I. INTRODUCTION: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Was there ever such a thing as 'Greek religion'? It may be an odd question to start this Survey with, but it should be absolutely clear from the start that Greek religion as a monolithic entity never existed. When archaic Greece emerged from the Dark Ages around 800 BC, religious unity and diversity had evolved together with the unity and diversity of the Greek world as a whole, as it came into existence with the emergence of the *polis*. Every city had its own pantheon in which some gods were more important than others and some gods not even worshipped at all. Every city also had its own mythology, its own religious calendar, and its own festivals (Chapter IV, §3). No Greek city, then, was a religious clone.[1] Yet the various city-religions overlapped sufficiently to warrant the continued use of the term 'Greek religion'. The family resemblance (to borrow Wittgenstein's famous term) of these 'religions' was strengthened by poets such as Homer and Hesiod (see below), who from the eighth century onwards produced a kind of religious highest common factor by inventing, combining, and systematizing individual traditions, which they then spread via performances at aristocratic courts or local and Panhellenic festivals (below, §3).[2]

Greek religion received its characteristic forms in the thousand or so big and small cities, the *poleis*, which spread Greek culture from modern-day Spain to the Black Sea.[3] The independence of these cities gradually diminished through the development of larger powers, such as Sparta and Athens, and they eventually had to cede their sovereignty to Philip and his Macedonians. These developments brought about rapid changes in the structure of Greek religion (Chapter VII). In this Survey, we will concentrate on the religious practices and beliefs during the 'glory that was Greece', namely the archaic and classical periods. Given its pre-eminence in the sources, Athens will often be our most important example, but I intend to show also something of the diversity of Greek religious culture.

[1] As was first argued, in an exemplary investigation of Aphrodite in Locri Epizephyrii, in Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 147–88. Excellent local and regional studies are: Graf 1985; Jost 1985; Parker 1996, 2005; Sporn 2002; Polinskaya 2013; Mili 2015; Pilz 2020.

[2] Kowalzig 2007.

[3] See M. Hansen and Nielsen 2004.

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Before we start looking in more detail at the different aspects, it may be helpful to sketch its main qualities in broad outlines. Greek religion was 'embedded'; it was public and communal rather than private and individual, and it had no strict division between sacred and profane (below, §1). It was also polytheistic and 'interconnected'; it served to maintain order and produce meaning; it was mainly concerned with the here and now, and passed down by word of mouth rather than through written texts (below, §2). Finally, it was male-dominated (Chapter VI) and lacked a religious establishment (below, §3).

I would like to conclude this brief introduction with two more observations. First, religious historians often present a relatively static picture of the archaic and classical age, as if during this period religion remained more or less unchanged until the Hellenistic period. Admittedly, it is not easy to keep a proper balance between a synchronic system and diachronic developments. Yet a modern history should at least try to stick to a minimal diachronic perspective. Second, the table of contents of this book may suggest to the reader that the following chapters are all independent subjects, which have little to do with one another. Nothing is further from the truth. Gods and sanctuaries, myths and rituals, beliefs and practices, sculptures and vase-paintings[4] – since they are mutually supportive, they should ideally all be treated together in one close-knit treatise.[5] Such a treatment is hardly possible in this brief compass, but it will be one of our challenges to show the interdependent nature of Greek religion.

1. Embeddedness

Most Western countries have gradually separated church and state, at least on an ideological level, but this is not the case everywhere, as shown by societies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. In ancient Greece, too, religion was totally embedded in society – no sphere of life lacked a religious aspect.[6] Birth, maturity, and death, war and peace, agriculture, commerce, and politics – all these events and activities were

[4] See T. Smith 2021.

[5] Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992: 158.

[6] The terminology derives from the economist Karl Polanyi (1886–1964); see Gemici 2008. It was applied to Greece in Parker 1986: 265, unconvincingly rejected by Nongbri 2008. See also Kindt 2012: 16–19.

