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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What might we mean by the theologies of ancient Greek religion?

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The term *theologia* first appears in Plato's *Republic* (379a5), in the course of a famous conversation discussing how to educate children (the future guardians of his imaginary state) about the true nature of the gods.[1] The emphasis there is placed on the power of stories and the dangerous content of traditional tales – in particular the stories of Homer and Hesiod. As Albert Henrichs has pointed out, this passage demonstrates that *theologia* is a 'perfectly good pagan word', and yet modern scholars have not given theology close examination in part, as Henrichs suggests, because they have tended to respond badly to the apparently Christian connotations of the term 'theology'.[2] When theology is mentioned by scholars, most have discussed the idea in the plural; some have focused on the writings of the ancient philosophers;[3] others have recognised that different theologies may be found in different sections of society.[4] This question of plurality is of course already there in the *Republic*: Plato's characters are discussing how to control and disseminate in a regimented way the great variety of stories

[1] Jaeger 1947 argued that *theologia* comprised rational investigation of God's nature, Vlastos 1952, following Goldschmidt 1950, that this is a term for stories about the gods.

[2] Henrichs 2010: esp. 21.

[3] Jaeger 1947.

[4] For example, Murray 1925: 68 who discusses popular or philosophical theology; Versnel 2011 explores various manifestations of the co-existence of such divergent theological attitudes, sometimes even within the same text. On the question of an ancient Greek theology or theologies, see also Kindt 2012: ch. 6.

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told about the gods. The plurality of ancient Greek theologies is also an underlying theme of this collection: but the chapters in this volume seek to explore it, not control it – and, in fact, the idea of plurality is itself used in two different senses.

To begin with, there is the multiplicity of stories: it has become a truism that what Greeks thought about the gods depended on when they lived, where they lived and their more particular social, intellectual and indeed religious context. The chapters in this volume pursue this theme into the territory of theology: all ask what theology is implied by the various words and actions we can attribute to Greeks in antiquity, but they ask it of different words and actions, undertaken by individuals in very different times, places and circumstances. Their concern is to identify particular words and actions, not in order to attribute coherent, or incoherent, views to particular Greeks, but to illuminate significant aspects of a broad range of attitudes to the gods. We are conscious that there are many further sources that we might have investigated – so although Herodotus variously leaves his mark here, later historians' theologies go without discussion; although we explore the comic festival, the distinct attitude to the gods that marks New Comedy is absent. Likewise in investigating cult statues, on the one hand, and dedicatory inscriptions, on the other, we leave the question of how the choices made with regard to the appearance of dedications conveyed theological views.

Following an opening chapter by Kindt, in which the theologies implicit in stories about the gods are explored, the chapters here are arranged in broadly chronological order – though several chapters deal with practices which were long repeated and cannot be considered to belong to any one age. This is not because we aim, or claim, to tell a story about the 'development' of theology among the Greeks – this is no 'Four (or Five) Stages of Greek Theology'. It is simply because earlier words and actions were available for later Greeks to draw on, while later thoughts were not, at least in that form, available to those who lived earlier. For any reader who is reading sequentially, therefore, a broadly chronological presentation seemed

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to us to be the least confusing, indeed, to put it more positively, potentially the most enlightening order in which to consider this material. Within that broad chronology we have chosen where it seems suitable to group chapters that concern related genres of writing or related activities: thus, we juxtapose comedy to tragedy, sacrifice to worshipping statues, Plato to later philosophers.

Constructing the book and its story of Greek theology in this way inevitably obscures as well as enlightens – and this raises our second use of plurality with relation to 'theology', concerning the nuances of meaning of the term 'theology' itself. For example, while some chapters here can point to certain textual passages in relation to which an understanding of 'theology' as the expression of determinate beliefs about the divine would be viable (e.g. Plato's contention that god is only ever the cause of good things at *R*. 379b1–c7), this volume asks whether it would be equally appropriate to describe in such terms the theology of, say, a statue or a civic festival calendar. The manner in which such things relate, or might relate, to beliefs about gods would seem to be much more flexible and underdetermined than that. A given visual representation of gods could plausibly suggest, or be explicable in terms of, several possible sets of beliefs about the divine, and need not in itself require any of those beliefs.

