

## INTRODUCTION

What to do with a world full of diverse, unpredictable and conflicting gods? Take two points in the history of philosophy and compare their respective strategies. First, at the very dawn of Greek philosophy we find the Presocratics exploring a variety of ways in which to handle the deeply intertwining, but sometimes inconsistent, aspects of the Greek pantheon. According to them, one can either appropriate and modify the traditional gods, or accommodate and subordinate them to one's own theological projects, or disprove them and re-conceptualise the divine, or just ignore the whole matter.<sup>1</sup> Still the traditional gods are largely present in the surviving fragments of their works, and there is no consensus between the early philosophers as to what kind of deity is to replace the traditional gods. Now jump a few hundred years later and one will find that there is little room left for these gods. The largest Hellenistic philosophical schools approached the divine in one way or another as a cosmological being, whose nature may be interpreted through mythological lenses, but it does not exhaust the cosmic god, because there are independent philosophical means to confirm its existence.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Stoicism offered a full cosmological re-interpretation of religion by using the names of traditional gods to refer to different facets of nature, of which the greatest is a fiery breath that pervades the universe and which is

<sup>1</sup> For these strategies and their respective proponents, see Tor (forthcoming). By the 'traditional gods' I mean the Olympian gods, the Titans and their progenitors. By the 'cosmic gods' I refer to the universe, the sun, the earth, the planets and the stars. Although the cosmic gods are referred as 'the heavenly class of gods' in Plato's *Timaeus* (οὐράνιον θεῶν γένος, 39e10), I shall not use this category for differentiation between the two groups, because the same title is applied to the traditional gods in Plato's *Laws* (θεοὺς οὐρανίους, 10.828c7). In Chapter 1, I shall add an additional category of the 'younger gods' (cf. τοῖς νέοις θεοῖς, *Ti.* 42d6), which encompasses both the traditional and cosmic gods created by the Demiurge of the *Timaeus*.

<sup>2</sup> For a statistical analysis of the size of various Hellenistic schools, see Goulet (2013).

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conveniently titled by the name of the king of gods ‘Zeus’, even if the Stoic ‘Zeus’ has little to do with the original namesake.<sup>3</sup>

This profound transformation of the Greek theological discourse and its enduring effects on religious thinking were developed by Plato and his students in the Academy. That Plato criticised conventional modes of piety in the *Euthyphro*, purified mythical stories in the *Republic* and explored the divinity of planets and stars in the *Timaeus* is widely known. What is less clear is how he initiated the transition from the traditional gods to the cosmic gods and how it was completed by the Early Academy (alternatively, the Old Academy). What is even more obscure is why Plato and his school pursued this project and what the fundamental meaning of it is. So, the philosophical fate of the traditional gods and the question concerning their relation to the cosmic gods may seem a small matter at first, but it eventually opens a number of contentious issues in the philosophy of Plato and the Platonists, promises to show the intricate paths of development of Greek theological thinking in this crucial period and widens the overall perspective on the complex patterns of interaction between Greek philosophy and religion. All of this requires a better understanding of what is actually said about the traditional and cosmic gods by Plato himself.

‘The other divinities’ is the title given to the traditional gods in Plato’s *Timaeus* (40d6). What defines the otherness of these gods is a contrast or perhaps even a deficiency: they are the kind of beings who lack the cosmological qualities characteristic of the cosmic gods, such as regular motion and spherical body. The peculiar status of traditional gods is also emphasised by Plato’s choice of the noun *daimones*, which evokes associations with the supernatural powers and lower divine beings of Greek theological thought.<sup>4</sup> Plato’s apparent preference for the cosmic gods is not surprising. In the later dialogues, he proposed to view the gods as primarily non-anthropomorphic beings remarkable for their intelligence, harmony, uniformity and capacity for self-motion. Both the *Timaeus* and Book 10 of the *Laws* indicate Plato’s resolution to

<sup>3</sup> See a useful overview in Brennan (2014) 107–13.

<sup>4</sup> For the philosophical as well as religious meaning of this term, see Sfameni Gasparro (2015).

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prove that cosmological entities, such as the world-soul and Intellect, are the finest instances of these qualities. Although Plato increasingly formulated theological reflections on cosmological grounds, he never rejected the traditional gods. In fact, these very dialogues testify to Plato's enduring aspiration to improve Greek religious beliefs and to preserve Greek cult practices with their objects of worship.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a reader of the later dialogues finds Plato in a peculiar position: he engages with the old gods, even though his primary theological commitments seem to lie elsewhere.