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accompanied by religious rituals or subject to religious rules; even making love was named after the goddess of love, *aphrodisiazein*. Sanctuaries dominated the skylines, statues of gods stood on the corners of the streets, and the smell of sacrifice was never far away.[7] Indeed, religion was such an integrated part of Greek life that the Greeks lacked a separate word for 'religion' in the modern sense, which emerged only during the Enlightenment.[8] When Herodotus wants to describe religions of the neighbouring peoples of Greece, he uses the term 'to worship the gods', *sebesthai tous theous*, and when he wants to describe the Greek nation, he speaks of 'the common blood, the common language and the common sanctuaries and sacrifices' (8.144.2). In other words, for Herodotus the problem of describing foreign religions could be reduced to the question 'Which [other] gods do they worship and how?'[9] In such an environment, atheism was simply unthinkable. The term *atheos* did not originate before the fifth century and even then indicated only a lack of relations with the gods.[10]

Embeddedness went together with the virtual absence of personal religion, since in classical Greece the notion of a private sphere was still in an early stage of development. There could be individual cult acts, such as sacrifice, the dedication of an ex-voto (Chapter III, §3), or a silent prayer (Chapter IV, §2), but cult was mostly a public, communal activity. Worship outside the basic groups of family, *deme* (commune), tribe, and city hardly attained respectability before the weakening of the *polis* at the end of the fifth century, and remained long vulnerable: witness Demosthenes' famous attack on Aeschines, or Theophrastus' *Superstitious Man*.[11] This public character also meant that religion was strongly tied up with social and political conditions. As life in Greece was dominated by free males, they could (and did) seriously restrict religious opportunities for women (Chapter VI, §1), metics,[12] and slaves, whose religious position was modest, except for those festivals where the social order was temporarily suspended and they could enjoy themselves (Chapter IV, §3).[13] The role of politics is

[7] Attention to the role of the senses in Greek religion has become more important in recent times. For smell, see Mehl 2018.
[8] See Bremmer 1998; Feil 1986–2012.
[9] Harrison 2002; Burkert 2001–11: vol. 7.
[10] Bremmer 2007, 2015.
[11] G. Martin 2009: 104–15 (Aeschines); Kindt 2015.
[12] Wijma 2014.
[13] Fischer 2017.

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visible, for example, in the struggle for religious authority in Sparta. There, in their competition for power with the kings, the highest magistrates had created alternative modes of consulting the gods in order to be independent of the seers, who were controlled by the kings.[14] It is also illustrated by Athens: when the city became more democratic, it created priesthoods that were additional to those controlled by the aristocrats; when it became more imperialistic, it started to extend the cult of its most important goddess, Athena, in other cities.[15]

Embeddedness also influenced the conceptualization of the sacred. In modern Western society, the sacred is limited to a direct connection with the supernatural and is sharply separated from the profane, but the situation was rather different in Greece. Here a variety of words existed to express our notion of the sacred. The most important term in this respect is *hieros*, which is everything that has to do with sanctuaries and the gods; for example, to sacrifice is *hiereisthai* and a priest is a *hiereus*. In short, *hieros* is 'as it were the shadow cast by divinity',[16] but it does not mean 'taboo', a quality often associated by anthropologists with the sacred; the more dangerous and unapproachable side of the sacred is expressed by the verbs *hagizo*, *enagizo*, and *kathagizo*.[17] In addition to *hieros*, the Greeks used *hagnos*, which could be applied to both humans and gods: regarding the gods and important social institutions, such as supplication and the oath, it denotes their awesomeness, but in the case of humans it refers to their ritual purity. The two notions are not easily combined, and in the late archaic age, when the gap between the human and the divine became enlarged,[18] a new word, *hagios*, was introduced, which is first attested for altars (Simonides fr. 519.9) and applies especially to temples, rites, and mysteries.[19]

Another key term in this area is *hosios*. It had a wide range with a basic meaning of 'what humans do to please the gods and to give them the *timê* [honour] they deserve, and whatever action or attitude the speaker can convince others that it belongs to that category'.[20]

[14] Jacoby on *FGrH* 596 F 46; Bremmer 1993.

