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Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

OLYMPIAN AND CHTHONIC RITUAL.

‘ΔΑΙΜΟΙ ΜΕΙΛΙΧΪΟΙCΙΝ ΙΛΆCΜΑΤΑ ΚΑΪ ΜΑΚΆΡΕCΙΝ
ΟΨΡΑΝΪΟΙC.’

IN characterizing the genius of the Greeks Mr Ruskin says: *‘there is no dread in their hearts; pensiveness, amazement, often deepest grief and desolation, but terror never. Everlasting calm in the presence of all Fate, and joy such as they might win, not indeed from perfect beauty, but from beauty at perfect rest.’* The lovely words are spoken of course mainly with reference to art, but they are meant also to characterize the Greek in his attitude towards the invisible, in his religion—meant to shew that the Greek, the favoured child of fortune yet ever unspoilt, was exempt from the discipline to which the rest of mankind has been subject, never needed to learn the lesson that in the Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.

At first sight it seems as though the statement were broadly true. Greek writers of the fifth century B.C. have a way of speaking of, an attitude towards, religion, as though it were wholly a thing of joyful confidence, a friendly fellowship with the gods, whose service is but a high festival for man. In Homer sacrifice is but, as it were, the signal for a banquet of abundant roast flesh and sweet wine; we hear nothing of fasting, of cleansing, and atonement. This we might perhaps explain as part of the general splendid unreality of the heroic saga, but sober historians of the fifth century B.C. express the same spirit. Thucydides is assuredly by nature no reveller, yet religion is to him in the main ‘a rest from toil.’ He makes Pericles say¹: ‘Moreover we have

¹ Thuc. II. 38.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Olympian and Chthonic Ritual* [CH.

provided for our spirit very many opportunities of recreation, by the celebration of games and sacrifices throughout the year.'

Much the same external, quasi-political, and always cheerful attitude towards religion is taken by the 'Old Oligarch'.¹ He is of course thoroughly orthodox and even pious, yet to him the main gist of religion appears to be a decorous social enjoyment. In easy aristocratic fashion he rejoices that religious ceremonials exist to provide for the less well-to-do citizens suitable amusements that they would otherwise lack. 'As to sacrifices and sanctuaries and festivals and precincts, the People, knowing that it is impossible for each poor man individually to sacrifice and feast and have sanctuaries and a beautiful and ample city, has discovered by what means he may enjoy these privileges. The whole state accordingly at the common cost sacrifices many victims, while it is the People who feast on them and divide them among themselves by lot'; and again², as part of the splendour of Athens, he notes that 'she celebrates twice as many religious holidays as any other city.' The very language used by this typical Athenian gentleman speaks for itself. Burnt-sacrifice (*θυσία*), feasting, agonistic games, stately temples are to him the essence of religion; the word sacrifice brings to his mind not renunciation but a social banquet; the temple is not to him so much the awful dwelling-place of a divinity as an integral part of a 'beautiful and ample city.'

Thucydides and Xenophon need and attempt no searching analysis of religion. Socrates of course sought a definition, a definition that left him himself sad and dissatisfied, but that adequately embodied popular sentiment and is of importance for our enquiry. The end of the *Euthyphron* is the most disappointing thing in Plato; Socrates extracts from Euthyphron what he thinks religion is; what Socrates thought he cannot or will not tell³.

Socrates in his enquiry uses not one abstract term for religion—the Greeks have in fact no one word that covers the whole field—he uses two⁴, piety (*τὸ εὐσεβές*) and holiness (*τὸ ὅσιον*).

¹ Ps.-Xen. *Rep. Athen.* II. 99.

² Ps.-Xen. *Rep. Athen.* III. 8.

³ Plat. *Euthyph.* 15 D.

⁴ So far as it is possible to distinguish the two, *τὸ εὐσεβές* is religion from man's side, his attitude towards the gods, *τὸ ὅσιον* religion from the gods' side, the claim they make on man. *τὸ ὅσιον* is the field of what is made over, consecrated to the gods. The further connotations of the word as employed by Orphism will be discussed later. 'Holiness' is perhaps the nearest equivalent to *τὸ ὅσιον* in the *Euthyphron*.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