The heterogeneity of the materials that we wish to examine and relate to each other calls for a continuous and context-sensitive process of conceptual elucidation, not a one-size-fits-all definition. Different senses – and strengths – of the term 'theology' become appropriate in different contexts and in relation to different sorts of material. At the weakest end of the spectrum, one might gloss 'theology' etymologically as 'talking about gods', where 'talking' is construed at its broadest. The term 'theology', in this sense, would merely aim to pick out references to gods, whether verbal or pictorial.[5] More

[5] We are only making an initial theoretical terminological point here: we do not suggest that such a weak sense of theology would ever be interpretively productive or warranted.

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strongly, 'theology' can signify the verbal or pictorial articulation of certain conceptions of, attitudes towards or questions about gods. For example, we may speak about how activities like prayer and reciprocal gift-giving convey conceptions of gods as capable of registering such actions and as at least liable to react to them. When we speak of 'theology' at this level, the level of the articulation of conceptions, representations and questions about gods, we have not yet invoked the category of 'belief' as part of our understanding of theology at all. In a stronger sense of 'theology', however, we may indeed discuss practices like prayer, divination and reciprocal gift-giving, not only as themselves conveying a concept of interventionist and communicative gods, but as conveying beliefs that there exist interventionist and communicative gods.[6] To put it more generally, we may speak of how certain verbal or pictorial representations of gods, or certain practices, suggest, in a more or less underdetermined and vague way, certain possible sets of beliefs about gods and are reasonably explicable in terms of those sets of beliefs. In a yet stronger sense, we can use 'theology' to signify more determinate and explicit expressions of particular beliefs about gods. Finally, 'theology' can signify, not just the expression of an unmethodical set of beliefs, but an explicit, systematic and generalised theory about the divine or, conversely, explicit and abstracted speculations about divinity which may be either systematically doctrinal or open-ended and aporetic to different extents (and in different cases we may investigate in different ways to what extent theological expressions appear to be supported by implicit or explicit inferences and argumentation).[7]

So, as well as considering 'theologies' in the plural, this volume will also explore some of the ways we may viably and usefully speak about 'theology' in relation to ancient Greek thought, practice and material culture. We should focus on the

[6] See e.g. Parker's inferences from these practices 2011: 1–39; cf. Versnel 2011: 552–3.

[7] We are in effect working here towards a more fine-grained version of Assmann's dichotomy (2001: 8–13, 163) between the 'implicit theology' embedded in a culture's acts and texts and the 'explicit theology' of metatexts, which operate at a reflective distance from religious activity.

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multiplicity of theologies not only in the sense of different or even divergent views and attitudes concerning gods, but also in terms of what theology – and theologising – fundamentally amount to in different cases and in relation to different texts and objects. Although what theology and theologising amount to across very different materials may be profoundly different, this volume holds – indeed, we think it proves – that they are yet sufficiently related to be thought of as participating in what is recognisably the same conversation. The different senses of theology remain meaningfully related to one another insofar as they constitute different points along what is recognisably the same spectrum, ranging from the weakest sense of making reference to gods to the strongest sense of explicit and abstracted speculative reflections about the divine.

As an example, we might contrast the second half of Heraclitus B5 with a fourth-century BCE Apulian red-figure krater (Fig. 11.3), which famously depicts Apollo's cult statue inside his temple and, next to this, the god playing a lyre.[8] Heraclitus reads: 'And they pray to these images, as if someone (τις) were to converse with houses not recognising who gods and heroes are' (οὔτι γινώσκων θεοὺς οὐδ' ἥρωας οἵτινές εἰσι). It is difficult to determine whether it is the very practice of praying to cult statues which is charged with conflating the images which are addressed with the deities themselves or only crass and misguided practitioners (the 'they') who do so. On both construals, however, the fragment explicitly articulates an abstracted and generalised criticism of theologically misguided and misleading attitudes to cult statues and their relation to the gods they purport to represent.[9] It is a very different sort of theology and theologising that we encounter in the krater. This is theological not only in the weakest sense of making reference

[8] APM02579. On this krater, see further Platt 2011: 119–23 and Gaifman below, pp. 256–8, 262–9.

[9] The practice itself: Kahn 1979: 266–7; Wildberg 2011: 210, n.14; misguided interpreters: Adomenas 1999: 101–6. C. Osborne 1997: 36–7 locates the theological and interpretive muddle rather in the failure to recognise that the practice of praying to gods by addressing their images makes sense strictly in its particular religious context and that any attempt to recreate the same kind of conversation outside of this context will lead to absurdity.

