the material evidence, including iconography, inscriptions and numismatics. They are also a ubiquitous feature of Greek literature from Homer onwards, via Greek tragedy and historiography (to name just two genres from a much larger group), to the apologetic literature of early Christianity, which, as I show in Chapter 6, relates closely to views expressed in earlier Greek sources and can indeed sometimes help to illuminate them. Moreover, some of our very best evidence for the study of ancient Greek religion is situated on the plane just below high literature. It is not just the works of Homer and Hesiod that are obvious sources for the study of ancient Greek religion – religious beliefs and practices can also be found in the form of a curse tablet buried in a grave, for example, or in Philostratus' account of the wonder-workings of a certain Apollonius.[35] It takes particular diligence to see how these and other sources contribute to the bigger picture we sketch of ancient Greek religion. The sources supporting my arguments illustrate this breadth and versatility. In one sense the individual chapters also demonstrate the interpretative tools available to make these diverse sources speak to each other, to examine them individually and in conversation with each other.

[34] Elsner 2007: 1–26.
[35] Philostr. *VA* (see also ch. 6). On the place of curse tablets within the religious culture of Athens see ch. 4.

Although this book aims to move current debates forward by examining the impact of the categories we use on the questions we ask about ancient Greek religion, its overall scope is necessarily selective and incomplete. Not all discussion points of polis religion outlined in Chapter 1 are followed up later. This is not another introduction to ancient Greek religion as such. *Rethinking Greek Religion* offers a critical evaluation of where research in ancient Greek religion stands at present. It should be used in addition to and in conversation with such introductory works as those of Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel, Bremmer and Price.[36]

Looking into the past raises the question of the future: this book aims to provide some indication of where the study of ancient Greek religion may be headed and makes some recommendations concerning promising areas of future debate. The intention is to spark curiosity about those areas of ancient Greek religion which fall outside the scope of much contemporary scholarship, in the hope that at least some of the questions and conceptual concerns raised here will inspire the reader to take up the thread.

Chapter 1, 'Beyond the polis: rethinking Greek religion' offers a critical appreciation of the model of polis religion. Starting from the central and problematic notion of the 'embeddedness' of Greek religion in the polis, I investigate key problems resulting from the scholarly use of the model and identify how individual works have positioned themselves relative to them. I argue that the strength of the model results from its capacity to direct our attention to a key structuring principle in ancient Greek religion. At the same time, however, we need to look at other discourses of power beyond the polis and explore the ways in which they express themselves within and outside the religious. Overall, the chapter raises a number of themes and questions that are addressed in more detail in subsequent chapters. In many ways, it provides a framework for the investigative threads of the book.

Chapter 2, 'Parmeniscus' journey: tracing religious visuality in word and wood' explores a dimension of ancient Greek religion concerned with personal experience, religious concepts and inquiry into the nature of the divine. These are all aspects of the religious not prominent in works primarily concerned with religious agency, control and power. The chapter revolves around a passage in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (which itself relies on much earlier material), featuring the experience of a certain Parmeniscus with regard to various divine representations in the form of oracles and a divine statue ('word' and 'wood'). Taking up and expanding Elsner's

[36] Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992; Bremmer 1994; Price 1999.

conception of religious visuality, I show that religious gazing is not limited to ritual-centred visuality, but can also include what I call a 'cognitive dimension': a mode of 'making sense' of divine representations which confronts the viewing subject with his personal expectations of the gods.[37] Overall, the chapter not only promotes a more comprehensive concept of religious visuality than the one suggested by Elsner, it also illustrates, both spatially and conceptually, how productive an approach can be that is not, or at least is not primarily, oriented towards the polis-centred perspective.

Chapter 3, 'On tyrant property turned ritual object: political power and sacred symbols in ancient Greece and in social anthropology', takes issue with the fact that Greek religious beliefs and practices are frequently seen merely as a disguise for socio-political power. This is at least partly due to the prevailing belief of classical scholars in functionalism as the interpretative tool best suited to pursue the larger agenda of many current works in the field: to prove the direct relevance of Greek religious beliefs and practices to Greek society. As a result of this perspective, however, the symbolic dimension of ancient Greek religion is either sidelined altogether, or, if considered at all, frequently put into a different category, separate from socio-political power. The chapter draws on current works in social anthropology in order to suggest that we need a more complicated conception of religious symbols, in which socio-political power is intrinsic to religious signification. The productivity of this approach is exemplified in a fragment from Philochorus attesting to the 'recycling' of symbolic capital after the Thirty, during the restoration of democracy in 403 BC. The case study of the recycling of symbolic capital demonstrates that religious symbols are actively involved in the negotiation of socio-political power and that religion is indeed more than a simple tool for individuals to achieve their political ambitions.

Chapter 4, 'Rethinking boundaries: the place of magic in the religious culture of ancient Greece', draws on the discussion set out in Chapter 3 of the relationship between the world on the one hand and religious symbols on the other. It seeks to expand the boundaries of our conception of the religious. In particular, it investigates the question of what beliefs and practices conventionally referred to as 'magic' add to our overall understanding of the religious culture of ancient Greece. The purpose of this chapter is to anchor questions raised previously, especially with regard to the margins of ancient Greek religion, in a more broadly conceived account of what aspect of the religious dimension of ancient Greece we are trying to rescue.

[37] See ch. 2, n. 20.

More specifically, the focus is on the cultural practice of cursing as a ritual activity, which is both inside and outside polis religion. I argue that it is absolutely essential to bring magical belief and practices into the picture because they reveal a more personal and instrumental side of the religious, supplementing and sometimes even challenging the beliefs and practices of polis religion. Moreover the inclusion of 'magic' uncovers a conversation from within ancient Greek religion about legitimate and illegitimate behaviour and legitimate and illegitimate religious power. I conclude that we need to adopt the conception of a broader religious culture of ancient Greece, which embraces locations of the religious besides those of polis religion.

Chapter 5, 'The "local" and the "universal" reconsidered: Olympia, dedications and the religious culture of ancient Greece', takes up the idea of a broader religious culture and explores its ramifications on the 'panhellenic' level. It investigates the cultural practice of setting up dedications at the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia and illustrates how multiple identities in the Greek world, including personal, polis and ethnic identities, were represented in the space of the sanctuary, hence mediating between the 'local' and 'universal' dimensions of ancient Greek religion and between polis religion and ancient Greek religion beyond the polis – without, however, assuming a strict duality between the two. On a more general plane this chapter shows how important it is to bring together the literary and material evidence in an integrated approach which does not rely on one illustrating the other but investigates the cultural discourses that have informed both kinds of evidence. Overall, the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia emerges as a complex space testifying to the existence of an understanding of what it meant to be Greek that is more than the sum of its polis-related parts.

Chapter 6, '"The sex appeal of the inorganic": seeing, touching and knowing the divine during the Second Sophistic', concludes our investigation of ancient Greek religion beyond the polis by bringing together a variety of issues and questions raised in the preceding chapters. Different tellings of the (in)famous story of a young man's desire to make love to Praxiteles' famous Aphrodite of Cnidus as they circulated in the literature of Roman Greece are examined as manifestations of a religious discourse exploring the nature of the divine and its availability to humanity, in particular to human knowledge. By drawing on traditional anthropomorphism represented here in the form of a statue crafted during the classical period, the religion of Roman Greece variously complements our understanding of the religious culture of ancient Greece. Above all, it showcases the