Socrates on Religion

3

Euthyphron of course begins with cheerful confidence: he and all other respectable men know quite well what piety and holiness are. He willingly admits that 'holiness is a part of justice,' that part of justice that appertains to the gods; it is giving the gods their due. He also allows, not quite seeing to what the argument is tending, that piety and holiness are 'a sort of tendance (*θεραπεία*) of the gods.' This 'tendance,' Socrates presses on, 'must be of the nature of service or ministration,' and Euthyphron adds that it is the sort of service that servants shew their masters. Socrates wants to know in what particular work and operation the gods need help and ministration. Euthyphron answers with some impatience that, to put it plainly and cut the matter short, holiness consists in 'a man understanding how to do what is pleasing to the gods in word and deed, i.e. by prayer and sacrifice.' Socrates eagerly seizes his advantage and asks: 'You mean then that holiness is a sort of science of praying and sacrificing?' 'Further,' he adds, 'sacrifice is giving to the gods, prayer is asking of them, holiness then is a science of asking and giving.' If we give to the gods they must want something of us, they must want to 'do business with us.' 'Holiness is then an art in which gods and men do business with each other.' So Socrates triumphantly concludes, to the manifest discomfort of Euthyphron, who however can urge no tenable objection. He feels as a pious man that the essence of the service or tendance he owes to the gods is of the nature of a freewill tribute of honour, but he cannot deny that the gods demand this as a *quid pro quo*.

Socrates, obviously unfair though he is, puts his finger on the weak spot of Greek religion as orthodoxly conceived in the fifth century B.C. Its formula is *do ut des*. It is, as Socrates says, a 'business transaction' and one in which, because god is greater than man, man gets on the whole the best of it. The argument of the *Euthyphron* is of importance to us because it clearly defines one, and a prominent, factor in Greek religion, that of *service* (*θεραπεία*), and in this service, this kindly 'tendance,' there is no element of fear. If man does his part in the friendly transaction, the gods will do theirs. None of the deeper problems of what we moderns call religion are even touched: there is no question of sin, repentance, sacrificial atonement, purification, no fear of judgment to come, no longing after a future complete beatitude.

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Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Olympian and Chthonic Ritual* [CH.

Man offers what seems to him in his ignorance a reasonable service to gods conceived of as human and rational. There is no trace of scepticism; the gods certainly exist, otherwise as Sextus Empiricus¹ quaintly argues 'you could not serve them': and they have human natures. 'You do not serve Hippocentauri, because Hippocentauri are non-existent.'

To the average orthodox Greek the word *θεραπεία*, service, tendance, covered a large, perhaps the largest, area of his conception of religion. It was a word expressing, not indeed in the Christian sense a religion whose mainspring was love, but at least a religion based on a rational and quite cheerful mutual confidence. The Greeks have however another word expressive of religion, which embodies a quite other attitude of mind, the word *δεισιδαιμονία*, *fear of spirits*; fear, not tendance, fear not of gods but of spirit-things, or, to put it abstractly, of the supernatural.

It is certainly characteristic of the Greek mind that the word *δεισιδαιμονία* and its cognates early began to be used in a bad sense, and this to some extent bears out Mr Ruskin's assertion. By the time of Theophrastos *ὁ δεισιδαίμων* is frankly in our sense 'the superstitious man,' and superstition Theophrastos defines as not just and proper reverence but simply 'cowardice in regard to the supernatural.' Professor Jebb² has pointed out that already in Aristotle the word *δεισιδαίμων* has about it a suspicion of its weaker side. An absolute ruler, Aristotle³ says, will be the more powerful 'if his subjects believe that he fears the spiritual beings' (*ἐὰν δεισιδαίμονα νομιζῶσιν εἶναι*) but he adds significantly 'he must shew himself such *without fatuity*' (*ἄνευ ἀβελτερίας*).

Plutarch has left us an instructive treatise on 'the fear of the supernatural.' He saw in this fear, this superstition, the great element of danger and weakness in the religion that he loved so well. His intellect steeped in Platonism revolted from its unmeaning folly, and his gentle gracious temperament shrank from its cruelty. He sees⁴ in superstition not only an error, a wrong judgment of the mind, but that worse thing a 'wrong judgment inflamed by passion.' Atheism is a cold error, a mere dislocation of the mind: superstition is a 'dislocation complicated, inflamed,

¹ Sext. Empir. *adv. Math.* ix. 123.² *The Characters of Theophrastus*, p. 264.³ Arist. *Polit.* p. 1315 a 1.⁴ Plut. *de Superstit.* i.