[15] On priesthoods, see Lambert 2010; Horster and Klöckner 2012. On Athens/Athena, see Smarczyk 1990, to be read with Tuplin 1999; Parker 1994; Jameson 2014: 232–69.

[16] So, strikingly, Burkert 1985: 269; see also Parker 1983: 151f.

[17] Parker 1983: 328–31; Parker 2011: 148f.

[18] For this process, which is in need of further analysis, see Bremmer 2019e: 89–93, 106.

[19] For the vocabulary of the sacred, see Parker 1983: 147–50; Motte 1986; Nuchelmans 1989; Rudhardt 1992: 231–52.

[20] Peels 2016: 255f.

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For example, *hosios* can denote purity because pollution is offensive to the gods, but also the proper bonds between guests and hosts, parents and children, and proper dealings with suppliants and the dead.[21] More strongly, it also includes the notion of 'justice', as is illustrated by a funerary epigram of a certain Sosikrates, who died 'not in a *hosios* way but through an unjust death' (*SEG* 38.440). From the fifth century onwards, the Athenians often used the combination *hiera kai hosia* to indicate two types of prime importance to society: the right ritual behaviour and the correct treatment of fellow humans. Even if the latter was not 'sacred', it was still felt to be parallel to and co-ordinate with the other sphere.[22] The same goes, in a way, for important institutions of society, such as the symposium or political offices, which were marked with a certain sanctity by the wearing of garlands. So, in Greece, the sacred 'appears as the intensely venerable rather than the absolutely other'.[23]

2. Polytheism, piety, and pollution

Unlike Christianity and Islam, Greek religion was polytheistic. This is not just a difference in quantity. In polytheism, the pantheon constitutes a kind of system, where gods may complement one another or may be in mutual opposition (Chapter II, §3). Did every Greek worship all the gods of their pantheon? We do not know, but it is unlikely. Wealthy Athens had dozens of sanctuaries, whereas excavators have found only few temples in small Priene on the west coast of modern Turkey. In some cases, worshippers may have tried to remedy the lack of sanctuary of a specific deity by dedicating a figurine of one god in the sanctuary of another, but on the whole inhabitants of rich urban centres must have had many more possibilities for worship than the ordinary person in the country or in small *poleis*.[24]

Unlike God or Allah, polytheistic gods only cover a limited sphere of life. Their importance, as for example expressed in sacrifice (Chapter IV, §2), depends on their specific realm. As only the totality of the gods was believed to cover the whole of life, ranging from orderly

[21] Peels 2016: 27–67.
[22] See the discussion of recent scholarship on *hiera kai hosia* in Peels 2016: 225–30.
[23] So Parker 1983: 153 (also for garlands).
[24] Alroth 1989: 64–105, reviewed in van Straten 1992.

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Apollo to bloodthirsty Ares, piety never meant devotion to only one god, although the closeness of a shrine may have fostered a special relationship with a god or hero (Chapter III, §2). It was only in Hellenistic times that faith in one god, *pistis*, became possible (Chapter VII, §3); only after the birth of Judaism and Christianity do we find conversions.[25] In fact, religious single-mindedness was definitely dangerous, as Euripides showed in his *Hippolytus* (428 BC), where the protagonist comes to a sad end through worshipping Artemis but refusing Aphrodite.[26] Consequently, piety did not yet include loving a god. As Aristotle (*Mag. Mor.* 1208b30) bluntly states: 'it would be absurd if someone were to say that he loves Zeus'.[27]

Proper Greek piety, *eusebeia*, on the other hand, was connected with a root **seb-* ('retreat in awe'), but in the classical period the element of reverence had come to the fore and even extended to loving parents, patriotism, and keeping to the ancestral customs: as Isocrates observed: 'piety consists not in lavish expenditures but in changing nothing of what our ancestors have handed down' (7.30). In fact, *eusebês* ('pious'), came very close to *hosios*, although more focusing on the abuse of temples, altars, and images of divinities.[28] That abuse was considered to be *asebeia*, which also included holding the wrong ideas about the gods.[29] Even though the evidence for many Athenian trials for impiety against famous philosophers is late,[30] Socrates was executed on the charge of innovation in regard to the gods, not for, say, religious theft.[31] Religious tolerance was not the greatest of Greek virtues.