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Central to this investigation is Plato's relationship with Greek religion, a category that evades a concise definition. Cultural historians regularly remind us that Greek religion was not a religion of a Church: it did not have a trained body of clergy, an authoritative revelation, a sacred scripture, a fixed set of doctrines or a mandatory formula of belief. It does not mean, however, that Greek religion lacked any structure whatsoever. In an influential paper, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (1990) argued that it was a polis religion in a sense that polis was the basic organising unit and the underlying framework of religious activities.<sup>6</sup> The polis regulated the public sacrifices and the celebration of festivals, supervised the institution of new cults and sometimes the appointment of priests, had the authority to issue decisions concerning, among other things, the religious calendar, funds and transgressions. The polis was also a medium between its citizens and the Panhellenic sanctuaries, for the delegates came to the Delphic oracle and the participants joined the games at Olympia as members of a specific political community.<sup>7</sup> Thus, religion seems to be

<sup>5</sup> Plato was not alone in this quest. Most (2003) 307–8 and Betegh (2006) suggest that the Greek philosophers generally tended to reinforce religion rather than deny it. Boys-Stones (2014) 2–6 argues that philosophy may have arisen as an extension of religious discourse.

<sup>6</sup> A similar polis-centred approach to Greek religion is taken by Burkert (1990); Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel (1992); Parker (1996).

<sup>7</sup> These international and domestic aspects of religious mediation are amply attested in the case of classical Athens, for which see Parker (2005) 79–115.

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‘embedded’ in the civic life and institutions of the polis.<sup>8</sup> Given the absence of an established creed, the polis-centred approach also downplays the importance of beliefs and the state of mind of the worshippers. It shifts the perspective towards religious agency and the performance of ritual acts, thus the public aspect of religion.

More recently, scholars have questioned whether we can position Greek religion exclusively within the political institutions. Julia Kindt (2012 and 2015) argued that although the polis was the ‘paradigmatic worshipping group’, its framework did not cover the whole range of Greek religious discourses. The polis religion coexisted with a variety of non-civic articulations of the supernatural, such as magic, mystery cults, personal dedications and experiences. In line with this turn to personal religion is Harrison’s (2015) contention that we cannot dispense with the notion of ‘belief’ in studying Greek religion, since cult practices were ‘enactments of meaning’ that mobilised certain personal as well as wider cultural beliefs in particular circumstances.<sup>9</sup> A growing number of studies, moreover, suggests that there was no unchanging, coherent and thus ideal version of official Greek religion. Religion had conspicuous inconsistencies stemming from multiple frames of reference, but also competing and complementing theological narratives.<sup>10</sup> Equally important is the fact that Greek religion was particularly open to creative fusion and innovation. As Kearns (2015) accurately summarises it, there was always ‘room for new gods, new identifications of old gods, and new associations between gods, and alongside these we can also often detect changes in cult practice and patterns of religious thought’.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The notion of ‘embedded religion’ was originally coined by Parker (1986). For a critical examination of this category and its proximity to ‘polis religion’, see Eidinow (2016) 207–14; Kindt (2012) 16–19.

<sup>9</sup> See Osborne’s (2016) study of the religious calendars from Cos and Mykonos, which shows that the specific regulations of these calendars are based on the belief that the gods have an internal hierarchy, enjoy regularity of rituals and have different tastes and preferences for the sacrificial objects. For an overview of the more general religious beliefs shared among the Greeks, see Kearns (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Parker (1997); Versnel (2011); Osborne (2015); Eidinow (2016).

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive exploration of new cults and the adaptation of the old ones in Athens of the fifth and fourth century BC, see Parker (1996) 152–98, 227–42.