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Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

Plutarch on Superstition

5

by a bruise.' 'Atheism is an apathy towards the divine which fails to perceive the good: superstition is an excess of passion which suspects the good to be evil; the superstitious are afraid of the gods yet fly to them for refuge, flatter and yet revile them, invoke them and yet heap blame upon them.'

Superstition grieved Plutarch in two ways. He saw that it terrified men and made them miserable, and he wanted all men to be as cheerful and kindly as himself; it also made men think evil of the gods, fear them as harsh and cruel. He knew that the canonical religion of the poets was an adequate basis for superstitious fear, but he had made for himself a way out of the difficulty, a way he explains in his treatise on 'How the poets ought to be taken.' 'If Ares be evil spoken of we must imagine it to be said of War, if Hephaistos of Fire, if Zeus of Fate, but if anything honourable it is said of the real gods¹.' Plutarch was too gentle to say sharply and frankly:

'If gods do aught that's shameful, they are no gods²,'

but he shifted the element of evil, of fear and hate, from his theological ideals to the natural and purely human phenomena from which they had emerged. He wants to treat the gods and regard them as he himself would be treated and regarded, as kindly civilized men. 'What!' he says³, 'is he who thinks there are no gods an impious man, while he who describes them as the superstitious man does, does he not hold views much more impious? Well anyhow I for my part would rather people would say of me there never was or is any such a man as Plutarch, than that they should say Plutarch is an unstable, changeable fellow, irritable, vindictive, and touchy about trifles; if you invite friends to dinner and leave out Plutarch, or if you are busy and omit to call on him, or if you do not stop to speak to him, he will fasten on you and bite you, or he will catch your child and beat him, or turn his beast loose into your crops and spoil your harvest.'

But though he is concerned for the reputation of the gods, his chief care and pity are for man. Atheism shuts out a man, he says, from the pleasant things of life. 'These most pleasant things,' he adds⁴ in characteristic fashion, 'are festivals and feasting in

¹ Plut. *de aud. poet.* 4.

³ Plut. *de Superstit.* x.

² Eur. *frg.* 292.

⁴ Plut. *de Superstit.* ix.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01003-0 - Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion

Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

Olympian and Chthonic Ritual

[CH.]

connection with sacred things, and initiations and orgiastic festivals, and invocations and adorations of the gods. At these most pleasant things the atheist can but laugh his sardonic laugh, but the superstitious man would fain rejoice and cannot, his soul is like the city of Thebes:

“It brims with incense and burnt sacrifice
And brims with paeans and with lamentations.”

A garland is on his head and pallor on his face, he offers sacrifice and is afraid, he prays and yet his tongue falters, he offers incense and his hand trembles, he turns the saying of Pythagoras into foolishness “Then we become best when we approach the gods, for those who fear spirits when they approach the shrines and dwellings of the gods make as though they came to the dens of bears and the holes of snakes and the lairs of sea-monsters.”¹ In his protest against the religion of fear Plutarch rises to a real eloquence¹. ‘He that dreads the gods dreads all things, earth and sea, air and heaven, darkness and light, a voice, a silence, a dream. Slaves forget their masters in sleep, sleep looses their fetters, salves their gangrened sores, but for the superstitious man his reason is always adreaming but his fear always awake.’

Plutarch is by temperament, and perhaps also by the decadent time in which he lived, unable to see the good side of the religion of fear, unable to realize that in it was implicit a real truth, the consciousness that all is not well with the world, that there is such a thing as evil. Tinged with Orphism as he was, he took it by its gentle side and never realized that it was this religion of fear, of consciousness of evil and sin and the need of purification, of which Orphism took hold and which it transformed to new issues. The cheerful religion of ‘tendance’ had in it no seeds of spiritual development; by Plutarch’s time, though he failed to see this, it had done its work for civilization.

Still less could Plutarch realize that what in his mind was a degradation, superstition in our sense, had been to his predecessors a vital reality, the real gist of their only possible religion. He deprecates the attitude of the superstitious man who enters the presence of his gods as though he were approaching the hole of a snake, and forgets that the hole of a snake had been to his ancestors,

¹ Plut. *de Superstit.* III.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01003-0 - Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion

Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

Plutarch on Superstition

7

and indeed was still to many of his contemporaries, literally and actually the sanctuary of a god. He has explained and mysticized away all the primitive realities of his own beloved religion. It can, I think, be shewn that what Plutarch regards as superstition was in the sixth and even the fifth century before the Christian era the *real* religion of the main bulk of the people, a religion not of cheerful tendance but of fear and deprecation. The formula of that religion was not *do ut des* 'I give that you may give,' but *do ut abeas* 'I give that you may go, and keep away.' The beings worshipped were not rational, human, law-abiding *gods*, but vague, irrational, mainly malevolent *δαίμονες*, spirit-things, ghosts and bogeys and the like, not yet formulated and enclosed into god-head. The word *δεισιδαιμονία* tells its own tale, but the thing itself was born long before it was baptized.

