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1
On making sense of Greek religion

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> The notion is that life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis.
>
> William Empson, note to *Bacchus* (*The Gathering Storm*, 1940)

To talk meaningfully about the religion of another culture is not easy, and requires of us some degree of tact and imagination. We need to be aware of the pitfalls. To begin with, it will seem all too clear that what we are dealing with is a human invention, a 'fiction' constructed by men for their own purposes – an interpretation which we can never quite give to the religion of our own culture, even if we have rejected it. To make that assumption will not help us to understand though it may boost our sense of superiority. And secondly, there is the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of avoiding thinking about someone else's religion as a kind of exercise in 'decoding', in translating myth and ritual into a 'natural' language (our own, of course) in which these things can be made to yield their true sense, which may be hidden from those who carry out the rituals and who recount the myths.

Moreover, to propose to 'make sense' of Greek religion is to lay oneself at once open to objections. Why should we suppose that Greek religion does 'make sense', when to many it seems obvious that it does not and cannot? There are two different sorts of objections that can be made. One, that the whole undertaking is unsound in method, because there is no such single *thing* as 'Greek religion' and there can be no 'making sense' in any unified way of so vast and disparate a body of data as the data which *we* put

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together and call 'Greek religion': the best we can hope for will be no more than piecemeal explanations of a particular ritual or a particular myth. The second objection is more insidious: it is that what we are dealing with is itself without sense, a rag-bag without significance, an agglomeration of literary 'devices' and mere 'superstitious' survivals that did not 'make sense' to any ancient Greek whom we can take seriously; to the backwoodsmen (perhaps) among the Attic peasantry, but not (surely) to Homer, nor (evidently) to Xenophanes or Heraclitus or Euripides or Thucydides or Plato . . . That is a view which seems to be held as self-evident by a large number of undergraduates, and, I suspect, sixth-formers, and is not unknown among scholars.

I want in this essay to argue the contrary, in the belief that not only does this approach enable us to understand more, but also that it is consistent with more of what we know both about ancient Greeks and about other societies in the way they understand the world about us. I want to put forward a description of Greek religion which sees it as constituting a complex and quite subtle statement about what the world is like and a set of responses for dealing with that world, and in doing so I shall make use of one or two analogies and assumptions which I had better begin by making clear.

My first point is negative: it will not be helpful, I think, to start any enquiry into Greek religious ideas by drawing a distinction (whether implicit or explicit) between valid or correct ways of thinking about the world, on the one hand, and invalid ones, on the other; between 'mystical', 'magical' or 'superstitious' thinking (which is mistaken) and 'scientific' or 'common-sense' (which is true). By 'ways of thinking about the world', I mean the ways in which we approach such questions as questions of cause and effect ('Why/How do things happen?') and of effective action in and on the world around us ('How can we cause this or that to happen?'). I am suggesting that we should not simply rule out religious answers to such questions as 'unscientific', proved wrong by observation and common-sense: the analogy which approaches religion as a

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sort of pseudo-science outmoded by the progress of true science is one that, in one form or another, has dogged and hampered the study of primitive religion from Frazer to Evans-Pritchard and beyond. Evans-Pritchard's classic study, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* – an account of his field-work among a southern Sudanese tribal people – is a brilliant, subtle and sophisticated analysis of a culture's complex religious thinking, but Evans-Pritchard is still sufficiently under the influence of the pseudo-science analogy to treat the thought-processes of the Azande as characterized by error and illogicality. He speaks of their displaying 'patterns of thought that attribute to phenomena supra-sensible qualities which . . . are not derived from observation or cannot be logically inferred from it, *and which they do not possess*' (my italics), as opposed to 'common-sense notions . . . that attribute to phenomena only what men observe in them or what can logically be inferred from observation'. That is to say, Evans-Pritchard assumes that the evidence of our senses and the application of an objective 'common-sense' are enough to show that Zande assumptions about the operation of oracles, magic and witchcraft in the way things happen are simply wrong, and 'pseudo-scientific' in the sense that science is merely a methodologically more demanding development of 'common-sense notions', one which 'has better techniques of observation and reasoning'.[1] On this view Zande thought-processes are unscientific and therefore simply mistaken, not 'in accord with objective reality': 'witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist',[2] and therefore their magical rituals are, to quote a distinguished philosopher of religion, 'a pseudo-technique, an effort to make up for poor practical skills with an imaginary technology'.[3]