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to gods but in the stronger sense of raising certain questions and gesturing towards different possible responses – in an underdetermined and open-ended manner – concerning the nature of the relation between Apollo and his cultic representations. Does the notable measure of correspondence between god and statue reinforce the appropriateness of anthropomorphic cultic images for anchoring regular interactions with the god? On the other hand, insofar as the krater's (archaising) 'statue Apollo' is *not* as detailed, full and lifelike as its 'real Apollo', are we made to recognise that, in engaging with the statue, we are not in fact engaging with the god himself and that our visual representations of gods (this krater included) are inherently limited? Such different materials as a krater and a philosophical text, then, may evince different theologies, and a fundamentally different sort of theologising, and yet be meaningfully relatable as participants in the same theological conversation.

As this suggests, continuous and context-sensitive investigations with and about the category of 'theology' may be beneficial not least in getting us to acquire a clearer and more precise understanding of the ways in which Greek theology and theologising amount to different things in different contexts and in relation to different texts or objects, and of the ways in which such different kinds of theologies can interact and interrelate. At the same time, thinking about ancient Greek theologies also promises to highlight the patterns of thought that informed seemingly disparate religious beliefs and practices – patterns that may otherwise go unnoticed. It is in this sense that an interest in ancient Greek theologies advances our understanding of the unity and diversity of ancient Greek religion as well as of the centres and peripheries of ancient Greek religious experience.

We therefore offer here not a sequential reading of the volume, which is, after all, the reader's default option, but some suggestions as to major questions that are best raised by clustering the chapters differently. One major question is about theology and the Greek city. This is a question itself in two parts: is there a theology of the polis, and, is there a

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politics of theology? The assumption prevalent in much modern scholarship, but also questioned by many scholars – that for the Greeks religion is 'polis religion', embedded in the very essence of the Greek city – might suggest that the Greek city was underpinned by, and underpinned, Greek theology. That the political actions of the Greek city had theological implications cannot be disputed – acts of tyrannicide, for instance, which were formally encouraged in various Greek poleis, have straightforward implications for whether or not rulers have a privileged position in relation to the gods. The formal theology of the city is explored here most directly by Willey in chapter 8, investigating law-making and the gods, but it is also in the background in such discussions as Csapo's in chapter 6 of the theology of the Dionysiac festival. Yet Csapo's discussion itself shows how extraordinarily hard it was for any city to commandeer the gods to its own structures and rules. Relationships within the Greek city emerge here, also, but differently, in Eidinow's consideration of 'popular theologies' in chapter 9. She explores the ways in which different stories may receive different emphasis over time, making it possible for different theologies to coexist, but also to conflict. Thus, the inhabitants of communities may choose to accommodate what might otherwise be considered deviant behaviour, but also police any behavioural orthodoxy.

But theologies also emerge here as political in a quite different sense – as the basis for factional division. We see this in Martin's examination of politicians in action, in chapter 12, but we also see it in Gagné's discussion of the Corinthian request, and Olympia's refusal, to change a dedicatory epigram. Here different conceptions of the relation of the individual to the community turn into different relations between the community and the gods: did the Cypselids stand between the Corinthians and their gods, or were their names simply temporary ciphers to be replaced when political situations changed? Did monuments dedicated by rulers who failed stand as testimonies to the gods' faithfulness to the real dedicators, the community, or as testimony to the gods' judgement on the

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declared dedicator, the tyrant? And was the political theology of Greek city like or in contrast to the political theology of Croesus' Lydia?

Croesus and the Cypselids alike live for us only in the pages of a story. If these are reflections on political theology they are the reflections of a storyteller. A number of chapters in this volume continue to meditate on the ancient links that have been made between storytelling and Greek theology. Taking a different approach from the *Republic*, Graziosi, in chapter 3 explores Homer and Hesiod as 'preferred' storytellers of ancient Greek religion ('preferred' in the sense of 'particularly authoritative'); Willey's discussion of lawgivers in chapter 8 finds them embedded in stories that crucially frame the reader's understanding of law in relation to the gods. The theological work of stories has long been central to Christian theology: what status and authority are we prepared to grant to these stories? How do we relate them to each other and to other forms of religious (theological) articulation, most notably in religious practices? Finally, in talking about their respective theologies, can we avoid the pigeonholing that has dominated so much scholarship in the past (see especially Kindt in this volume)?