Whereas the Christian world-view increasingly separated God from this world, the gods of the Greeks were not transcendent but directly involved in natural and social processes. Myths related divine visits on earth, and in Homer's *Iliad* gods even participated in the fighting before Troy.[32] Gods also intervened in the human world in cases of moral transgressions: the myth of Oedipus relates the fatal consequences of incest, and the Spartans believed that their murder of

[25] For *pistis*, see Bontempi 2013. On conversion, see Bøgh 2014; Bremmer 2016.
[26] Gladigow 2005: 138–48.
[27] For a discussion of the notion 'loving god (God)', which ranges from classical times to the early Christian period, see Söding1992.
[28] See the illuminating analysis, based on a statistical comparison, in Peels 2016: 68–106.
[29] Vicente Sánchez 2015; Eidinow 2016: 48–62; Naiden 2016.
[30] For the full evidence, see Filonik 2013 and 2016.
[31] For the much-discussed case of Socrates, see, most recently, Karavas 2018; Bremmer 2020c: 1016–20.
[32] On visits, see Flückiger-Guggenheim 1984.

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helot suppliants in a sanctuary of Poseidon had caused the catastrophic earthquake of 464 BC.[33] It is for such connections between the human and divine spheres that the Greek world-view has been called 'interconnected', in contrast to the Christian 'separative' cosmology.[34]

An important consequence of overstepping or breaking existing cosmological, social, and political boundaries was the incurring of pollution. The vocabulary of pollution and purity, together with its concomitant practices, was most frequently used in Greek religion to indicate proper boundaries or categories not to be mixed. Natural pollutions are to a certain extent understandable, with the messiness accompanying birth and the smells arising from a decaying body. But we would not so readily use the vocabulary of pollution for the violation of temples, divine statues, and sacred equipment, which infringes the domain of the gods, or for murder, which infringes social relations, as does killing suppliants, while madness and other diseases infringe the wholeness of the physical person. On the other hand, incest and cannibalism were seen as monstrous, polluting crimes, which confuse the boundaries between humans and animals. Males who confused gender roles by assuming the passive role in homosexual acts and women who transgressed boundaries of respectability by prostituting themselves were also considered to be polluted. The latter, though, were not seen as contagious or dangerous and the committers of these sexual activities did not need to purify themselves. The employment of this particular vocabulary with the corresponding rites of purification can, in one way, be seen as an important Greek means of dealing with maintaining religious and social norms and values in times when the legal process was still underdeveloped.[35]

In addition to removing disorder, Greek religion gave meaning and explanation to life. Dreams, waywardness of behaviour, unforeseen events such as shipwrecks, plagues, and earthquakes – all could be traced to particular gods and in this way were given a recognizable and clear place in Greek world-view; if necessary, there were even anonymous and unknown gods to take the blame.[36] On the other hand, not everything became clear through the mediation of religion,

[33] For Oedipus, see Bremmer 1990a. For the Spartans, see Hdt. 1.128; also Parker 1983: 184. In general, see Speyer 1989: 254–63.

[34] Oudemans and Lardinois 1987.

[35] Parker 1983, unconvincingly criticized in Osborne 2011: 158–84; Petrovic and Petrovic 2016; Carbon and Peels 2018.

[36] Van der Horst 1994: 165–202; Henrichs 2019: 299–334.