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Multidimensionality is also observable with respect to the nature of gods. The Greek gods are no longer studied as personalities with a determined essence and one core activity, as if Athena was merely the goddess of wisdom or Aphrodite was simply the goddess of love. A single great divinity like Athena had many spheres of activity, such as political life, crafts, war, but also, for example, health as Athena Hygieia and horses as Athena Hippiia.<sup>12</sup> These specific areas were not controlled by particular gods. In fact, they were shared among the gods, who worked in groups in every domain of human life. For instance, the Athenians sought civic help from and political approval of Athena, Zeus, Hestia, Apollo, Aphrodite and even Artemis, quite an unexpected team of political advisors. The picture is particularly complicated by the fact that it was not just ‘Athena’, who was worshipped by the Athenians as a group of citizens, but ‘a goddess’ with different epithets in different places by different officers. So, for a citizen, a plethora of Athenas mattered in politics: Athena Polias was honoured as the patron goddess and protectress of the city on the acropolis; Athena Phratria sanctioned the admission to *phratries*, the main route to citizenship, in the north-western part of the agora; the councilmembers worshipped Athena Boulaia upon entering the chambers in order to secure a good advice. A similar pattern is replicated by the cult practices of other major Athenian gods as well.<sup>13</sup>

One could try to salvage the unity of each god by arguing that although the gods had overlapping activities and domains of life, they contributed their own special function in the shared area, which was peculiar only to them.<sup>14</sup> It would amount to saying that one can distinguish Athena and Aphrodite by the mode of activity rather than activity itself: the principal feature of Athena is *mētis*, her sharp

<sup>12</sup> See Deacy (2008) 45–58.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Apollo the exegete was honoured as a cult advisor in the Prytaneum, the heart of the city; Apollo Patroos sanctioned the audit of potential officers at the edge of agora; the *prytaneis* held sacrifices to Apollo Prostaterios before the assemblies; and Apollo Lykeios was a god of the citizens serving in the army, since his precinct was employed for training by the cavalry and hoplites. For a discussion of these epithets and, more generally, the ‘political gods’ in Athens, see Parker (2005) 395–7, 403–8. See also Cole (1995) 301–5.

<sup>14</sup> This is the central tenet of the structuralist approach to the traditional gods, for which see the pioneering works of the members of the *École de Paris*, originally published in the seventies: Detienne and Vernant (1991); Vernant (1980) 92–110 and (2006) 157–96.

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intelligence and expert knowledge, while the speciality of Aphrodite relates to sexual allure and erotic bonds. Hence, Athena may promote political unity by wise council, while Aphrodite by civic affection. Robert Parker (2011) rightly objects that despite the virtue of this model in keeping ‘the great gods from spilling over into one another’, it re-introduces re-essentialisation of the divine, which was characteristic of the earlier works on the Greek gods. It also has a weak explanatory power in determining the logic of functional extension that would predict the new areas, in which the speciality of the god is to be applied, and explain what builds the cohesion across distinct spheres of activity. Again, a good example is provided by Parker: Aphrodite Euploia was honoured by the Athenian sailors to calm the sea and avert disasters, but the goddess did not have the same function in other types of storms.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we have to admit that the identities and competences of the gods were marked by their plurality, heterogeneity and sometimes discrepancy. If we want not to water down these theological challenges, it is crucial to abstain from a simple definition and conclude that functional speciality is not the only denominator of Greek gods – it has to be accompanied with the cult context, the topological position, the political discourse and sometimes even information on the personal relationship with a specific god.<sup>16</sup> The traditional gods are dynamic networks of power, whereby a specific sanctuary or narrative can evoke only some components of this cluster without, however, absorbing it completely.<sup>17</sup>

These nuances and complexities are to some extent present in Plato’s account of Greek religion. For Plato, religion is primarily a service to the gods (θεραπεία τῶν θεῶν, *Lg.* 4.716d7; cf. 11.930e5), the inventory of which is composed of sacrifices, prayers, dedications and celebration of festivals.<sup>18</sup> Its recipients are not only the Olympians, but also the chthonian gods, the daemons, the heroes and the family divinities, and even the living parents and the dead ancestors (7.717a–e).<sup>19</sup> The belief behind

<sup>15</sup> Parker (2011) 96. <sup>16</sup> Versnel (2011) 142–9.

<sup>17</sup> Pirenne-Delforge and Pironti (2015).

<sup>18</sup> For theme of the ‘service to the gods’ in Plato’s dialogues, see Mikalson (2010) 29–32; Van Riel (2013) 12–14.

<sup>19</sup> For ‘chthonian’ as a problematic religious category, see Parker (2011) 80–4.