Evans-Pritchard would presumably have said much the same about ancient Greek religious notions and thought-processes. The trouble about this is that not only is the thesis vulnerable to philosophical argument about the nature of 'objective reality',[4] but also that Evans-Pritchard's own experiences of the Azande

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during his field-work demonstrated how absolutely fundamental these 'unscientific notions' were in their daily life and with what unassailable seriousness they were regarded. He himself found it all too easy, while among them, to think in terms of Zande notions; indeed all too hard to 'check', as he disarmingly puts it, 'this lapse into unreason'.[5]

For the truth is that systems of religious belief, in any culture in which they are living things, are not only self-justifying[6] (and thus impossible to disprove by empirical observation, as Evans-Pritchard found in talking to the Azande), but also all-pervasive within the culture, so that there is no corner of life that is not lived in their terms: it is not possible to be a member of the society and think in wholly different categories. If we want an analogy to help us understand religion, one that will direct our attention positively to what is important in religious systems, we should turn not to the concept of a pseudo-science and a pseudo-technology but to language. Like language, religion is a cultural phenomenon, a phenomenon of the group (there are no 'private' religions, any more than there are 'private' languages, except by some metaphorical devaluation of the two terms), and like language, any religion is a system of signs enabling communication both between members of the group in interpreting and responding to experience of the external world and in the individual's inner discourse with himself as to his own behaviour, emotional and private. We do not need to go all the way in the direction of cultural relativism to see the relevance to our thinking about Greek religion of Edward Sapir's words about language:

> The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.[7]

For 'language' here, we could read 'religion' and 'religious'.

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If Greek religion, then, is among other things a way of representing and interpreting (even, at the limit, of constructing) the external world and man's experience of himself, we can best approach it as a mode of experience, a response to life as lived by ancient Greeks. In particular, as a system of responses to those aspects of experience which threatened to overturn the sense of an intelligible order in terms of which men lived. Here I would like to quote once more, this time from a splendidly illuminating essay by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz himself quotes with approval the philosopher Suzanne Langer '[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos', and goes on:

> There are at least three points where chaos – a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability – threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight. Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it – challenges with which any religion, however 'primitive', which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope.[8]

With the help of this remark, let us assume that what Greek religion offered to those brought up within its field of efficacy was both a framework of explanation for human experience and a system of responses to all that is wayward, uncanny and a threat to the perception of order in that experience – a language for dealing with the world. In which case, to make sense of it, to see what Greek religion is a response to and what kind of response it is, we need first of all to take account of differences of two kinds: firstly, differences of 'world', that is between our experience of the external world and that of ancient Greeks, and secondly, institutional differences in the response, differences between two traditions and conventions in the organization of religious thought and behaviour.

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To start with the first kind of difference, we need to acknowledge the precariousness of life in the ancient world and to take stock of the real poverty of its technological resources. The support of life, even in a prosperous and 'advanced' community like that of fifth-century Attica, was based almost wholly on subsistence farming, carried on with minimal agricultural technology and in a world in which the onset of disease attacking crops, animals and men was subject to no effective control. The result was a world constantly vulnerable to crop failure and sickness and far closer to present-day village India than to anything in our own immediate experience, a world in which the expectation of life was appallingly low and in which medicine (the most articulate and sophisticated of ancient sciences) was all too often an unavailing witness of human suffering, disease and death; not merely, as Thucydides notes, in major epidemics such as the famous plague at Athens in the 420s but in the ordinary run of human sickness during the average year. The Hippocratic doctor who worked for four years on the island of Thasos and the mainland opposite, and whose case-notes we have in the collection of writings attributed to Hippocrates as *Epidemics* 1 and 3 (a misleading title), records 25 fatalities out of 42 cases that he attended and recorded.[9] To encounter anything similar in our experience we have to go back to the nineteenth century or earlier, to a world in which a tombstone in the Tewkesbury Abbey precinct can record the twelve children of a marriage who died aged 58, 57, 52, 18, 17 and 'seven in infancy', before we confront an experience of which 'natural death' was so pervasive and ordinary a part. To this we can, of course, add such 'extras' as earthquakes and the violent deaths among the male population brought about by endemic warfare and the recurrent political confrontations which Greeks called *stasis*.