Arguments drawn from the use of the word *δεισιδαιμονία* by particular authors are of necessity vague and somewhat unsatisfactory; the use of the word depends much on the attitude of the writer. Xenophon¹ for example uses *δεισιδαιμονία* in a good sense, as of a bracing confidence rather than a degrading fear. 'The more men are god-fearing, spirit-fearing (*δεισιδαίμονες*), the less do they fear man.' It would be impossible to deduce from such a statement anything as to the existence of a lower and more 'fearful' stratum of religion.

Fortunately however we have evidence, drawn not from the terminology of religion, but from the certain facts of ritual, evidence which shews beyond the possibility of doubt that the Greeks of the classical period recognised two different classes of rites, one of the nature of 'service' addressed to the Olympians, the other of the nature of 'riddance' or 'aversion' addressed to an order of beings wholly alien. It is this second class of rites which haunts the mind of Plutarch in his protest against the 'fear of spirits'; it is to this second class of rites that the 'Superstitious Man' of Theophrastos was unduly addicted; and this second class of rites, which we are apt to regard as merely decadent, superstitious, and as such unworthy of more than a passing notice and condemnation, is primitive and lies at the very root and base of Greek religion.

¹ Xen. *Cyropaed.* III. 3. 58.

Cambridge University Press

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Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

Olympian and Chthonic Ritual

[CH.]

First it must clearly be established that the Greeks themselves recognised two diverse elements in the ritual of their state. The evidence of the orator Isocrates¹ on this point is indefeasible. He is extolling the mildness and humanity of the Greeks. In this respect they are, he points out, 'like the better sort of gods.' 'Some of the gods are mild and humane, others harsh and unpleasant.' He then goes on to make a significant statement: '*Those of the gods who are the source to us of good things have the title of Olympians, those whose department is that of calamities and punishments have harsher titles; to the first class both private persons and states erect altars and temples, the second is not worshipped either with prayers or burnt-sacrifices, but in their case we perform ceremonies of riddance.*' Had Isocrates commented merely on the titles of the gods, we might fairly have said that these titles only represent diverse aspects of the same divinities, that Zeus who is Maimaktes, the Raging One, is also Meilichios, Easy-to-be-Intreated, a god of vengeance and a god of love. But happily Isocrates is more explicit; he states that the two classes of gods have not only diverse natures but definitely *different rituals*, and that these rituals not only vary for the individual but are also different by the definite prescription of the state. The ritual of the gods called Olympian is of burnt-sacrifice and prayer, it is conducted in temples and on altars: the ritual of the other class has neither burnt-sacrifice nor prayer nor, it would seem, temple or altar, but consists in ceremonies apparently familiar to the Greek under the name of *ἀποπομπαί*, 'sendings away.'

For *ἀποπομπαί* the English language has no convenient word. Our religion still countenances the fear of the supernatural, but we have outgrown the stage in which we perform definite ceremonies to rid ourselves of the gods. Our nearest equivalent to *ἀποπομπαί* is 'exorcisms,' but as the word has connotations of magic and degraded superstition I prefer to use the somewhat awkward term 'ceremonies of riddance.'

Plato more than once refers to these ceremonies of riddance. In the *Laws*² he bids the citizen, if some prompting intolerably base occur to his mind, as e.g. the desire to commit sacrilege,

¹ Isocr. *Or.* v. 117.

² Plat. *Legg.* 854 B *ὅτι ἐπὶ τὰς ἀποδιοπομπήσεις, ὅτι ἐπὶ θεῶν ἀποτροπαίων ἱερὰ ἰκέτης...τὰς δὲ τῶν κακῶν ξυνοσίας φεύγε ἀμεταστρεπτι.*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

Ritual of Aversion

9

'betake yourself to ceremonies of riddance, go as suppliant to the shrines of the gods of aversion, fly from the company of wicked men without turning back.' The reference to a peculiar set of rites presided over by special gods is clear. These gods were variously called *ἀποτρόπαιοι* and *ἀποπομπᾶιοι*, the gods of Aversion and of Sending-away.