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these practices is that rituals allow one to summon and keep the gods in the company of the worshippers (7.803e). Plato understands religion as an unequal combination of beliefs and practices, for the moral value of cult practices is dependent on the agent's inner disposition towards the gods. The service to the gods must be accompanied with the right kind of mindset in order to make the outward ritual actions count as proper piety. The minimal threshold here is the belief in the existence of gods (νομίζειν τοὺς θεοὺς, 10.885b–c), after which we find increasing layers of religious correctness.<sup>20</sup> The most important among them are undoubtedly a moderate and cautious attitude to religious questions, the recognition of one's ignorance of divine matters, the belief in and, if possible, the philosophical understanding of the goodness, uniformity, providential care of the gods.<sup>21</sup> Plato never gave a complete list of the required religious beliefs, nor did he conceive these beliefs as forming a fixed doctrine, but it is clear that they have a substantially stronger normative influence over the cult practices than anything we can find in Greek religion. Plato's stance on religious beliefs is well documented in Van Riel (2013), while his take on cult practice has not received much attention. My aim is to look further into this rather neglected area of Plato's theology and examine his philosophical justification for the need of ritual activity.

Scholars occasionally present Plato as the exponent of the polis religion.<sup>22</sup> It is an accurate characterisation in so far as Plato's considers the polis as the primary domain of religious activity and outlaws any kind of private practice performed in the household environment (10.909d–910d). It is also true that the legislators of the fictional Magnesia in Plato's *Laws* feel free to draft various regulations concerning the religious calendar, sacrifices and festivals (8.828a–b) and impose legal penalties on a religious

<sup>20</sup> For the legitimacy of construing θεοὺς νομίζειν and θεοὺς ἠγείσθαι as 'to believe (in the existence of) gods', see Versnel (2011) 538–59. Cf. Mikalson (2010) 11, who opts for 'to recognize the gods'.

<sup>21</sup> Moderation: *Lg.* 4.716c–d. Cautiousness: *Phrd.* 246d; *Phlb.* 12c; *Ti.* 28b. Ignorance: *Cra.* 400d; *Ti.* 40d–e; *Criti.* 107a–d. Goodness: *R.* 2.380a–c; *Lg.* 10.900d. Uniformity: *R.* 2.382e–383a. Providential care: *Ti.* 41c–d; *Lg.* 10.902e–903a, 10.904a–c.

<sup>22</sup> The *locus classicus* is Burkert (1990) 332–7. The more recent studies belong to Lewis (2010); Abolafia (2015).

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misconduct (9.854 c–d, 10.909d–e, 10.910c–d). This interpretation, however, tends to miss not only Plato’s concern with the personal beliefs and their improvement, but also the fact that the political community does not have the ultimate authority over religious matters. From the institutional point of view, the Delphic sanctuary is repeatedly construed as the most legitimate body to sanction or give instructions and laws on any religious question (5.738b–c, 6.759c–d; *R.* 4.427b–c). The other source of authority is tradition. It is an umbrella concept, which encompasses such terms as the ‘ancestral laws’ (ἄρχαῖοι νόμοι, 11.930e7; also πατριος νόμος, 12.959b5), the Orphic ‘ancient account’ (παλαιὸς λόγος, *Lg.* 4.715e8, 5.738c2) or simply ‘convention’ (νόμος, *Cra.* 400e2; *Ti.* 40e3).<sup>23</sup> Plato’s characters usually introduce the concept of tradition due to uncertainty over religious matters and hope that the customary ways of speaking about the gods can please them. The truthfulness of the tradition is sometimes founded on prophecy, visions and inspiration (*Lg.* 5.738c) or, alternatively, on the assumption that the ancients were in a closer proximity to the gods and thus had a better grasp of them (*Ti.* 40d–e). In the latter cases, the legends are clouded in obscurity and come from an anonymous group of people, such as the ‘children of gods’ (ἔκγονοι τῶν θεῶν, *Ti.* 40d8). Needless to say, Plato is well known for his usual hostility to these stories and authors (*R.* 2.364b–365a), so their epistemic value is rather controversial – a topic, which will be revisited in this book.