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and some divine actions remained inexplicable. Tragedians explored these actions, but their juxtaposition of the human and the divine in such plays as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or Euripides' *Bacchae* shows something of the bafflement evoked, on occasion, by the gods' reactions.[37]

Most Greek religion, though, was directed at this life not the hereafter. In Homeric times, death was still more or less the end of life, although most people believed in a journey to the underworld as their final destination.[38] In the course of the archaic age, life after death became an issue for reflection. Aristocratic circles (probably the more intellectual among them) began to think about their personal fate and crave for an existence prolonged beyond their allotted lifespan. Salvation through leading a model life or through initiation into mysteries gradually gained in popularity (Chapter VII, §1), but belief in a life after death never flourished to the extent it did in the Christian Middle Ages. There, if anywhere in Greek religion, it seems that opinions differed widely.[39]

Such a variety of opinion is hardly surprising in a society that was oral rather than literate. Books did not play a role in Greek religion except for a few groups outside mainstream Greek religion, such as the Orphics (Chapter VII, §2), and children were religiously socialized by attending and practising rituals.[40] This meant that religious ritual played a much larger role in Greek life than in modern society. We should not deduce from this that the Greeks had no beliefs, but in classical times a Greek would never say 'I believe': the modern term 'belief', with its propositional content, is the fruit of a very long development which we should not retroject on classical Greece or, for that matter, early Christianity.[41] Together with the absence of a holy book went the absence of a creed and, consequently, of heresy, but not of a certain amount of theology, which has recently started to receive attention, although usually neglected in previous studies of Greek religion.[42] Religious authority was widely fragmented because priests were

[37] Gould 2001: 203–34; Buxton 2013: 161–72 (bafflement).
[38] Nesselrath 2020.
[39] For the development of beliefs and attitudes regarding death, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1995; Scholl 2007; E. Giudice 2015; Schlatter 2018; Mackin Roberts 2020.
[40] For books, see Parker 2011: 16–20. For children, see Prescendi 2010; Auffarth 2012.
[41] *Contra* Versnel 2011: 539–59 and see also Harrison 2015; Bremmer 2020e. For early Christianity, see T. Morgan 2015; Frey *et al.* 2017.
[42] Eidinow *et al.* 2016, to be read with Bonnet 2017.

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rarely professionals, and there was no Greek equivalent to Christian ministers, Jewish rabbis, or Islamic mullahs (Chapter III, §1). Most citizens could sacrifice by themselves; indeed, Herodotus was amazed that the Persians had to call upon a magus to perform their sacrifices (1.132).

3. Religious specialists

It was mainly outside their own homes, though, that the Greeks could meet certain religious specialists, in particular poets, priests, and seers. Originally, poets were undoubtedly the main religious 'inventors' and 'reproducers'. Even if he exaggerated slightly by implicitly suggesting that there was only the barest of religion before Homer and Hesiod, Herodotus was not far wrong when he stated that these poets defined the theogony, gave the gods their epithets, assigned their functions, and described their forms (2.53.2). Poets could exert this influence because they were supported by the aristocrats, who controlled life through their religious, political, social, and cultural hegemony.[43] Poets also enlarged their religious capital by claiming to be in close contact with the gods. Not only did they manage to make the Greeks believe, if not unconditionally, in the divine guarantee by the Muses of the information they supplied, but they also claimed a privileged knowledge about the gods which was denied to normal humans, as for instance when Homer tells us that an owl is called *chalkis* by the gods but *kumindis* by humans (*Il.* 14.290–1).[44]

Poets also regularly 'invented' religious traditions, if necessary by borrowing from neighbouring peoples. It was only realized in the 1950s that the myth of Kronos' castration of his father, Ouranos, derived from the Near East: the slow but steady decipherment of ever more clay tablets has now shown that this myth ultimately derived from the Hurrians, having passed through Hittite and Phoenician intermediaries.[45] Only a few decades ago, it also became clear that the division of the world between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades through the throwing of lots, as described in the *Iliad* (15.187–93), derives from

[43] See Bremer 1991; Weber 1992.