In such a world the threat of chaos, in Geertz's sense, is never far away. Yet the religious institutions and systems of belief of ancient Greeks were equally different, less structured, less 'worked out' than those we tend to take for granted. For if the dif-

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ferences in experience are fundamental, so too are the differences in religious tradition, which reach into every aspect of consciousness. Greek religion is not 'revealed' as Christianity is; there is no sacred text claiming the status of the 'word of God', nor even of His prophets; no Ten Commandments, no creed, no doctrinal councils, no heresies, no wars of religion in which 'true believers' confront the 'infidel' or the heretic. Central terms of our religious experience such as 'grace', 'sin', and 'faith' cannot be rendered without disfigurement into the ancient Greek of the classical period: the central *Greek* term, *theous nomizein*, means not 'believe in the gods', but 'acknowledge' them, that is, pray to them, sacrifice to them, build them temples, make them the object of cult and ritual. There is never an assumption of divine omnipotence, nor of a divine creation of the universe, except in philosophical 'theology', nor any consistent belief in divine omnipresence. There is no church, no organized body persisting through time comprising those with dogmatic authority, able to *define* divinity and rule on what is correct or incorrect in religious belief. Men of religion in ancient Greece are of two kinds, those with ritual functions (*hiereis*, meaning primarily 'sacrificers') and custodians of religious tradition and customary law on the one hand (that is men such as the Athenian *exēgētai* and the *hierophants* of the Eleusinian mysteries), and, on the other, men with a god-given and peculiar closeness to divinity, with a special insight into or power to communicate with the divine, that is *manteis*, dream-interpreters and such figures as the Pythia (Apollo's prophetess) at Delphi. All these are indeed essential parts of the fabric of Greek religion (no army took the field in fifth-century Greece without a *mantis* to accompany its dangerous enterprise[10]), but they do not constitute a church; there is no system of relationships joining them together and making them conscious of a common stance or a common ideology; there is no 'training for the priesthood'.

All this means that, for all its weight of tradition (not less evident in ancient Greek religion than in other religions), Greek religion remains fundamentally improvisatory. By which I mean

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that though the response to experience crystallizes, on the one hand as ritual, on the other as myth, and both involve repetition and transmission from generation to generation, there is always room for new improvisation, for the introduction of new cults and new observances: Greek religion is not theologically fixed and stable, and it has no tradition of exclusion or finality: it is an open, not a closed system. There are no true gods and false, merely powers known and acknowledged since time immemorial, and new powers, newly experienced as active among men and newly acknowledged in worship (as were Bendis and Asclepius in the last decades of the fifth century at Athens).

The same absence of finality is characteristic of Greek myth. If there is one reason beyond all others why we have no tradition of religious myth in our culture, it is that the Christian 'myth' of the Old and New Testament is once for all an unchanging and unchangeable revelation of divine truth in its entirety; all that is left for improvisation in the face of new experience is hagiography and martyrology, the creation of new intermediaries, new saints and new martyrs in the Christian tradition. By contrast, Greek myth is open-ended; a traditional story can be re-told, told with new meanings, new incidents, new persons, even with a formal reversal of old meanings, as in the myth of Helen (seduced to Troy as the *casus belli* of the Trojan war, the 'woman of many men', or in Egypt as a wronged and virtuous wife), or in the myth of Orestes (example of filial duty to Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, or paradigm of moral dilemma, of the inextricability of good and evil in fifth-century tragedy). The improvisatory character of Greek myth is not just a literary fact, not only the source of its perennial vitality in literature, but also the guarantee of its centrality in Greek religion. It is not bound to forms hardened and stiffened by canonical authority, but mobile, fluent and free to respond to a changing experience of the world.