As a result, it is necessary to differentiate Plato’s understanding of religion, which is internal to his text, from a cultural-historical account of Greek religion, which can be reconstructed by religious historians by independent means. It is crucial not to submit to the idea that Plato can convey the experiences of an average Greek, even if he explicitly presents something as typical to them, or pretends to give an objective picture of the Greek religious landscape. For it is evident that there is, in fact, nothing ordinary, standard and perhaps nothing traditional about Plato’s views of the religious tradition. Once we take a closer look at his points of

<sup>23</sup> These terms can also refer to non-religious topics, for which see e.g. *Lg.* 1.636b, 2.656e, 3.677a, 6.757a.



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reference, our perception of the uniformity of Plato's account of the old tales concerning the gods may shatter. Plato's 'conventional' myths concerning the gods may be traced back not only to Homer and Hesiod (*Lg.* 10.886b–c), but also to the Orphics (*Lg.* 4.715e–716a) and the Pythagoreans (*Phlb.* 16c–d), whose approach to religion was neither conventional on the cultural level, nor institutionalised on the political level. For these reasons, I shall analyse Plato's engagement with the traditional gods, whilst simultaneously trying to uncover the broader religious horizon behind it. My aim is to determine which aspects pertaining to the gods, beliefs and practices Plato considers as 'traditional' and whether the available cultural examples can reinforce or undermine his understanding. This is also the reason why this book gives merely a selective overview of religion in Plato. I shall follow and unravel those religious themes, which dominate in Plato's later dialogues, namely theogony, anthropogony and cult practices, and examine those gods, such as Ouranos, Helios, Athena, Apollo and Dionysus, who play the most significant part in these discourses. Although I shall consider the individual identities of gods, my aim is to follow contemporary religious studies by focusing on the way in which traditional gods function within the broader networks of divine power – the gods as a group of created divinities, makers of humans, polis founders, moral exemplars.

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An additional complicating factor is Plato's repeated attempts to dissolve the amalgam of religious inconsistencies in overly neat definitions, rigid distinctions and normative judgements. This is particularly conspicuous in Plato's cosmological investigations into the nature of world and gods. It is not an exaggeration to say that he generally treats the gods as bundles of the right kind of cosmological characteristics (e.g. order, uniformity, intelligence). The important outcome of this move is that it tends to unify various gods by vaporising their internal differences. It is especially true of the cosmic gods, namely the planets and stars, who are distinguished from one another only by their corporeal and spatial aspects, such as size, orbits, visibility and position in the

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universe. We saw a moment ago that the contrary is the case with the traditional gods, who have complex individual identities in Greek religion. It raises the broader question of whether Plato is ready to preserve and give cosmological support to the complex nature of traditional gods.

At first, it seems that the answer should be negative, because Plato is routinely understood as a natural theologian.<sup>24</sup> This category is part of the famous tripartition of Greek religion – natural theology of the philosophers, mythical theology of the poets and civic theology of the polis – which is meant to separate these discourses as well as to unite Greek philosophers in terms of how they conceptualise the divine.<sup>25</sup> In particular, natural theology is understood as an enterprise that postulates the god as a hypothetical first principle, whose causation and existence can be reconstructed from its effects in nature. The fact that theology is woven into natural philosophy seems to give it a more scientific flavour that can do away with inconsistencies of Greek religion. Accordingly, natural theology appears to be a rival explanatory framework to mythical theology, independent of its religious ideas and substituting for it a more solid discourse.<sup>26</sup> Recent discussions, however, challenge the idea that we can draw firm discursive boundaries such as the tripartition: the civic, philosophical and poetic discourses are not mutually exclusive theological options, because the poetic representations of the gods deploy the values, sentiments and ideologies of the polis, while the early cosmological critique of poetic theologies constitutes an internal modification of religion rather than an external alternative to it.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Shaul Tor shows that only a handful of philosophers, among whom Anaxagoras is the best example, can meet the rigorous criteria necessary for the austere role of natural theologian. Most of the others approach Greek religion without displacing it: some use a hierarchical model, in which the religious

<sup>24</sup> See for example Gerson (1990) 33; Dombrowski (2005) 84.

<sup>25</sup> The early version of this classification is found in the Stoic Posidonius (*Plac.* 1.6.33–37 MR), later adopted by a Roman scholar Varro and discussed in Augustine (*De civ. D.* 6.5), and still defended by some contemporary scholars, for example Mikalson (2010) 16–19.

<sup>26</sup> Gerson (1990) 1–14.

<sup>27</sup> See Kindt (2015) 29–32 and Tor (2017) 36–48 respectively.