[44] For the idea of a separate language of the gods, which goes back to Indo-European times, see M. West 2007: 160–2; Willi 2009: 247–9; this volume, Chapter II, §1.

[45] See, most recently, Rutherford 2018.

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the Akkadian epic *Atrahasis*. And when Hera, in a speech to deceive Zeus, says that she will go to Okeanos, 'origin of the gods', and Tethys, the 'mother' (*Il.* 14.201), she mentions a couple derived from the parental couple Apsu and Tiamat of the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*.[46]

Priests and priestesses (Chapter VI, §1) conducted larger rituals and supervised sanctuaries (Chapter III, §1), but never developed into a class of their own because of the lack of an institutional framework. Consequently, they were unable to monopolize access to the divine or to develop esoteric systems, as happened with the Brahmans in India or the Druids among the Celts. On the whole, priesthoods had no great influence except for those of certain important sanctuaries, such as the Eumolpides and Kerykes in Eleusis (Chapter VII, §1) and the Branchidai at Apollo's oracle at Didyma (Chapter III, §3). Despite their modest status, priests must have played an important role in the transmission of local rituals and myths, and Hellanicus (*FGrH* 4 F 74–84), one of the earliest historians, used priestesses of Hera in Argos as his most trustworthy chronological source.

In the case of problems or inexplicable events, it was a male seer (although more recently several female seers have emerged [Chapter VI, §1]) who could bring help. In the archaic age, seers were still aristocrats, who participated in every aspect of aristocratic life, including the battlefield. But, despite their expertise, their words were not definitive. People were free to accept or reject their advice, and epic and tragedy supply various examples of seers whose word was wrongly neglected, such as that of Teiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which must have contributed to the status of the seers.[47]

Despite this support from tragedy, the position of poets and seers gradually declined in the later classical age through various developments, such as the rise of literacy, increasing knowledge of the world, and growing self-reliance. Even though tragedians still held an important position in the adaptation and formation of religious traditions in the fifth century, they now had to share their one-time monopoly with historians and philosophers. After the fifth century the former

[46] See Burkert 1992: 89–93 and 2004: 30–1. See also Currie 2016: 204; Yakubovich 2017: 365 (with further linguistic arguments); this volume, Appendix.

[47] Flower 2008; S. Johnston 2008: 109–43; Naerebout and Beerden 2012; Trampedach 2015; Foster 2018; Bremmer 2019e: 147–64; Van Hove 2019. For a comparison with the ancient Near East, see Beerden 2013; Nissinen 2017.

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took over to a large extent the task of preserving religious traditions, and the latter became the main 'theologians'. Moreover, at the end of the archaic period the most important religious authority had become the *polis*, which now mediated and articulated most religious discourse and controlled much of the cultic activity. This control has led to the expression *polis* religion,[48] but we should beware of overstressing such control. There were always certain areas, such as magic, mysteries, mythography, and oracles, where that control was less than complete, and more or less space for individual agency remained available;[49] individual households may also have differed in their religious practices.[50] In addition, it should be noted that there is a certain Athenocentric bias in the approach, which neglects the innovations in, for example, southern Italy, or the freedom in colonial outposts or even in the periphery of Attica itself.[51] As there was no creed or divine revelation, the *polis*, when challenged, appealed to the traditional nature of rites, *ta nomizomena*, and customs, *ta patria* (Chapter IV, §1). Such a stress on tradition could lead to rigidity, but possible tensions between conservatism and innovation were resolved by introducing new cults rather than abandoning old ones.[52]

[48] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000.

[49] See especially Rüpke 2011; Kindt 2012: 12–35; Bremmer 2019e: 125–46. But see also the spirited defence of Parker 2018b.

[50] See Boedeker 2008; Faraone 2008.

[51] On outposts, see Demetriou 2017; Bremmer 2019e: xii; Lemos and Tsingarida 2019. On the periphery, see Scholl 2018.

[52] On accepting new gods, see Garland 1992; Auffarth 1995; Parker 2011: 273–7.

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