The relation between story and action, under the guise of those heavily charged terms 'myth' and 'ritual', has long been central to anthropological discussions of religion. One of the things that we did rather deliberately in setting up the conference was to keep the two apart, so as to think separately (even if sometimes in the same chapter, as here in Osborne's discussion of sacrifice in chapter 10) about the implications of actions. But in life, as Csapo's discussion of the Dionysia makes clear, actions and words were never separate. Does this, however, mean that they were never dissonant, never counteracted each other? The general absence of evidence for explicit argument over ritual practice in Greek antiquity – or our failure to identify the evidence – has contributed to the unwarranted assumption of theological agreement. This has been reinforced by the tendency to construct a uniformity of action for which there is no positive evidence – a tendency parallel to

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the assumption of underlying monotheism that, as Goldhill shows in chapter 7, has plagued the interpretation of tragedy.

The plurality of texts and contexts in which questions about gods are raised in the ancient Greek world underlies our talk of Greek theologies rather than Greek theology. But the discussions here of philosophical enquiries across Greek antiquity highlight the ways in which this plurality is not trivial but deep-seated. It is in the writings of the philosophers that we find explicit attention being given to the sources of theologies and the authorities underwriting them. But that attention serves to problematise rather than to establish theological authority – starting with Xenophanes' and Heraclitus' explicit criticism of Homer.

Yet to recognise that there were for many Greeks no unproblematically authoritative articulations of knowledge of the gods is not to join those who dismissed Homer and Hesiod as mere literary fictions with little if any immediate relevance to what real Greeks did in their real lives. Once we accept that no single articulation of the religious can be favoured as offering a straightforward account of religion, whether as thought or as lived, we need to rethink both what Greeks did with the plurality of theologies with which they were faced and what we do with the similarities and differences between individual theologies that variously emerge from these several chapters.

The last contribution to this volume, Peter Van Nuffelen's 'Narratives of continuity and discontinuity', turns directly towards such problems of agreement and dissonance. Taking up the theme of narrative and storytelling, Van Nuffelen draws attention to what he calls 'the theology in the story'. This is found on two levels (at least): first, in the constructions of continuity and discontinuity used by ancient religious and philosophical groups, not necessarily to represent historical continuity, but for other purposes, such as the creation of identity. Second, in the interpretations of modern scholarship, which is not only influenced by ancient rhetorics, but also by our own theological assumptions. Enquiring into ancient Greek theologies matters not least because it concerns the core of how we conceive of ancient Greek religion.

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To stress the need to acknowledge theological variety is not to stand in the way of also asking in the case of similarities between individual articulations of the religious, what they reveal about larger structures of theological thought that pervade different areas of academic compartmentalisation and expertise. What, if anything, do the views of Heraclitus on oracular language as a form of divine representation and Greek statuary representations of the gods have in common? The question of the existence of a theology (or theologies) of ancient Greek religion is ultimately the question of the unity of religious structures behind what may at first sight look like a bewildering array of religious beliefs and practices. Older scholarship (most notably those scholars influenced by Jane Ellen Harrison) sought to answer it by pointing to multiple theologies brought together in the interplay of myth and ritual; most recently the political and social structures of the ancient Greek polis have served as a placeholder in which to claim and situate the unity of ancient Greek religion. The challenge offered by this book is to find a way of understanding how Greek theologies worked together without having recourse to the unsatisfactory oppositions between 'Olympian' and 'Chthonic', 'literary' and 'lived', 'public' and 'private', 'philosophical' and 'cult', 'polis' and 'anti-polis' with which earlier scholars have sought to divide the broader religious culture of ancient Greece with its many alternative locations and articulations of the religious.[10]

So, this is a book that seeks to find a place for difference. No longer should inconsistencies between individual theologies be explained away by dismissing some theological stances and favouring others. Emily Kearns put this well: 'Divergent statements [about the Greek gods] may appear divergent not because Greek religious thought is a chaotic jumble of random ideas, and not only because of differences in individuals and

[10] Some of the recent scholarship addressing these dichotomies includes: Aleshire 1994; Scullion 1994; Burkert 1995; Kearns 1995; Osborne 1997; Parker 1997, 2011; Sourvinou-Inwood 1997; Betegh 2004; Trepanier 2010; Eidinow 2011; Kindt 2012: esp. 190–4.

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