Ritual and myth, I am arguing, are both modes of religious response to experience in a world in which 'chaos', the threat posed

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by events which seem to be unintelligible or which outrage moral feeling, is always close. But if we are to make sense of Greek religion as response to experience, we have to ask: What aspects of experience? What kinds of event are taken to be signs of divine activity and stimulate a religious response? How did an ancient Greek *know* that a divine power was at work in the world of his experience? The answer, of course, is that he didn't – outside, say, the fictional worlds of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He had to guess, to wrestle with uncertainty and disagreement, both in discerning the active power of divinity at work in events and, more particularly, in determining what divinity and for what reason. And until these questions could be answered, response was premature and might be misguided and misdirected; it was inhibited by thoughts of the consequences; it might involve irreparable loss in the effective destruction of foodstuffs, in the slaughter of scarce animal resources (or in myth even of sons or daughters), and might even result in an outcome counter to the intentions of the respondent. So these are questions that matter, and our sources (particularly Herodotus) reflect the doubts and anxieties that attend their answering.

Before I turn to Herodotus, let me cite an example that he would have understood, an example of 'the signs of ultra-human activity', of the putative effect of divine activity, from another culture. It comes from the world of the Dinka, another tribal people of the southern Sudan, reported by Godfrey Lienhardt in his outstanding book *Divinity and Experience*, a work to which I owe much in the writing of this essay; I quote the Dinka case because it offers a wealth of recorded detail that is hardly ever available in the Greek evidence. Its relevance to Greek religion will, I hope, become clear. The case concerns Lienhardt's 'boy', Ajak, who had left home to find work in town and in doing so had broken with his father, who died before the breach was healed. Ajak had been drinking and was subsequently said to be possessed. Lienhardt's account goes on:

> Ajak was running round and round outside the hut, breathing heavily and panting and groaning. He did not appear to hear when addressed. It

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was said that this outburst had been preceded by a period of sitting alone, during which he chanted and muttered to himself. This is often a sign of impending possession. [Compare the beginning of the Cassandra scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.] Nobody knew the songs he had been singing: they were said to be hymns to Divinity . . . Ajak ran about for some twenty minutes, apparently quite unaware of spectators. As he gradually tired, his movements became clumsier and less vigorous, and his breathing was deeper and quicker. Although he seemed to be gazing straight ahead, without care for where he was going, he avoided bushes and stumps of wood in his path. Eventually his legs began to give way beneath him and he staggered and eventually fell sprawling on the ground, where he stayed, rolling about and lashing out with his arms and legs. [Cf. some of the symptoms of epilepsy, widely regarded as the 'sacred disease' in ancient Greece.]

He lay there for some time. Bursts of frenzied movement were interspersed with quieter periods, when he sang snatches of songs which nobody could understand. By this time a few spectators from the village had gathered round . . . 'It is a Power . . . of his home', one of the spectators said, while another said, 'he has a ghost . . . in his body'. Then a minor master of the fishing-spear [hereditary priests of the Dinka] came and, addressing what he said to the threshing form of Ajak, asked whatever it was which troubled him to tell its name and say what it wanted.

The spear-master addresses the disturbing power by various possible names, and, getting no reply, takes the power to task for wantonly seizing a man far from home, in a foreign place. The spectators listen eagerly to Ajak's unintelligible mumblings, saying that in due course 'it' would leave him; to Lienhardt's question, what 'it' was, they answer variously 'that it would be his [clan] divinity . . . or the ghost of his father, or the free-divinity Deng, or "just a power" '. Ajak, dazed and exhausted, goes to bed and the next day is unable to remember anything. The seizure is repeated twice more: on the second occasion when Ajak becomes quieter, Lienhardt tries to speak to him by name. 'Someone said: "It is no use speaking to Ajak; it is *not* Ajak." ' Spectators argue about the source of possession (was it Garang or Macardit or 'just a

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