Harpocration¹ tells us that Apollodorus devoted the sixth book of his treatise *Concerning the gods* to the discussion of the *θεοὶ ἀποπομπᾶιοι*, the gods of Sending-away. The loss of this treatise is a grave one for the history of ritual, but scattered notices enable us to see in broad outline what the character of these gods of Aversion was. Pausanias² at Titane saw an altar, and in front of it a barrow erected to the hero Epopeus, and 'near to the tomb,' he says, 'are the gods of Aversion, beside whom are performed the ceremonies which the Greeks observe for the averting of evils.' Here it is at least probable, though from the vagueness of the statement of Pausanias not certain, that the ceremonies were of an underworld character such as it will be seen were performed at the graves of heroes. The gods of Aversion by the time of Pausanias, and probably long before, were regarded as gods who presided over the aversion of evil; there is little doubt that to begin with these gods were the very evil men sought to avert. The domain of the spirits of the underworld was confined to things evil. Babrius³ tells us that in the courtyard of a pious man there was a precinct of a hero, and the pious man was wont to sacrifice and pour libations to the hero, and pray to him for a return for his hospitality. But the ghost of the dead hero knew better; only the regular Olympians are the givers of good, his province as a hero was limited to evil only. He appeared in the middle of the night and expounded to the pious man this truly Olympian theology:

'Good Sir, no hero may give aught of good;
For *that* pray to the gods. We are the givers
Of all things evil that exist for men.'

It will be seen, when we come to the subject of hero-worship, that this is a very one-sided view of the activity of heroes. Still it remains, broadly speaking, true that dead men and the powers of the underworld were the objects of fear rather than love, their cult was of 'aversion' rather than 'tendance.'

¹ Harpocrat. s.v. *ἀποπομπάς*.² P. II. 11. 1.³ Babr. *Fab.* 63.

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Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Olympian and Chthonic Ritual* [CH.

A like distinction is drawn by Hippocrates¹ between the attributes, spheres and ritual of Olympian and chthonic divinities. He says: 'we ought to pray to the gods, for good things to Helios, to Zeus Ouranios, to Zeus Ktesias, to Athene Ktesia, to Hermes, to Apollo; but in the case of things that are the reverse we must pray to Earth and the heroes, that all hostile things may be averted.'

It is clear then that Greek religion contained two diverse, even opposite, factors: on the one hand the element of *service* (*θεραπεία*), on the other the element of *aversion*² (*ἀποτροπή*). The rites of *service* were connected by ancient tradition with the Olympians, or as they are sometimes called the Ouranians: the rites of *aversion* with ghosts, heroes, underworld divinities. The rites of service were of a cheerful and rational character, the rites of aversion gloomy and tending to superstition. The particular characteristics of each set of rites will be discussed more in detail later; for the present it is sufficient to have established the fact that Greek religion for all its superficial serenity had within it and beneath it elements of a darker and deeper significance.

So far we have been content with the general statements of Greek writers as to the nature of their national religion, and the evidence of these writers has been remarkably clear. But, in order to form any really just estimate, it is necessary to examine in detail the actual ritual of some at least of the national festivals. To such an examination the next three chapters will be devoted.

The main result of such an examination, a result which for clearness' sake may be stated at the outset, is surprising. We shall find a series of festivals which are nominally connected with, or as the handbooks say, 'celebrated in honour of' various Olympians; the Diasia in honour of Zeus, the Thargelia of Apollo and Artemis, the Anthesteria of Dionysos. The service of these Olympians we should expect to be of the nature of joyous 'tendance.' To our surprise, when the actual rites are examined,

¹ Hippocr. *περὶ ἐνυπνίων* 639 ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖσιν ἐναντίοισιν καὶ γῆ καὶ ἥρωσιν ἀποτρόπαια γενέσθαι τὰ χαλεπὰ πάντα.

² English has no convenient equivalent for *ἀποτροπή*, which may mean either turning ourselves away from the thing or turning the thing away from us. *Aversion*, which for lack of a better word I have been obliged to adopt, has too much personal and no ritual connotation. Exorcism is nearer, but too limited and explicit. Dr Oldenberg in apparent unconsciousness of *θεραπεία* and *ἀποτροπή* uses in conjunction the two words *Cultus* and *Abwehr*. To his book, *Die Religion des Veda*, though he hardly touches on Greek matters, I owe much.